

Health and Fitness: Is it a Mitzvah?

18 Jewish Sources

CONTENTS:

- 1 – Is a healthy lifestyle a Jewish issue?
- 2 – What is the moral imperative of healthy living?
- 3 – How is living a healthy lifestyle good for you?
- 4 – What defines a healthy lifestyle?



SECTION 1 — IS A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE A JEWISH ISSUE?

1. HILLEL (1st Century BCE)

Is the body profane or holy?

Hillel once told his students he was going to carry out an important mitzvah. They asked him which one. He answered, “Going to the bath-house.”

“But is that a mitzvah?” they wondered.

“Yes! See how the statues of kings, which are set up in the theaters and arenas, are scrubbed and kept clean by specially appointed officials. Should not we, who are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) have even greater regard for the cleanliness of our bodies?” (*Lev. Rabbah* 34:3)

2. RABBI ELIYAHU DE VIDAS (16th Century)

Does God care about our bodies?

God wants us to care for our health because God loves us very much, and doesn’t want us to put ourselves in any danger, just as a parent does not want his or her children to put themselves in danger (*D. Eretz Sh. 3*).

3. RABBI YISRAEL SALANTER (19th Century)

Gratitude.

A lack of gratitude is a fundamental flaw in any relationship, especially that which we have with God. There is no greater ingratitude to God than disregarding and not taking care of the body God gave us. A person cannot begin to serve God if he's an ingrate, and the height of ingratitude is not taking proper care of our bodies. By taking care of our bodies we demonstrate our gratitude to God for the incredible gift of a working body.

4. RABBI YISRAEL MEIR KAGAN (“CHAFETZ CHAIM”) (19th-20th Century)

Spiritual purpose of the body.

Our bodies were given to us by God in order for us to accomplish our life’s purpose with them (*Likutei Amarim* Ch. 13).

Discussion Points:

i. *Why is closeness to God considered to be the greatest pleasure?*

ii. *How is taking care of the body an expression of gratitude?*

iii. *How is gratitude the basis of a relationship with God?*

iv. *Expansion: If God loves us why do we experience bad things and challenges in our lives?*

SECTION 2 — WHAT IS THE MORAL IMPERATIVE OF HEALTHY LIVING?

5. RABBI MOSHE RIVKES (17th Century)

Not caring for your body is akin to rejecting God’s gift.

God created the world to be able to give us the greatest pleasure. That pleasure is the pleasure of being close to God. We can achieve that pleasure and relationship by refining ourselves by performing the mitzvot. If we put ourselves in danger we are rejecting God’s love and will and we are saying we don’t want the pleasure that comes as a result of the mitzvot. That is a great disgrace to God (*B. HaGola C. Mishpat* 427).

6. RABBI SAMSON RAFAEL HIRSCH (19th Century)

You do not belong to yourself.

Was even a small part of your being, a fragment of your power, meant for you only? Did you not have the duty of becoming a blessing unto your world in everything and with everything? Do you not belong to it with your whole being, were you not born for it when God called you into existence here below, and do you not deprive the world of its justified demands upon you when you destroy your existence here? (*Horeb* 62).



7. RABBI YISRAEL MEIR KAGAN (“THE CHAFETZ CHAIM”) (19th-20th C.)

You don't own your body.

The entire world and all that fills it belongs to God. God gave each of us life and strength in order to be able to study Torah and fulfill the mitzvot. We have no permission to harm ourselves because in truth our bodies belong to God, our master.... [Our bodies] were given to us with that specific purpose and we don't have a right to abuse our bodies (*Likutei Amarim* 13).

8. RABBI YOSEPH CARO (16th Century)

The obligation to protect life.

And similarly, any obstacle that endangers life, it is a positive commandment to remove it and to be very careful around it as it is said, “Protect yourself and guard yourself.” (Deut. 4:9) And if he did not remove and set aside these obstacles that are dangerous, he violated the positive commandment and also violated the commandment, “Do not bring bloodguilt upon yourself” (Deut. 22:8) (*Choshen Mishpat* 427).

9. RABBI SAMSON RAFAEL HIRSCH (19th Century)

Harming the body is morally equivalent to murder.

Only if the body is healthy is it an efficient instrument for the spirit's activity. Therefore, even the smallest unnecessary deprivation of strength is accountable to God. Every smallest weakening is partial murder. Therefore you should avoid everything which might possibly impair your health. You should not risk your health except when God Himself demands it.... And the law asks you to be even more circumspect in avoiding danger to life and limb (*sakana*) than in the avoidance of other transgressions (*Horeb* 62).

