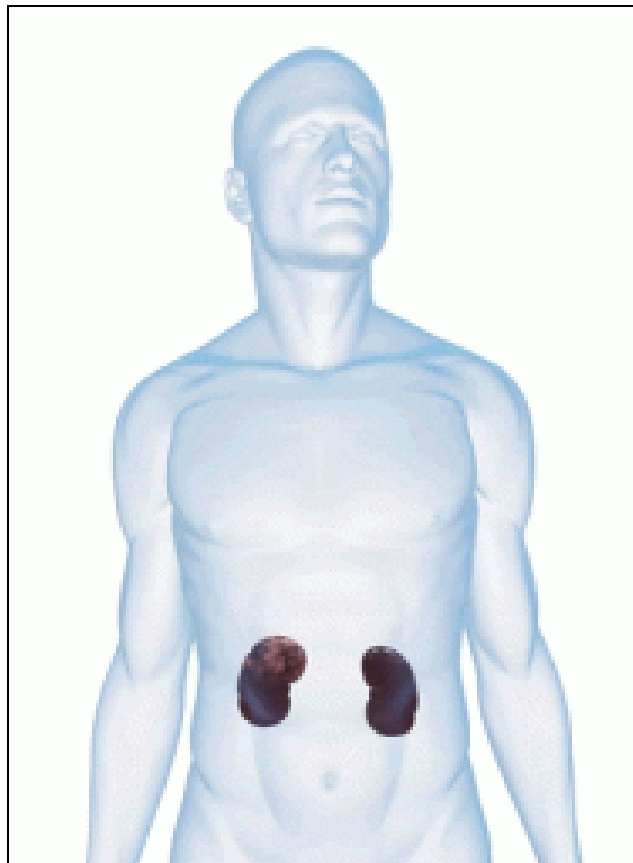


The Question
of the
Kidneys' Counsel



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The Question of the Kidneys' Counsel

Introduction

The kidneys (*kelayot*) are mentioned in Scripture in two contexts. On several occasions they are listed amongst the organs of an animal that are offered on the altar.¹ But on over a dozen other occasions they are described as organs with functions relating to cognition (which itself may be the reason why they play a role in sacrificial rites, due to the animals' kidneys representing the parallel organ in man²); specifically, functioning as the mind, conscience, or the source of counsel/ free will:

You are present in their mouths, but far from their kidneys. (Jer. 12:2)

I bless God, Who has counseled me; my kidneys admonish me at night. (Ps. 16:7)

On several occasions, the kidneys are mentioned in this context together with the heart:

God of Hosts, just Judge, Who examines the kidneys and heart... (Jer. 11:20)

I, God, probe the heart, and examine the kidneys, and repay each man according to his ways, with the fruit of his deeds. (Jer. 17:10)

God of Hosts, Who tests the righteous, looking at the heart and kidneys... (Jer. 20:12)

...the Lord, the righteous, examines the hearts and kidneys. (Ps. 7:10)

My son, if your heart is wise, my heart also rejoices. My kidneys rejoice, when your lips speak with uprightness. (Prov. 23:15-16)

¹ Exodus 29:13; 29:22; Leviticus 3:4; 3:10; 3:15; 4:9; 7:4; 8:16; 8:25; 9:10 and 9:19.

² As per the comments of Ramban and Rabbeinu Bechaya to Leviticus 1:9, and Tashbetz, *Magen Avot* 3:4.

The King James Bible, when translating *kelayot* in its non-sacrificial context, uses the word “reins” rather than kidneys. While the two terms are essentially synonymous, the differentiation was probably done out of a desire to indicate an allegorical use of the term. The JPS translation uses “mind” or “conscience.”

But did the authors of Scripture mean the term metaphorically? Or did they indeed intend that the kidneys are the seat of part of the mind, a role that we would assign today to the brain? This is a question that has been discussed extensively in several articles,³ with the general conclusion being that it does indeed reflect a belief that the kidneys actually possess such functions. In this paper, however, I shall focus on how various medieval and later rabbinic authorities differed in their understanding of this topic.

The Kidneys in the Talmud and Midrash

It is clear that the Sages of the Talmud understood the Scriptural references to the kidneys literally. This is evident from the following passage:

The Rabbis taught: The kidneys advise, the heart considers, the tongue articulates, the mouth finishes, the esophagus brings in all kinds of food, the windpipe gives sound, the lungs absorb all kinds of fluids, the liver causes anger, the gallbladder secretes a drop into it and calms it, the spleen laughs, the gizzard grinds, the stomach [causes] sleep, the nose [causes] wakefulness. (Talmud, *Berachot* 61a; similarly in Midrash *Vayikra Rabbah* 4:4)

This is not an aggadic legend intended to be understood metaphorically. The descriptions of the functions of the tongue, mouth, esophagus, windpipe, lungs, stomach and nose are all clearly scientific descriptions intended to be interpreted literally. The account of the liver causing anger is also consistent with standard belief in the ancient world.⁴ Thus, the account of the function of the kidneys and heart are thus also clearly intended to be literal descriptions. This, too, is consistent with standard belief in the ancient world, which placed the mind in the heart and nearby organs.⁵

³ Garabed Eknayan, “The Kidneys in the Bible: What Happened?” *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology* 16:12 (2005) pp. 3464-3471; Giovanni Maio, “The Metaphorical and Mythical Use of the Kidney in Antiquity,” *American Journal of Nephrology* (1999) 19:2 pp. 101-6.

⁴ See too *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 7 and *Midrash Lekach Tov* on the verse “*kaveid lev Pharaoh*.”

