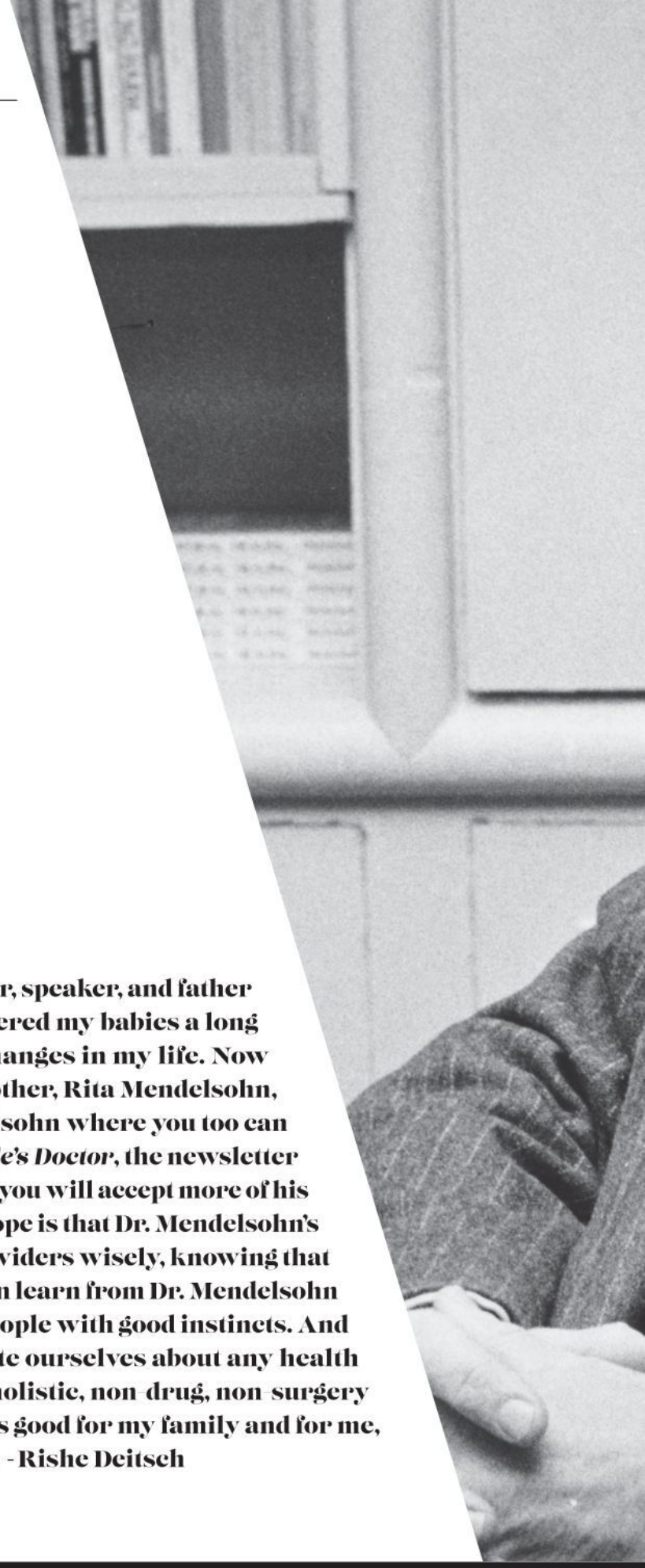


Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn
A Doctor For All Seasons

Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, pediatrician, author, speaker, and father of Sally Mendelsohn (the midwife who delivered my babies a long time ago) was the catalyst for many good changes in my life. Now Sally, her sister, Ruth Lockshin, and their mother, Rita Mendelsohn, have created a new website about Dr. Mendelsohn where you too can enjoy hearing his talks and reading *The People's Doctor*, the newsletter he published during the '70s and '80s. Some of you will accept more of his message; some will accept less or none. My hope is that Dr. Mendelsohn's teachings can help us choose our medical providers wisely, knowing that there are vast differences among them. We can learn from Dr. Mendelsohn to trust ourselves more, as mothers and as people with good instincts. And we can learn from Dr. Mendelsohn to educate ourselves about any health issues we and our families face, and to seek holistic, non-drug, non-surgery solutions when possible. Dr. Mendelsohn was good for my family and for me, and I hope you benefit from his work as well. - Rishe Deitsch



Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn

The People's Doctor

Ruth Lockshin

Sometime in 1979 my father, Dr. Robert S. (Zalman Shaul) Mendelsohn (1926-1988), traveled from his Chicago home to Brooklyn for some speaking engagements. He spoke to two audiences of women only, one night in Williamsburg, and one in Boro Park. My sister Sally was there, and she recalls that the mostly Chassidic audience – 200 or so each night –gave him a warm reception. As an observant Jew himself, he often spoke fondly of those evenings.

At the time, my father's book, *Confessions of a Medical Heretic*, was on its way to becoming a bestseller. I could find no written report of those evenings, but I imagine he would have told the ladies how he began to question Modern Medicine. He started his career as a board-certified pediatrician in a North Michigan Avenue practice in Chicago, but became disillusioned when patients whose tonsils he had irradiated – standard practice in the early 1950s – came back to him with cancer of the thyroid. Even the once-ubiquitous tonsillectomy at the time had mostly been abandoned due to its unacceptably high mortality rate.

Other doctor-induced disasters followed. Women who were prescribed DES during pregnancy to help prevent miscarriages found that not only was it ineffective for that purpose, but the daughters who were born to them had a higher risk of infertility and even of developing a rare form of vaginal cancer.

Dad began to doubt much of what he had learned in medical school. Although medicine claimed to be based in science, to my father it looked more like a religion, and an idolatrous one. He called it the Church of Modern Medicine, noting that it had high priests (doctors, especially surgeons); holy waters (fluoridation, silver nitrate drops in the eyes of newborn infants, etc.); and ritual mutilation (unnecessary surgery). He criticized the over-prescription of antibiotics, and warned against unnecessary mastectomies, hysterectomies, and C-sections.

My father loved to contrast the Torah's "choose life" with Modern Medicine's "death with dignity." He encouraged Jewish doctors to value their own Jewish practices, such as instilling hope in patients by asking them what they wanted for breakfast the next morning, even if the doctor was certain they wouldn't make it through the night.

He went on to write other popular books, including *Male Practice*, his book about the medical mistreatment of women, and *How to Raise a Healthy Child in Spite of Your Doctor*, where he argued that doctors paid "lip service" to breastfeeding but actually were more informed about infant formula, which he called "the granddaddy of all junk food." His books were controversial—he advocated home birth, raised doubts about the value and safety of routine pediatric care, and taught his patients to avoid surgery and medication whenever possible. Yet his messages were always delivered with humor. He used to joke that obstetricians were like firemen—both rushed in to save lives. But, he added with a wink, the firemen didn't also set the fires!

This year, almost 30 years after his death, our family launched a website about Dad: thepeoplesdoctor.net

The site contains a complete set of *The People's Doctor*, the newsletter that my father published for 11 years. I love having this collection online because it's encyclopedic. Whether I want to know about arthritis or yeast infections, heart problems or hyperactivity, I can always check to see what Dad thought about it. Even for treatments that didn't exist in his time, it's helpful to see Dad's approach: question your doctor, read



Mrs. Rita Mendelsohn, Dr. Mendelsohn, and their daughter Ruth, 1956.

drug package inserts carefully, get a second opinion, try a more natural approach.

The website summarizes my father's views on medication, parenting, hospitalization and surgery, women and medicine, and Judaism and medicine. Each of these sections contains links to some of his writings on these topics, or to articles about his views. You can also see him being interviewed or hear some of his entertaining lectures. A photo archive shows Dad with our family and in public settings. In the Archives section, just choose "video," "audio," or "photo" from the dropdown list of Media Types. Look for a link at nsheichabadnewsletter.com.

Readers who still remember Dr. Mendelsohn will enjoy the memories. Others will find it a fun and informative introduction to a truly original thinker. In both cases, Dr. Mendelsohn will help you learn how to make better medical decisions and hopefully lead a healthier life.

