

NERVAL'S DIARY

Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...

Nôtre-Dame de Jérusalem, 14 juillet 1994

Dear Reader,

Better to take a holiday rather than the oncoming day of mourning as a date. Unfortunate events center around this day in Jewish history: the destruction of both temples in 586 BC and 70 AC, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the preparations for the holocaust in 1941. The תשעה באב tishah b'av, i.e. next Sunday, conveys awe and commands respect [1].

Hebrew University and the University of Vienna recently concluded a treaty of scientific cooperation. As former head of department (dermatology; 1983–1986) in Jerusalem, I am a member of the steering committee of this cooperation (on the Vienna side). It is my goal to get under way as many projects as possible and not only in dermatology.

Incidence and/or serendipity play their part in this context and got us to the Holy City to establish personal contact. Us – who? The head of orthopedic surgery in Vienna, Professor Rainer Kotz, and myself. My passion for cycling for more than four decades resulted in two grave accidents, 1984 (on the penultimate day of ח' תשסד. 5744) and again earlier this year. Rainer twice skilfully repaired skeletal destruction and made me cycle again.

Barbara Gilchrest of Boston University, another long-time friend, recently speculated in the NEJM [2] if all too consequent application of sunscreens could reduce individual 25-(OH) vita-

min D₃ levels and increase bone fragility. Following up this suggestion made me aware that my vitamin D₃ level was undetectable (phototype I and very consequent). Immediate supplementation did not influence the catastrophic outcome hitting the ground shortly after. Sure, also age (58) plays a role – the ubiquitous osteoporosis.

It may well prove worthwhile to check hip fractures in this regard, those in the sun (Jerusalem), others less in the sun (Vienna), and compare their vitamin D₃ levels in a pilot study and vis-à-vis Caucasians and African-Americans. At this point, Mike Hollick, again of Boston joins in having dealt with the latter question previously. In a later phase, sunscreen users versus non-users may follow.

By 2050, there may be 26 million people aged 85 or over in the US alone [3]. We will be facing an enormous problem; in the skin (cancer, dermatoheliosis) and in the bones.

- 1 Encycl Iudaica, Keter Jerusalem 1972, vol 3, 936–939.
- 2 Gilchrest BA: Sunscreens – a public health opportunity (editorial). *New Engl J Med* 1993;329:1193–1194.
- 3 Campion EW: The oldest old (editorial). *New Engl J Med* 1994; 330:1819–1820.

à bientôt,

K.H., Vienna