⁵ For an extensive discussion of ancient views concerning whether the mind is housed in the brain or the heart, see Julius Rocca, *Galen on the Brain: Anatomical Knowledge and Physiological Speculation in the*

The immediately preceding statement in the Talmud relates that the two kidneys have two distinct roles:

The Rabbis taught: A person has two kidneys, one of which counsels him to do good, and the other counsels him to do evil. And it is reasonable that the good one is on his right and the evil one on his left, as it is written, “The heart of the wise man is to his right, and the heart of a fool is to his left.” (Talmud *ibid.*)

Due to its juxtaposition with the other passage, there is every reason to believe that this was likewise intended literally as an account of the two kidneys’ respective functions.

Another source in the Talmud, to which we will later return, discusses how we know where to cut the spinal cord of a sheep that has been brought as a sacrifice. The Talmud answers that the Torah instructs it to be cut “opposite the *atzeh*” (Lev. 3:9). The word *atzeh* does not appear anywhere else in Scripture, and is usually translated as “spine.” But the Talmud expounds it to mean, “the place of the kidneys, which give counsel (*‘etzah*,’ vocalizing the word differently).”⁶

Elsewhere, there is a description of how man is a microcosm of everything in the universe, with a description of how each of his bodily parts corresponds to something in the world; in this list, it describes his kidneys as corresponding to advisors.⁷ In another place, the Talmud states that God placed wisdom (*chachmah*) in the kidneys.⁸

A Midrash also relates that Abraham was taught the Torah by his kidneys,⁹ while another Midrash elaborates upon the Scriptural accounts of God examining the kidneys

Second Century AD, pp. 17-47. While Galen knew the brain to have a cognitive function, Aristotle believed that the brain only serves to cool the blood. Along with other ancient cultures, he believed the mind to be housed in the heart. The Rabbinic word for “brain,” *moach*, only appears in Scripture in one instance (Job 21:24) where it refers to the marrow inside bone. It does appear that some of the Sages of the Talmud may have adopted aspects of Galen’s view, since we find R. Yehudah HaNasi disputing people with the statement, “It appears that he does not have a brain in his head;” see too Midrash Mishlei 1. However, the fact of some of the Sages attributing *some* cognitive function to the brain, does not mean that they ruled out the heart and kidneys serving to make moral decisions. In general, the Sages of the Babylonian Talmud followed Akkadian and ancient Babylonian understandings of physiology and medicine; see Mark J. Geller, “Akkadian Healing Therapies in the Babylonian Talmud,” (Berlin: Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte 2004).

⁶ *Chullin* 11a.

⁷ *Avot d’Rabbi Natan* 31:3. This probably dates to somewhat after the Talmudic period.

⁸ *Rosh HaShanah* 26a.

⁹ Midrash *Bereishit Rabbah* 61:1; similarly in Midrash Tanhuma, *parashat Vayigash*.

and heart, explaining that out of all the limbs and organs in the body, it is these that are directly responsible for determining a person's actions.¹⁰ Note that this Midrash entirely excludes any role for the brain in this process.

Finally, in the *Nishmat kol chai* prayer, of uncertain authorship and origins, it is made clear that it is the heart and kidneys, not the brain, that house a person's consciousness:

For every mouth is in acknowledgement to You, and every tongue swears to You, and every knee bows to You, and every erect spine prostrates itself to You, and all hearts fear You, and all innards and kidneys praise Your Name, as it is written, "All my bones say, Who is like You, O God."

Medieval France/ Germany: No Difficulties

Rashi (1040-1105), in all his commentaries on all the verses and Talmudic statements about the kidneys, does not make any comment about their being a metaphor. While it is true that in general Rashi does not do anything other than explain the simple meaning of the text, he does see fit to explain where a word is a metaphor. We see this specifically in the context of anatomy. On the verse, "and you shall circumcise the foreskin of your hearts" (Deut. 10:16), Rashi (along with the other commentaries) stresses that the word "foreskin" is a metaphor—but not the word "hearts"! Furthermore, in his commentary to the Talmudic account of the kidneys giving counsel, Rashi elaborates that the kidneys advise the heart on what to do, bringing Scripture as a source for this. From all this, we see that Rashi believed that the kidneys actually do provide counsel. There is no reason why he would not have unquestioningly accepted this. Living in France and Germany, Rashi's education was limited to Jewish studies alone; he would not have been exposed to the scientific and medical texts that would lead one to question whether the kidneys really do have such a function.

Somewhat strangely, on the word *atzeh* (Lev. 3:9), Rashi explains that it refers to the kidneys, which give counsel—thus citing the Talmudic interpretation. However, the Talmudic interpretation would appear to be an exegesis (*derash*), rather than the straightforward translation (*peshat*). Yet Rashi presents it as the *peshat*. Whatever the reason for this perhaps unexpected approach, it accentuates the fact that Rashi genuinely believed the kidneys to be the source of counsel.

¹⁰ Midrash Tehillim 14.

I have not been able to locate any source in the literature of French-German rabbinic authorities which, either explicitly or implicitly, demonstrates any awareness of the scientific difficulties with the Scriptural and Talmudic descriptions of the kidneys' function.