Discussion Points:

v. *What are the three moral reasons to maintain a healthy body?*

vi. *Other than oneself, who else is harmed when a person makes unhealthy choices?*

SECTION 3 — HOW IS LIVING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE GOOD FOR YOU?

10. RAMBAM (MAIMONIDES - 12th Century)

Healthy body necessary for healthy mind.

One of a Jew's main goals in life should be to develop and expand his mind through the rigorous study of the wisdom of the Torah. There is a connection between the mind and the health of the body. It is impossible to do mitzvot or study Torah properly if one is ill and unhealthy. Staying healthy is a prerequisite to the proper performance of all of the mitzvot. Therefore a person must avoid things that harm the body (*Deoth* 4:1).

11. RABBI AVRAHAM BEN DAVID (RAVAD) (12th Century)

Develop discipline.

The purpose of eating is for us to have energy to live. Unhealthy foods do not fit within that purpose. We eat unhealthy foods not because they help us to live but because they are tasty. Eating unhealthy foods just because they are tasty is simply following our *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) and our lustful impulses. Avoiding unhealthy food is a way to develop discipline over our *yetzer hara*. That discipline over the *yetzer hara* will spill over to other areas and give us greater strength to control our *yetzer hara* in general. (*Sfar Hakedusha* p. 44)

12. RABBI DR. AVRAHAM TWERSKI (21st Century)

Controlling urges is a prerequisite to happiness.

The *guf* [body] and the *neshamah* [soul] are antagonistic. The more you provide the *guf*, the more you detract from the *neshamah*. And you cannot be happy when you detract from the *neshamah* (Hamodia, July 2009).

Discussion Points:

vii. *What are the benefits of a healthy lifestyle?*

viii. *What is the role of discipline and self-control in Judaism?*



SECTION 4 — WHAT DEFINES A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE?

13. TALMUD (5th - 6th Century CE)

Minimum daily obligation: hygiene.

A person must wash his face, hands and feet each day in honor of one's Creator (*Shabbat* 50b).

14. RAMBAM (MAIMONIDES - 12th Century)

How and how much to eat.

Overeating is like poison. A *talmid chacham* (scholar) should not be a glutton, rather should eat what is necessary for a healthy body; he will not overeat; and he will not seek to fill his belly like those who stuff themselves with food and drink until they expand their girth. Rather, a wise person only eats one or two portions, and only eats what he needs to live and no more (*Deoth* 4:20, 5:1).

15. RABBI SAMSON RAFAEL HIRSCH (19th Century)

How much to eat.

The mouth of man is, on account of its functions, eating and speech, also the reconciling bond between spirit and animal. Therefore our Sages dedicated the meal as the first step towards the ennoblement of the animal in man; thus the table becomes the altar, and thus you prepare yourself for the meal as for the eating of sanctified foods in the Temple. If you eat only because of pleasure, in order to serve as a tickling of your palate, then your eating is not yet purely human.... If, however, you eat only what you need, and with the intention of strengthening yourself with the eating, for a well-equipped life of righteousness and love, pleasing to God, then your eating becomes human and your deed becomes a Divine service (*Horeb* 69).

16. RABBI SAMSON RAFAEL HIRSCH

Eat like a human not like an animal.

If you realize that your eating should be only a strengthening for life, will you then be able to eat more than is necessary for this? Will you not try to avoid becoming like an animal – avoid eating in beast-like fashion? And if this inner stimulation is not strong enough for you, then picture those persons who kill their humanity in the service of their stomach, their animal nature.... Self-control in eating is the mother of many virtues: it leads to temperance in all other enjoyments and is a rung of the ladder of holiness (*Horeb* 69).

17. RABBI SHMUEL KAMENETSKY (21st Century)

We are required to avoid or prevent obesity.

The Issue of obesity is “sakanat nefashot” [life endangerment] (Irgun Shiurei Torah July 16. 2008).

18. RAMBAM (MAIMONIDES - 12th Century)

What about exercise?

As long as a person exercises, avoids overeating and keeps his digestive system healthy, he won't get sick and he will remain vigorous his entire life (barring genetic or environmental factors). But one who sits comfortably and doesn't exercise or who doesn't keep his digestive system healthy, even healthy foods and medicines won't keep him from pain and weakness (*Deoth* 4:14-15).

Discussion Points:

ix. *How much should a person eat? In what manner?*

x. *How can you determine whether or not you are fulfilling this mitzvah?*

