

The Healing From Within

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How Sabbath-observant medical residents handle the conflict between their beliefs and their demanding schedules.

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Dr. Robert Shochet helps direct Sinai Hospital's Sabbath-Friendly residency program.

Theo Heller describes his commitment to Sabbath observance as "absolute." So does Elliot Rothschild. When faced with a similar choice in their careers, however, Theo found he had to go to work on Shabbat, while Elliot was able to stay home and worship.

Both men are doctors, and the work in question is the rigorous ordeal called residency. Physicians fresh out of medical school are required to earn their stripes on this hospital battlefield, which tests both physical endurance and devotion to duty. Residents must

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spend days or weeks at a time on call, and have to work frequent overnight shifts.

In some residency programs, doctors work 60 days or more in a row, rarely seeing their families or enjoying a day of rest — religious or otherwise.

Living By The Mitzvot

Dr. Heller, a 34-year-old native of South Africa, earned his medical degree at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and did his residency at Georgetown University Hospital. Now a fellow in gastroenterology and liver disease at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore, he recalls with chagrin his

time under the gun.

"At Georgetown the work ethic is very strong. During internship we had one day off a month and I had to work most every *Shabbos*," he said. "It was very difficult."

Georgetown makes no special accommodation for residents whose religious conviction calls for them to cease from their toils on the Sabbath or the Jewish holidays.

But after consulting with his rabbi at Shomrei Emunah synagogue in Silver Spring, where he lives, Dr. Heller determined that he could work on the Sabbath without violating his religious convictions.

"In the Torah it says you should live by the *mitzvot*, or commandments, he said, "so you can work on the Sabbath when someone's life is involved." As a doctor, he never knew when his work might help to save a life, and he therefore felt free to provide his services on the sacred day of rest.

Of the three residency programs in Baltimore, neither the University of Maryland Medical Center nor Johns Hopkins Hospital offers special accommodations for *shomer* Shabbos residents, although some departments within these institutions have proven themselves flexible in this regard.

Sinai Hospital does offer a formal program to accommodate its Sabbath-observant residents, the reason Dr. Rothschild is able to get time off. A 30-year-old Montgomery County native, he earned his degree at the University of Maryland Medical School and is presently doing his residency at Sinai.

Dr. Rothschild works 60 to 100 hours a week. But every Shabbat he is home in Pikesville with his wife Diana and their 3-year-old and 9-month-old children, or else worshipping at the Orthodox B'nai Jacob Synagogue.

"They make it very easy here," he said of Sinai, and that in turn makes it easy for him to keep both his faith, and his sanity. "Having the Sabbath off is a way to always restart the cycle. I know that Friday night, come hell or high water, I am going to have some time with my family."

Around the country a small number of mostly Jewish-sponsored hospitals offer Sabbath-friendly schedules for Jewish residents. When Dr. Rothschild was applying for residency programs, he wrote explaining his religious requirements: of the 10 programs he contacted, only four were willing to accommodate him. While three of these said they could make some kind of informal arrangement, only Sinai had a formal program in place.

Sabbath-Friendly

"Sinai is committed to the needs of the Jewish community in Baltimore, and part of that is understanding the needs of its Jewish physicians," explained Dr. Robert

Shochet, associate program director of the Hopkins-Sinai residency training program.

Sinai's residency program has operated under the aegis of the Hopkins program for the past 10 years.

When the two institutions formed this alliance, Sinai's Sabbath-friendly policy "was presented as part of the program, and Hopkins didn't consider it to be an issue," Dr. Shochet said. The program has remained in place at Sinai ever since.

While the three-year residency is traditionally a trial by fire, Dr. Shochet said there is more to being a good doctor than merely putting in the hours. "We're not evaluating people based on the number of hours they work, but on the quality of their work," he explained.

Dr. David Blass couldn't agree more. "There are 143 hours of the week that are not part of the Sabbath, and there have been weeks when I have been in the hospital for 115 of those hours," he said.

"That's plenty of hours to test somebody's mettle."

A 28-year-old Baltimore native who earned his degree at the University of Maryland, Dr. Blass is in the midst of completing a one-year residency at Sinai. This leaves him free to worship on Saturday mornings at Shomrei Emunah synagogue in Greenspring with his wife, Malka, and their two sons.

Next year, however, he will begin a three-year psychiatry residency at Hopkins — but that should be all right. While Hopkins has no formal program for *shomer* Shabbos residents, "the psychiatry program at Johns Hopkins Hospital has historically been extremely sensitive to the need of their individual residents," he said.

Dr. Blass already has spoken with program coordinators, who are willing to fit his schedule to his religious needs. However, he agreed with Dr. Heller that if a life were in jeopardy he would be obliged to put Sabbath observance aside.

And although he is grateful that Hopkins will be making it possible for him to fulfill the *mitzvah* of the Sabbath rest, he acknowledges that "there is no one answer that is right for everybody."

The advice from most Sabbath-observant medical residents is uniform in this regard. When in doubt, they say, always ask your rabbi. □

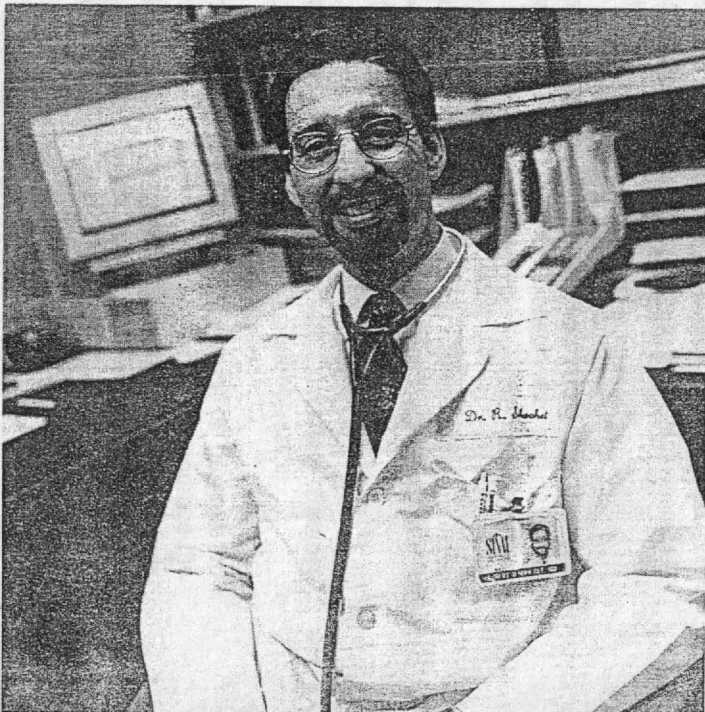


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