Medieval Spain: Grappling with the Challenge

In sharp contrast to Rashi, **R. Judah HaLevi** (c. 1075–1141) expresses awareness at the scientific objections to the kidneys being the source of counsel, and offers a scientific quasi-defense:

Now, with that which is said about the function of the following organs—the kidneys give counsel, the spleen laughs, the liver causes anger and the stomach causes sleep—there is room for doubt. However, it is not surprising that the kidneys would have an effect upon the nature of thoughts. Surely we see something similar in the function of the testicles; for eunuchs are weak of intellect, even more than women. (*Kuzari* 4:25)

While he ends up with the same position as Rashi, that the Talmud is to be accepted literally, his approach could not be more different. For Rashi, there was no reason to question the Talmudic account. But for HaLevi, who was educated in Arabic literature, science and philosophy, the Talmud was not studied in a vacuum. In particular, his training as a physician is doubtless responsible for his being sensitive to the problem raised by the Talmud's accounts of the functions of these organs. Still, given the limited development of the medical sciences in his era, his decision to nevertheless maintain belief in the Talmud's statement is not unreasonable; although it was probably fuelled by his general goal of defending traditional Jewish teachings against external threats. R. Yehudah HaLevi's approach was to form the basis for many later authorities in their approach to this topic, but they would not emulate his hesitancy. He admits that there is room for doubt as to the correctness of the Talmud's statement, and his proposed solution seems somewhat tentative.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-c.1164) takes a different approach and explains the Scriptural references to kidneys as a metaphor.¹¹ The kidneys are hidden deep within the body, and thereby represent man's innermost self. Furthermore, Ibn Ezra elsewhere

¹¹ See his commentary to Psalms 7:10, 16:7, and 139:13.

explains the function of kidneys as relating to the generation of sperm.¹² He thus did not believe them to be the source of counsel, and therefore explained the verses metaphorically.¹³ Additionally, in his comment to Lev. 3:9, regarding the word *atzeh*, Ibn Ezra states that the word is not related to any other in Scripture—clearly rejecting the aforementioned Talmudic exegesis which relates it to the word *etzah* and sees the verse as referring to the kidneys.

Ibn Ezra “received his secular education in the best tradition of the Arabic-Andalusian science.”¹⁴ His scientific interests are most prominently in the fields of mathematics, astronomy and astrology, rather than physiology or medicine. Still, as can be seen from his discussion of the function of the kidneys, he certainly studied physiology also, and it is presumably for this reason that he was perturbed by the Scriptural description and the Talmudic elaboration.¹⁵ While he had no difficulties simply rejecting the Talmudic statement—and in so doing, acted consistently with the standard approach to Aggadata amongst the Gaonim and Sephardic Rishonim¹⁶—he could not do that with the Scriptural verses, and therefore chose to interpret them allegorically instead.

Ramban (Gerona, 1194 – Land of Israel, 1270) accepts that the kidneys truly are the sources of counsel. He explains that the reason why with sacrifices, the animal’s kidneys are burned, is that they are the instruments of thought and desire, and thereby remind man that it was these with which he sinned.¹⁷ He makes no mention here of the

¹² Long Commentary to Ex. 23:25. See Shlomo Sela, *Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science*, pp. 130-137, for a discussion of this passage.

¹³ In his commentary to Psalms 139:13, “It was You who created my kidneys, You formed me in my mother’s womb,” as an alternative to explaining the term metaphorically, he suggests that they are invoked due to their being the seat of desire. As we shall see, there were those who used this belief to explain the Talmudic notion of the kidneys counseling man. However, in the context of this verse, the kidneys are not necessarily mentioned as being sources of counsel, and thus there is no reason to believe that Ibn Ezra’s mention of their being the seat of desire represents any sort of effort to accommodate the Talmud’s statement.

¹⁴ Sela, p. 8.

¹⁵ Note that in his commentary to Exodus 23:25, Ibn Ezra writes that the soul, which is the intellect, is housed in the brain, and the *ruach* is housed in the heart.

¹⁶ See Chaim Eisen, “Maharal’s *Be’er ha-Golah* and His Revolution in *Aggadic* Scholarship — in Their Context and on His Terms.” *Hakirah* vol. 4 (Winter 2007) pp. 137-194.

¹⁷ Commentary to Leviticus 1:9.

scientific issues involved. Yet Ramban, having medical training in thirteenth century Spain, was aware that the brain is the seat of the mind.¹⁸ But while there is no open reference to the problem, there is perhaps an implicit reference, which emerges when we contrast the commentary of Ramban with that of Rabbeinu Bachya, who often expresses similar ideas. Both correlate the act of bringing the sacrifice with atoning for sinning with deed, speech and thought. But whereas Rabbeinu Bachya simply describes the innards and kidneys as “instruments of counsel and thought,” Ramban says that these are the instruments of “thought *and desire*.” The latter appears to be an accommodation with the scientific view of the time that the kidneys are linked to the sexual organs. Yet, unlike Ibn Ezra, this does not mean that Ramban saw that function as existing in exclusion to the kidneys functioning as a source of counsel; it seems that he may have considered this to be part of their role as a source of counsel, as advocating sexual desire (and perhaps general counsel too). This is an approach that, as we shall later see, others presented explicitly.

As noted, **Rabbeinu Bachya b. Asher** (mid-thirteenth century - 1340), a disciple of Rashba, also notes that the kidneys of an offering correlate with the organs in man which give counsel to the heart and lead him to sin.¹⁹ Yet he was also aware that the brain has a cognitive function. In order to reconcile this with the Scriptural and Talmudic accounts of the role of the heart and kidneys, he proposed that thoughts are conceived in the head, but need to descend to the heart and kidneys in order to be actualized and transmitted as directions to the body.²⁰ **R. Yehoshua Ibn Shu'ib** (Spain, early 14th century), another disciple of Rashba, cites and endorses the view of R. Yehudah HaLevi that the Talmud's statement is correct and scientifically defensible. He also claims further evidence in support of the Talmud's statement, noting that there was a case of a

¹⁸ In *Torat Hashem Temimah (Kitvei HaRamban)*, vol 1. p. 150), Ramban notes that the purpose of the Tefillin of the head is to be facing the brain, which is the “chariot of the soul.” Note, however, that in his commentary to Ex. 13:16, he writes that the seat of thought is in the brain *and* the heart.