"A drug that alleviates an ailment in one part of the body is often harmful for another part of the body."

FROM THE *GEMARA*

The *Gemara* says (*Pesachim,* 113a) that Rav told his son Chiya, "Do not ingest any unnecessary drugs." Rashbam explains, "Rav cautioned his son not to take medicines unnecessarily, since he may develop an addiction to them and squander his money on the addiction's support. Even if he needs the medicine to treat a disease, he should take it only if there is no other equivalent therapy."

Rashi adds, "A drug that alleviates an ailment in one part of the body is often harmful for another part of the body."

In contrast, "a Heaven-sent cure is not accompanied by new threats." (*The Tehillim Treasury*, citing the Novominsker Rebbe, Rabbi Nochum Perlow, based on *Tehillim* 107:20)

Ben Yehuyada also comments on this statement from Rav to his son, saying (loose translation), "Taking a drug is like waging war against a disease. Before one joins battle with an ailment in its early stages he should first attempt diplomatic overtures, i.e., a generally healthful lifestyle."

PRIVATE PRACTICE AND PUBLIC SERVICE

Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn had a full-time private pediatric practice at his office on Chicago's North Michigan Avenue from 1956 to 1967. After that, he continued to see patients of all ages on a consultancy basis at his home.

From 1967 to 1969, Dr. Mendelsohn served as National Director of Project Head Start's Medical Consultation Service. As reported in *The New York Times* on March 24, 1969, he was forced to resign his Head Start position after he publicly criticized the nation's public school system, telling a congressional committee that many of the good things the program had achieved were lost to the "intellectually deadening" public school system.

It was that 1969 experience, he said, that made him go public with his complaints about the medical establishment, including the newsletter, the syndicated column and radio shows.

The Chicago Tribune quoted a fellow physician in Franklin Park, Ill., as remembering Mendelsohn as a "very pleasant and kind man." Dr. Gregory White said, "He became







July 7, 1978, Dr. Mendelsohn celebrating the birth of his first grandchild, Channa, who was born in his home.

a critic because he wanted doctors to be all they should and could be. He was an idealist, not an impractical idealist but one who wanted doctors to live up to the highest ideals of medicine."

Dr. Mendelsohn often recalled the incident of his being fired with amusement, and even dedicated his first book, *Confessions of a Medical Heretic,* "to all who gave me career opportunities which led to my present thinking, and to all who denied me opportunities which I mistakenly thought I wanted."

A longtime supporter of the volunteer breastfeeding support organization, La Leche League International, he served on its Medical Advisory Board and spoke frequently at its conferences.

Dr. Mendelsohn served on boards and committees including the Maimonides Award Committee, the boards of the College of Jewish Studies and the Jewish Home for the Aged-BMZ in Chicago, and the National Health Federation (where he served as honorary president from 1981-1982). From the National Nutritional Foods Association, he received the Rachel Carson Memorial Award for his "concerns for the protection of the American consumer and health freedoms."■

SUGGESTED READING

Confessions of a Medical Heretic, by Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, published by Contemporary Books, Inc., 1979

Male Practice: How Doctors Manipulate Women, by Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, published by Contemporary Books, Inc., 1981

How to Raise a Healthy Child…In Spite of Your Doctor, by Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, published by Contemporary Books, Inc., 1984

Dissent in Medicine…Nine Doctors Speak Out, by Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, published by Contemporary Books, Inc., 1985

Physician's Desk Reference (PDR), 70th Edition (Dr. Mendelsohn suggested that everyone own a copy of this so that whenever a drug is prescribed for anyone in your family, you will know about potential side effects. Today that information can be gotten online.)

Our Daily Meds, by Melody Petersen, published by MacMillan, 2008

A Good Birth, A Safe Birth: Choosing and Having the Childbirth Experience You Want, by Roberta Scaer and Diana Korte, published by Harvard Common Press, 1992

Dr. Mendelsohn has also recommended books by ***Angela Kilmartin*** (about some common women's health issues) and books by midwife ***Ina May Gaskin*** (about birth). |