

Can A Shabbat-Observant Jew Get Through Medical Residency At Baylor?

By AARON HOWARD • Thu, Mar 08, 2012

It's possible, says one Houstonian who did

When David Zalkin completed his pediatrics rotation as a medical student in 2008, his wish was to stay in Houston to do his residency at the Baylor College of Medicine Pediatric Residency Program. Why not? Baylor's is considered one of the nation's top pediatric programs. Zalkin had just one small conflict: He was shomer Shabbos. And, Baylor had no shomer Shabbos or Shabbos-friendly residency.

For Zalkin, the issue was: Should he get his education at a school where he could be guaranteed a shomer Shabbos residency or go to Baylor (a "hands-down stronger program," in Zalkin's words – and, a situation that was better for his family), with no guarantee that he wouldn't be forced to compromise his religious observance and his beliefs?



Dr. David Zalkin

In practice, explained Dr. Daniel Eisenberg, radiologist at Albert Einstein Medical Center, Philadelphia, the requirements of Sabbath observance usually preclude a medical student, resident or attending physician from working in a hospital on the Sabbath or major Jewish holiday, if they would be expected to do routine medical work. Such work would include utilizing electricity and writing, for example. Except for a gravely ill patient or potentially gravely ill patient, the health care provider could not use the telephone, turn on lights, write notes, or fulfill many routine hospital functions.

Once medical training is completed, a physician can almost always take a position that fits personal needs. In contrast, residents are in a very vulnerable position. They have the responsibility of primary patient care, but lack the autonomy to control their work environment. As a result, they might be asked to perform duties, as part of training, that conflict with their religious beliefs.

Zalkin will complete his residency in June. To date, he has been 100 percent successful in keeping Shabbat, although he said, "there were many close calls."

He's actually the second shomer Shabbos person to go through the Baylor residency program. The first was Dr. Nava Miller, who went through the program in the 1990s. Miller managed to be off most Shabbatim and all of the holidays. Technically, Zalkin is the first to go through the residency keeping totally shomer Shabbos. And, there is one more shomer Shabbos person, Dr. Mordechai Raskas, who is in the second year of residency at Baylor.

According to most religious opinions, if there's a conflict between seeking medical training at a hospital where training and patient care is superior, versus training at a hospital that is inferior but where one's observance will not clash with Halakhic restrictions, then "one should seek association with the most reputable and prestigious hospital possible to ensure excellent training and continuing education."

However, if the superior training is to be acquired at the price of Sabbath desecration, "the student-physician must forgo the educational advantages of the prestige hospital."

Zalkin, 32, came to Houston in 2002 with Teach For America. He worked in east Houston with HISD for two years. In 2005, he started at Baylor College of Medicine. At that time, Dr. Ralph Feigin was chairman of the department of pediatrics. Feigin contacted Zalkin, after he had completed his pediatrics rotation as a medical student in March 2008. Feigin made Zalkin an offer to come to Baylor. Zalkin told Feigin he was shomer Shabbos.

"Dr. Feigin turned to me and said, 'You'll stay here, and you'll make it work.'"

Zalkin felt reassured. However, Zalkin also knew Feigin was dying of lung cancer at the time.

“He had already revealed that,” continued Zalkin. “He was a giant of a human being, who looked out for each and every resident. The magnitude of his character was legendary. Although he made it clear to me it would work out, he passed away six months later. And so, I was left in a challenging position.

“I had some serious meetings with the program director of the residency. He explained the program would not a priori arrange a shomer Shabbos schedule, and the school would not rearrange their scheduling template for residents. But, they would allow me to trade (Friday and Saturday hospital shifts) with other residents.

“I decided we would try, knowing there were no guarantees.”

Zalkin was raised in a traditional Conservative household. He would drive to synagogue on Shabbat. His Halakhic observance grew, and he became shomer Shabbos in Houston, while a member of Meyerland Minyan.

“Shabbat is an oasis in time,” commented Zalkin. “When you start keeping the Sabbath, you realize how sacred that time is. You realize you don’t want to give that up. I got to the point where I didn’t want to compromise on that time, especially after I started having a family.”

During his residency, Zalkin has experienced several close calls. Since chief residents make the schedule on a monthly basis, Zalkin consulted them on his need to reschedule Shabbat hospital assignments. Many times, he had to approach colleagues to trade shifts.

“When people see you are sincere in your beliefs (Zalkin wears a kippah, for example), and people know it’s not an extra day off for socialization, they would respond. If they were able to help, they would. The vast majority of people were generous of spirit. Occasionally, I would get into the technical aspect of keeping Shabbat with other residents. People tend to be more religious here. And, I found a lot of folks could appreciate my beliefs, because they are religious.

“Similarly, there’s an advantage to being here, because you are often the only Orthodox Jewish person your colleagues have met. So, they are willing to hear you out on your terms. It’s sometimes more difficult in the East, because people tend to be less observant, and that goes for the Jews, also. Frankly, it can be challenging for other Jewish people, who are not as observant.”

Shomer Shabbos residencies are pre-set up with schedules that would not cause conflict. According to Dr. Eisenberg, in some schools, there is a shomer Shabbos team – which means residents never cover shifts in the hospital on Shabbos. Shabbos friendly means the school will work out an arrangement via schedule templates, so the resident will not have to be in the hospital on Shabbos. So, in theory, either of these two ways could work.

Eisenberg suggested the key for potential residents is a commitment from the program to honor one’s religious requirements. This requires rapport and communication with the program, so that there’s a mutual understanding of the program’s needs and the individual’s needs. The goal, after all, is to optimize patient care, while respecting one’s religious convictions.

Medical schools that have built-in shomer Shabbos programs do so, because they want to attract top talent. Many in that pool of students happen to be Jewish. Plus, at a time when medical schools are creating mandatory medical ethics classes, attracting candidates who are shomer Shabbos also can be understood as a means of attracting healers with serious ethical standards. There tends to be a strong relationship between those who try to keep a Torah-observant life and the way they deal with patients and families.

“In terms of building a shomer Shabbos residency into the schedule at Baylor, it’s a big leap,” Zalkin believes. “I was hoping to get a guarantee when I signed up, but I didn’t. There’s Mordechai behind me, who has the same experience as me.

“There’s a challenge to build this in, when it hasn’t been done before. Plenty of residencies in other parts of the country build this in. I’m not sure what worked for me would work for everyone else. My attitude is: Learn the Halakha, be prepared for any circumstance and never jeopardize the health or well-being of your patients.”