¹⁹ See commentary to Leviticus 1:9, 3:9 and 9:9.

²⁰ See his commentary to Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 6:6. A similar view of the role of the kidneys can be found in the thirteenth-century work *Sefer Ma'arechet Elokut*, chapter 10 and in R. Yitzchak Caro, *Toldot Yitzchak* to Genesis 6:6. Note that in Rabbeinu Bachya's presentation, there is a conspicuous absence of any specification that it is sexual desire that the kidneys provide; this, in conjunction with his general description of the role of the kidneys and heart, shows that unlike Ramban, he saw the kidneys as responsible for all counsel, not specifically sexual desire.

person who had his kidneys injured and as a result had his mental faculties harmed.²¹ Yet another disciple of Rashba, **R. Yaakov b. Chananel Skili** (Spain-Israel-Iraq, 14th century), similarly defends the position that the kidneys genuinely do provide counsel. He cites verses and statements from the Talmud that the kidneys contain knowledge and provide guidance. R. Jacob explains the reason why he is citing these verses at length:

It was necessary for me to bring all these because I heard that there are some of my people, small of faith, who challenge our Sages for saying that the kidneys give counsel, and they say that the kidneys have no power to understand and to give counsel, but rather are just like the lower intestines. But behold, we have learned from the words of the prophets, and from the words of Solomon... who was wise in the natural sciences... and from God's response to Job... that the kidneys are an organ of wisdom, just like the heart. (*Torat HaMincha* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom Publications 2000), Discourse 74 for *parashat Ki Tavo*, p. 665)

Note, however, the difference between the approach of R. Yaakov b. Chananel and that of R. Yehudah HaLevi and R. Yehoshua ibn Shu'ib. They both saw it as necessary to include some sort of scientific justification for their position, whereas for R. Yaakov b. Chananel, the authority of the prophets and King Shlomo alone is enough.

R. Shimon b. Tzemach Duran ("Tashbatz," Majorca-Algiers 1361-1444) studied philosophy and science extensively, focusing in particular on medicine, which he practiced for many years at Majorca. In his work *Magen Avot* he provides a scientific basis for the Talmud's description of the kidneys' function.²² He argues that since the kidneys are located close to the sex organs and are related to sexual desire, and the sex organs differ with men and women, and counsel is only found with men (!), thus the kidneys are seen to be the source of counsel. As further evidence for this, he points out that eunuchs lack counsel and wisdom. R. Duran states that R. Yehudah HaLevi is his basis for this. But in fact HaLevi's claim was milder, being only that since the testicles are observed to be linked to cognitive functions, it is not far-fetched to suppose that there is also some sort of link between the kidneys and cognitive functions. R. Duran's

²¹ *Drashot Ibn Shu'ib to parashat Emor*, p. 284.

²² *Magen Avot* 3:4.

son **R. Shlomo** (“Rashbash,” Algiers 1400-1467) cites and further elaborates upon the explanation given by his father as well as that given by R. Yehoshua ibn Shuib.²³

Early Modern Italy

The discussion about the kidneys flared up again in sixteenth century Italy. This was a place where many Jews received an extensive secular education, especially in medicine. The first person to weigh in on the issue was **R. Moshe ben Avraham Provençal** (Italy 1503-1576), a halachist and Chief Rabbi of Mantua. Amongst his responsa is a question that was posed about the Talmud’s description of the kidneys giving counsel, since scientists and physicians had concluded that the brain is the seat of counsel. R. Moshe responds that the opinion of scientists and physicians is irrelevant vis-à-vis the tradition of the Sages. He points out that the concept of the kidneys giving counsel is also stated by the Prophets and is even found in the Torah itself, citing the verse from Lev. 3:9 that the spinal cord be cut “opposite the *atzeh*.”²⁴

His disciple and later successor R. **Yehudah Moscato** (Italy c.1530- c.1593), on the other hand, while still defending the Talmudic position, sought to reconcile it with science. R. Moscato had also studied with R. Azariah de Rossi and, as a product of the Renaissance, he was well read and respected modern knowledge, which meant that he could not simply dismiss medical opinion.²⁵ In his commentary on the Kuzari, he offers some brief comments in elaboration of R. Yehudah HaLevi’s pointing out that the reproductive organs are likewise connected to the cognitive faculties.²⁶ But in his collection of sermons, he has a lengthy explanation of his own to justify the Talmud’s statement.²⁷ This is based on the ancient ideas of the bodily humors, with the medieval modification of how these produce vapors which affect the brain. R. Moscato explains that the spleen filters black bile from the blood, and the gallbladder filters yellow bile.

²³ Responsa Rashbash 309-310 (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim 1998).

²⁴ *She’elot u’Teshuvot Rabbeinu Moshe Provençal* (Jerusalem 1989), also cited in *Pachad Yitzchak, erech Kilyaot Yoazot*.

²⁵ According to one study, R. Moscato was “deeply affected by Renaissance culture and it left a noticeable imprint on the essential character of his thought.” See Moshe Idel, “Judah Moscato, a late Renaissance Jewish Preacher,” in *Preachers of the Italian Ghetto* (1992) pp. 41-66.

²⁶ *Kol Yehudah* (Venice, 1594) to *Kuzari* 4:25.

²⁷ *Nefutzot Yehudah* (Venice, 1588; Lemberg, 1859), *derush* 9. He also cites *Derech Emunah, shaar bet*, but I have been unable to determine to which of the numerous works by this title he refers.

The kidneys, he states, remove the “watery elements” from the blood, which are released as urine. Since the result of this is that the blood is cleansed, and it is clean blood that produces clear and pure vapors, which in turn means that the forces that power the intellect will produce elevated and perfected thoughts, R. Moscato argues that it is correct for the kidneys to be described as the source of wisdom, understanding and counsel. His explanation for why the spleen and gallbladder are not also described in this way is that their role in filtering the blood is not as obvious and prominent as that of the kidneys. But aside from the outdated physiological views of R. Moscato, his explanation does not even suffice for his own time period, since he does not address the fact that the Talmud describes one of the kidneys as providing *harmful* counsel.

R. Yitzchak Lampronti (Italy, 1679-1756) studied with the prominent rabbinic scholar and physician Yitzchak Cantarini, and completed his medical studies at the University of Padua. He continued to practice medicine even while working as rabbi and Rosh Yeshivah.²⁸ In his Talmudic encyclopedia *Pachad Yitzchak*, he has an extensive entry on the topic of the kidneys giving counsel.²⁹ Due to his extensive medical background, he must have considered this an obviously and deeply problematic statement that required addressing at length.

After citing the relevant portions from the Talmud, R. Lampronti begins by noting that while the natural philosophers have discovered many wondrous things, they have not penetrated the true nature of things. Our sages, on the other hand, were privy to divine secrets regarding creation. However, R. Lampronti proceeds to note that when faced with a conflict between the Sages and science, he chooses between two approaches: one being that the Sages’ received knowledge enabled them to reach truths that secular scientists cannot attain, and the other being that the Sages did not speak from tradition and were mistaken in their view. The latter is an approach that he applies in the case of the Talmudic statement that lice spontaneously generate, yet in the case of the kidneys, R. Lampronti adopts the approach that the Sages were correct (and later cites R. Moshe Provençal’s insistence on this). Ruderman claims that R. Lampronti is simply inconsistent and self-contradictory.³⁰ However, I do not believe that to be the case. R.

²⁸ David Ruderman, “Contemporary Science and Jewish law in the Eyes of Isaac Lampronti of Ferrara and Some of his Contemporaries,” *Jewish History* 6:1-2, *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume* (1992), pp. 211-212.

²⁹ *Pachad Yitzchak, erech Kilyaot Yoazot*.

³⁰ Ruderman, p. 219.

Lampronti explains why he is taking the approach here that the Sages were correct: because Scripture itself attributes such a role to the kidneys.

R. Lampronti proceeds to give a scientific explanation for why the Talmudic account of the function of the kidneys is correct. Like R. Yehudah HaLevi, Ibn Shuib and Tashbatz, R. Lampronti begins with the notion that the kidneys are involved with generating sperm for the testicles. He explains the concept of “one for good, one for evil” as meaning that there are both good and evil manifestations of the sexual urge. As for the Talmud’s calculation that the good kidney is on the right and the evil on the left, he interprets this allegorically, to mean that the wise person will use his sexual urge for the “right”—i.e. for the good—namely, for the purpose of procreation, whereas the evil person will use his heart for the “left”—for evil purposes of lust.

But R. Lampronti’s interpretation of the Talmud is problematic on several counts (aside from the fact that the actual connection between the kidneys and sperm is minimal). First is that he interprets one statement of the Talmud (concerning the function of the kidneys) literally, and the adjacent statement (concerning the placement of the kidneys) allegorically, which is unreasonable. Second is that if “right” means good and “left” means evil, then it does not make sense for the Talmud to say that the good kidney is on the right and the evil kidney is on the left; this means that it is saying that the good aspect of kidneys is good and the evil aspect is evil! Third is that restricting the notion of the kidneys giving counsel to referring only to the sexual urge hardly seems consistent with the verses and Midrash Tehillim, which imply that all of man’s inner struggles are dictated by the kidneys.

Although R. **Chaim Yosef David Azulai** (“Chida,” 1724-1807) spent several years in Italy, he was essentially a product of Jerusalem, dedicated to Talmud and Kabbalah. Nevertheless, he had broad interests, which come to light in his defense of the Talmud’s statement about the kidneys. Chida claims that the microscope³¹ reveals connections between the kidneys and the brain.³² His reference is apparently to vascular microcirculation and macrocirculation which connects the heart, kidneys and brain.³³

³¹ Chida actually uses the term telescope (“*tel iskopio*”), but presumably intended to refer to the microscope.

³² *Pesach Einayim*, *Berachos* 60a, and *Midbar Kadmus*, *Kaf*.

³³ My thanks to Rabbi Dr. Edward Reichman for explaining this to me.

Chida thereby sees evidence that the kidneys are transmitting information to the brain, apparently relying on the ancient belief that blood is a vehicle of the mind.

The Modern Period: Literalists, Allegorists and Rationalists

In the modern era, many still insisted on the literal truth of the kidneys providing counsel. Rabbi **Eliezer Waldenberg** (1915-2006), who was the rabbi of the Shaarei Zedek Medical Center, uses the Talmud as reason for warning against kidney transplants, since one risks the donor's kidneys counseling the recipient in a harmful manner.³⁴ The prominent Sephardic authority Rabbi **Ovadiah Yosef** (b. 1920) recommends that Jews receiving kidney transplants choose, wherever possible, to receive the organ from a Jewish donor, due to the Talmudic account of the kidneys providing counsel.³⁵ These authorities probably were simply unaware and/or unconcerned with modern scientific views as to the function of the kidneys. But Rabbi **Chaim Elazar Spira** (the Munkacher Rebbe, 1871-1937) claims that medical science provides support for the Talmud's statement, albeit somewhat reinterpreted to be referring to nineteenth-century beliefs concerning the pathophysiology of kidney stones.³⁶ He explains that renal colic results from an inability to digest calcium properly, which in turn results from psychological stress and anxiety—which he describes as “the inability to provide counsel to the soul.” R. Spira thereby sees medical science as justifying the Sages' statement that the kidneys provide counsel; although he seems not to have noticed that even with this very loose interpretation of “providing counsel,” it is the heart affecting the kidneys, rather than the other way around, as described in the Talmud. In a similar manner, many traditionalists today claim scientific support for the Talmud's account,³⁷ citing papers attesting to a (very minor) connection between the brain and kidneys.³⁸ These

³⁴ Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer* 13:91:4. See too 17:66:7

³⁵ Responsa *Yabia Omer* vol. 8 *Choshen Mishpat* 11.

³⁶ *Divrei Torah* 6 p. 880. My thanks to Rabbi Chaim Rapoport for referring me to this source, and to Rabbi Dr. Edward Reichman for explaining R. Spira's discussion.

³⁷ See, for example, Abigail Atlas, “‘The Kidneys Give Advice,’ Revisited,” *Derech HaTeva* vol. 10 (2005-6) pp. 9-10.

³⁸ E.g. Anne M. Murray, “The brain and the kidney connection. A model of accelerated vascular cognitive impairment,” *Neurology* 1331819 (August 19, 2009); Raymond Vanholder, Peter Paul De Deyn, et al., “Marconi Revisited: From Kidney to Brain—Two Organ Systems Communicating at Long Distance.” *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology* (2008) 19 pp. 1253-1255.

people ignore the fact that the Talmud is not speaking of a potential minor negative impact of kidney disease on the cognitive function of the brain, but rather of the kidneys providing counsel and being the organ that God inspects in order to judge a person, with the brain playing no role whatsoever.

Other traditionalists, who accept the modern scientific view regarding the kidneys, interpret the Scriptural and Talmudic accounts allegorically. In the non-Jewish world, Reverend **J. G Lansing** develops a lengthy argument to prove that the kidneys in the Bible are a metaphor for a specific component of man's spiritual/ mental self, namely, his conscience.³⁹ Following from the premise that the kidneys in Scripture are allegorical, **Frank Chamberlin Porter** (1859-1946), Professor of Biblical Theology at the Yale Divinity School, claims that the same is true with the Talmud. Referring to the passage in *Berachot*, he writes as follows:

Here we have, of course, not a literal identification of the impulses with the two kidneys. The word reins (*kelayot*) is used in the Old Testament prevalingly, as the word heart is used almost exclusively, not of the physical organ, but of the inner man, the inmost self. In the saying before us, the two kidneys in the physical man suggest the two impulses in man as a moral being. (Frank C. Porter, "The Yeçer Hara: A Study in the Jewish Doctrine of Sin," in *Biblical and Semitic Studies: Yale Historical and Critical Contributions to Biblical Science* p. 102)

The physician Dr. **Yehudah Leib Katzenelson** (1846-1917) insists that the Talmud's account of the kidneys providing counsel must be a metaphor, since the sages "surely knew" that the brain is the seat of the intellect and counsel.⁴⁰ In a lengthy discussion, Rabbi **Yekutiel Aryeh Kamelhar** (1871-1937) claims that the Talmud is allegorically referring to the spiritual counterpart of the kidneys, which are so named because just as the actual kidneys provide "good counsel" by filtering urine, so too these spiritual organs provide good counsel.⁴¹ Rabbi **Chaim Friedlander** of the Ponovezh Yeshivah (1923-1986) similarly insists that the Scriptural and Talmudic references must be to "metaphysical kidneys" which cleanse the soul of evil, paralleling the function of

³⁹ Lansing J. G. "The Reins." *The Old Testament Student* 3:6 (Feb. 1884), pp. 191-196.

⁴⁰ *HaTalmud VeChachmat HaRefuah* (Berlin 1925), p. 106. For further discussion of the Talmud's statement about kidneys, see R. Meyer Lebusch Malbim, *Chiddushi HaMalbim Al HaShas, Berachot* 60b; R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Michtav MeEliyahu* vol. 5 p. 26.

⁴¹ *HaTalmud U'Mada'ei HaTevel* (Levov 1928) 3:1. pp. 17-20.

the physical kidneys which cleanse the body of waste.⁴² None of these authorities explain how the Talmud's account of the kidneys also providing harmful counsel occurs with the spiritual counterparts to the kidneys; nor do they provide any justification for reading the various Talmudic statements in this light (beyond the general claim of the Sages' supernatural wisdom).⁴³

For Orthodox Jews of a more rationalist persuasion, on the other hand, it is relatively easy to accept that the Talmud's views on the kidneys were simply mistaken. More challenging, however, are the descriptions of the kidneys found in Scripture. Some take the approach that the Scriptural verses to this effect are allegorical, and were misunderstood by the Sages and Rishonim.⁴⁴ But others are able to accept that they are literal and mistaken without this harming their faith, by adopting a variant of the principle of *dibra Torah k'lashon bnei adam*, "the Torah speaks like the language of men."⁴⁵ This phrase appears in numerous places throughout the Talmud and Midrash, in the rabbinic works of the medieval period, and in the writings of recent scholars. However, the concept is utilized in very different ways.⁴⁶ In the Talmud and Midrash, the phrase means that pleonasms (excesses in language) are used as a rhetorical flourish in the Torah, just as people speak, and are not intended to provide a basis for an additional exegesis. In the writings of the Geonim and Rishonim, on the other hand, we find them employing this principle to account for Scriptural anthropomorphisms.⁴⁷ But

⁴² *Sifsei Chaim, Emunah u'Bechirah* II, p. 316. My thanks to Rabbi Chaim Rapoport for this source.

⁴³ They also do not address the account in *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* that man's hair, innards, nostrils, nasal mucous, tears, teeth, saliva, neck, arms, fingers, head, stomach, kidneys, spleen, navel, blood, legs and other bodily parts all correspond with something in the physical world (e.g. with his hair corresponding to forests). It is difficult to imagine that they could argue that this is actually referring not to physical organs, but to man's "spiritual" hair, innards, nostrils, nasal mucous, tears, teeth, saliva, neck, arms, fingers, head, stomach, spleen, navel, blood, legs and other bodily parts.

⁴⁴ They do not explain why Scripture never makes any mention of the brain.

⁴⁵ See Avraham Korman, *Ha-Adam Ve-Tiv'vo* (Tel Aviv, 1986, reprinted edition 2003), pp. 289-290.

⁴⁶ See Zion Ukshi, "The Torah Speaks Like the Language of Men—The Development of the Expression and its Nature" (Hebrew), *Derech Efrata* 9-10 (5761) pp. 39-59.

⁴⁷ *Otzar HaGeonim, Berachos, Chelek HaPerushim* 271 pp. 91-94; R. Bachya Ibn Pakuda, *Chovos HaLevavos, Sha'ar HaYichud* 10; R. Yehudah HaLevi, *Kuzari* 5:27; R. Avraham Ibn Daud, *Ha-Emunah HaRamah*, introduction, p. 2; Ibn Ezra, Commentary to Genesis 6:6, Long Commentary to Exodus 4:8, Commentary to Daniel 10:21; Rambam, *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:26. See Avraham Nuriel, "Dibra Torah K'lashon Bnei Adam in the Guide for the Perplexed" (Hebrew), in *Galuy VeSamuy BePhilosophia HaYehudit BiYemei HaBeinayim* (Jerusalem 5760) pp. 93-99.

according to Rambam, this does not mean that the Torah uses anthropomorphic descriptions of God simply because this is the way that people *speak* about God; rather, it is because this is the way that many people *think* of God. The corporeal description of God given in the Torah is based upon the intellectual framework of the masses.⁴⁸

Rambam further explains that various laws in the Torah are based upon false but prevalent beliefs; the punishment for cursing someone, for example, is based upon the popular but false belief that cursing someone actually has an effect.⁴⁹ In addition, according to the standard interpretation of the *Guide*, Rambam believed that Ezekiel's vision included the mistaken notion that the spheres make sounds, since prophetic insights are received by a prophet within the framework of his worldview, regardless of the scientific accuracy of this worldview.⁵⁰ Ralbag takes the same approach.⁵¹

R. **Yosef Ibn Kaspi** (1280-1340) likewise extends "the Torah speaks in accordance with the language of men" beyond descriptions of God to a broad range of additional phenomena. Rabbi Dr. Isadore (Yitzchak) Twersky (1930-1997) explains Ibn Kaspi's approach at length:

Kaspi frequently operates with the following exegetical premise: not every Scriptural statement is true in the absolute sense. A statement may be purposely erroneous, reflecting an erroneous view of the masses. We are not dealing merely with an unsophisticated or unrationalized view, but an intentionally, patently false view espoused by the masses and enshrined in Scripture. The view or statement need not be allegorized, merely recognized for what it is... The key factor is Kaspi's use of the well-known rabbinic dictum: *dibrah Torah*

⁴⁸ *Guide to the Perplexed* 1:26 and 1:33. Note Rambam's definition in 1:26: "But in accordance with 'the language of men,' that is to say, the imagination of the multitude..." As Rabbi Dr. Isadore Twersky describes it: "In its Maimonidean adaptation, the rabbinic dictum may then be paraphrased as follows: 'The Torah speaks in conformity with the imagination (and frequently crude perception) of the multitude' and therefore uses anthropomorphic imagery when speaking of divine attributes" ("Joseph ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual," p. 239).

⁴⁹ *Sefer HaMitzvos* 317 and *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:41. See Twersky, loc cit., pp. 240-241.

⁵⁰ See *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:8 and 3:3, with the commentaries of Efodi, Shem Tov, Narvoni, and Abarbanel in *Ta'anos*, 4, and Rabbi Shlomo Fisher, *Derashos Beis Yishai, Ma'amar Hamo'ach Vehalev*, fn. 4. For further discussion, see Warren Zev Harvey, "How to Begin to Study *Moreh Nevuchim*," (Hebrew) *Da'at* 21 (1988) pp. 21-23.

⁵¹ Ralbag, commentary to Gen. 15:4, and commentary to Job, end of ch. 39. I am indebted to Dr. Marc Shapiro for this reference.

bileshon bene adam, “The Torah speaks in the language of men,” famous for its medieval use in the realm of anthropomorphism... Many scriptural statements, covered by this plastic rubric, are seen as errors, superstitions, popular conceptions, local mores, folk beliefs, and customs (*minhag bene adam*), statements which reflect the assumptions or projections or behavioral patterns of the people involved rather than an abstract truth. In its Kaspian adaptation, the rabbinic dictum may then be paraphrased as follows: “The Torah expressed things as they were believed or perceived or practiced by the multitude and not as they were in actuality.” (Rabbi Dr. Isadore Twersky, “Joseph ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual,” pp. 239-242⁵²)

R. **Samson Raphael Hirsch** (1808-1888) writes about scientific inaccuracies in Scripture as follows:

Jewish scholarship has never regarded the Bible as a textbook for physical or even abstract doctrines. In its view the main emphasis of the Bible is always on the ethical and social structure and development of life on earth; that is, on the observance of laws through which the momentous events of our nation’s history are converted from abstract truths into concrete convictions. That is why Jewish scholarship regards the Bible as speaking consistently in “human language;” the Bible does not describe things in terms of objective truths known only to God, but in terms of human understanding, which is, after all, the basis for human language and expression. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Collected Writings* vol. 7 p. 57⁵³)

Similarly, Rabbi Hirsch notes that although there is no actual solid layer surrounding the earth that could be called a firmament, Scripture nevertheless uses that term because that is how the sky appears to man; as a dome over and around the earth.⁵⁴

⁵² The cases of *dibra Torah* that I have so far located in Ibn Kaspi are not the same as that of the kidneys. However it is a natural extension of those cases, and perhaps even proceeds *a fortiori* from them.

⁵³ Rabbi Hirsch is discussing the Scriptural usage of the Ptolemaic description of the universe rather than the Copernican model. There are two ways of employing the approach of “the Torah speaks in the language of men” for this case. One is that just as we today speak of sunrise even though we know that it is the earth moving, so too the Torah uses such figures of speech and they were not intended to be understood by its audience as actually describing the sun moving. Another is that the Torah is speaking in accordance with how people actually understood the universe. Rabbi Hirsch seems to be following the latter approach, with his mention of the Torah speaking in terms of human *understanding*.

⁵⁴ Commentary to Genesis 1:6. Cf. Rabbi Akiva Eiger, note to the phrase *u’vokeya chalonei rakia* in *Siddur Otzar HaTefillos* p. 672. See too Maharzav to *Midrash Bereishis Rabbah* 6:8.

Rabbi **Avraham Yitzchak Kook** (1865-1935) also invokes the concept of “the Torah speaks in the language of men” to explain why there is no reason to seek scientific accuracy in the Torah:

Every intelligent person knows that there is no relevance to our faith... with regard to the state of astronomical or geological knowledge... it makes no difference with regard to the words of the Torah... It is already adequately known that prophecy takes its metaphors to guide mankind according to that which was then well-known in the language of men at that time, to direct the ear according to that which it is able to hear in its time...⁵⁵ The intellectual truths of the depths of Torah are elevated and exalted far beyond these; the human illustrations—whatever they may be—with regard to the nature of existence, certainly also have a particular path in the ethical development of mankind... in each generation, according to his way of framing things, which constantly changes. (R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Adar HaYekar*, pp. 37-38)

Accordingly, Orthodox Jews can accept that Scripture speaks of the kidneys as actually providing counsel, and also accept that the kidneys do not in fact do this. Furthermore, this approach has many applications beyond the question of the kidneys’ counsel. Aside from the astronomical and cosmological issues discussed by Rambam, Ralbag, Rav Hirsch and Rav Kook, there are a number of instances where the Scriptures, according to traditional and scholarly interpretation, conflict with modern science.⁵⁶ While traditionalists struggle to reinterpret these verses and fit them into modern science, the principle of “the Torah speaks in the language of men” as utilized by the aforementioned authorities, while not without its own difficulties, renders these reinterpretations unnecessary.

⁵⁵ Rabbi Kook proceeds to refer to the opinion of Rambam in the *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:7, and the Jerusalem Talmud at the end of *Taanis* (4:5) regarding the corruption in the calculation of the ninth of Tammuz.

⁵⁶ Thus, as well as the inconsistency between the Genesis account of the age and development of the universe, the geocentric description of the universe, and the description of the firmament being a flat, firm structure, there is also the description of dew descending from the heavens and the descriptions of the hare and hyrax as ruminants.

Conclusion

The topic of the kidneys' function well illustrates the differing education that Jews received in different times and places. Already in the early medieval period, science had recognized that cognitive functions occur in the brain, with the kidneys serving as filtering organs. But for Jews in northern France and Germany, these discoveries had not entered their intellectual horizons, and the Scriptural and Talmudic accounts posed no difficulties. Not so for Jews in Spain, whose broad education caused them to realize that there was a problem here. Depending on whether they were more traditionalist or rationalist in orientation, they either justified the Talmud's statement or rejected it, but either way, they grappled with the problem. A similar phenomenon occurred much later in Italy, where Jews likewise had a broad education in general and with physiology in particular.

Today, one can find both Orthodox Jews who maintain their belief in the Talmud's account and those who reject, but few are they who can be oblivious to the challenge that it poses. Yet even Orthodox Jews who adopt a rationalist approach to the Talmudic and Midrashic accounts are often reluctant to accept that the Scriptural accounts pose a similar challenge. However, in light of the growing awareness of similar such challenges in Scripture, the approach of "the Torah speaks in the language of men," as implemented by Rambam, Ibn Kaspi, Rav Hirsch and Rav Kook, is likely to become more widely accepted.

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