



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

בשביל החיים
Walking with Life

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

HEALTH AND SELF-CARE

RABBI JACOB HERBER

INTRODUCTION

I have delivered hundreds of sermons over the course of my nearly thirteen years as a congregational rabbi. The subject matter of those *d'rashot* has run the gamut: from calls to greater religious observance to supporting the State of Israel during its time of need to taking a stand against racism, anti-Semitism, gender discrimination, and genocide around the world to treating others with respect and decency to caring for the environment to finding spiritual pathways to God. Yet I have never spoken from the *bimah* about caring for our bodies and the imperative to ensure our physical wellness.

In retrospect, we should not be surprised by this glaring omission. In many ways much of our tradition is silent or circumspect about the subject of caring for our bodies. This fact is nothing short of perplexing. Judaism is a religious tradition which has so much to say about the proper way by which we should live our lives. “You shall therefore be holy, for I [God] am holy,” the Torah intones.¹ God commands that we consciously strive, *imitatio dei*, to live with sacred intent.

Living life with holiness is accomplished when we follow God’s *mitzvot*; we observe *kashrut* (the Jewish dietary laws) because that makes us holy, we honor Shabbat and keep the festivals and other sacred days because that makes us holy, we treat other human beings with dignity, respect and honesty because that makes us holy. But what of maintaining proper nutrition, engaging in regular exercise, caring for the physical well-being of our bodies? Why do the Torah and the rest of our religious tradition seem to have nothing to say about the obligation one has to care for one’s body?

Perhaps the easy course to take would be to accept the silence. But at a time when both child and adult obesity is on the rise, and diseases like coronary heart disease and diabetes are claiming more and more victims, we have an obligation to reconsider what Judaism has to say about caring for the human body and to find those voices in our tradition which place a premium – even a requirement – on the need to treat our bodies with care.

THE TORAH AND THE BODY

The apex of the creation story is God’s creation of humankind on the sixth day, with God fashioning the first humans, Adam and Eve, in God’s image. God blesses them and then gives them the very first commandment found in the Torah, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”²

The first humans are given the injunction to be stewards of the world. In mastering the earth and all that inhabit it, Adam and Eve must continue God’s creative process through human fertility and by caring for and preserving the world in which they live. God formed man “from the dust of the earth and “blew into his nostrils the breath of life.”³ This is intubation on a divine scale! But God says nothing to Adam and Eve about their need to care for themselves. We should expect that God would demand from those first humans - the crowning achievement of God’s creation – that they protect and preserve the life which God had so carefully crafted. Instead, like much of the Bible this text is mute on the subject.

THE RABBIS AND THE BODY

It may be that our earliest teachers were concerned more with the human soul than with the human body because of their cultural antagonists. The ancient rabbinic sages were surrounded by and familiar with Hellenistic culture and philosophy. Much of that culture was focused on the human form. The Greeks and other Hellenists (among them even some Jews) glorified the naked human body in sculpture, painting and pottery. They celebrated both the strength and the beauty of the body through sporting events in the gymnasium, and most prominently in the grandest of all Greek athletic competitions, the Olympic Games. Arisitipus, the founder of the Greek philosophical school known as Hedonism,

¹ Leviticus 11:45

² Genesis 1:27

³ Genesis 2:7



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and his followers claimed that the pleasures of the body were far more important than the pleasures of the intellect.

Repelled by what they saw as an unhealthy, immodest, immoral focus on the excesses of the flesh, the rabbis of the Talmud devoted more of their discourse to the soul, rather than to body. When they did teach about the latter their approach was to place their discussion within the religious context of holiness. Some sages even made the audacious claim that “cleanliness is next to Godliness,” or as Sir Francis Bacon would later amend the statement, “Cleanness of body was ever deemed to proceed from a due reverence to God.”⁴

The following *ma'aseh*⁵ best exemplifies this principle and the importance of caring for one's body:

“The loving man rewards himself” [Proverbs 11:17]. This refers to Hillel the Elder who, when he took leave of his students, used to walk with them a little way. His students asked him: Rabbi, where are you walking to? He answered: To do a *mitzvah*. They asked, What *mitzvah*? He replied, To take a bath in the bathhouse. They said to him: Is that really a *mitzvah*? He replied, Certainly! If the statues erected to kings in the theaters and circuses are washed and scrubbed by those in charge of them...how much more should I, who have been created in God's image and likeness, [wash and scrub my body], as it is written: “For in the image of God he made man [Genesis 9:6].” Another version of this story runs...“Rabbi, where are you going to?, to which he replied: To do a charitable deed for a guest in my house. They asked him: Does this guest stay with you every day? – He answered: This poor soul – is it not a guest in the body? It is here today and gone tomorrow!”⁶

In this midrashic text we find Hillel's disciples questioning him about his destination. The implication of their query is that they believe he is going somewhere of great importance, otherwise why would he leave them behind in the academy? When he tells them that he is heading to the public baths they are nothing short of incredulous. “Is that really a *mitzvah*?” they ask. Through the pedagogic use of paradox and proverbs Hillel teaches his students a thing or two about the importance of preserving our physical health. He compares the hygienic care that pagans take with the statues they have erected to their mortal kings in public places like theatres, circuses and, by implication, even the bath houses which he himself seems to frequent, with the care which his students, and by implication which we, should take with their bodies which were created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image, in the likeness of the ultimately all-powerful divine king.

In the second part of the Midrash, Hillel claims from the get-go that he is on his way to perform a *mitzvah*. The deed is to benefit none other than his soul which happens to be resident in his body. His soul, Hillel points out, is transient and needs to have its protective shelter, Hillel's body, well appointed and cared for. In either retelling of the story, Hillel's message is clear and reflects a central Jewish belief: our bodies do not belong to us. They were created by God in God's image. We therefore have an obligation to take care of them.

The great medieval Jewish philosopher and theologian Moses ben Maimon (1135-1204), known best as Maimonides or the Rambam, would later come to codify Hillel's sentiment and enshrine it as law:

He who regulates his life in accordance with the laws of hygiene, with the sole motive of maintaining a sound and vigorous physique and begetting children to do his work and labor for his benefit, is not following the right course. A man should aim to maintain physical health and vigor, in order that his soul may be upright, in a condition to know God. For it is impossible for one to understand sciences and meditate upon them when one is hungry or sick, or when any of his limbs is aching...because his purpose in all that he does will be to satisfy his needs so as to have a sound body with which to serve God. Even when he sleeps and seeks repose, to calm his mind and rest his body, so as not to fall sick and be incapacitated from serving God, his sleep is service of God.⁷

⁴ Sir Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, Book II (1605)

⁵ A *ma'aseh* is a story in which a revered and respected individual or group of individuals does something which sets a legal precedent.

⁶ *Midrash Rabbah Vayikra* 34:3

⁷ *Maimonides Mishneh Torah Laws of Proper Behavior* 3:3



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In addition to being philosopher, theologian, rabbi and *posek* (legal decisor), Maimonides was also a practitioner of medicine. A child of the Iberian Peninsula, he fled Cordoba in the wake of the invasion of the Almohades, a fanatical Muslim sect. He eventually settled in Egypt where he served as the physician to none other than the vizier Saladin. Considered one of the greatest thinkers the Jewish people ever produced, Maimonides melded his knowledge of medicine and the human body with his application of Aristotelian philosophy and rabbinic hermeneutics to develop one of the most comprehensive, rational approaches to Jewish living and thought.

In this text from his *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides makes the claim that perceiving God is the one true endeavor in which one should engage. Activities which do not facilitate this goal should be avoided. But more than that, one should consciously make choices related to one's physical health, because those choices are inextricably connected to our ability to function at our optimum intellectual capacity. The food we eat, the liquids we drink, the rest we take, even our sexual activity – all have a bearing on our ability to successfully participate in that which Maimonides holds as all-important - intellectual pursuits which bring us metaphysically proximate to God. Maimonides has written for us an Rx that will enable us to better, more fully know God through a prescription that outlines healthy living.

He makes a similar claim in his *Guide to the Perplexed*:

The Law as a whole aims at two things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body...Know that as between these two aims, one is indubitably greater in nobility, namely the welfare of the soul – I mean the procuring of correct opinions – while the second aim – I mean the welfare of the body – is prior in nature and time...For it has already been demonstrated that man has two perfections: a first perfection, which is the perfection of the body, and an ultimate perfection, which is the perfection of the soul. The perfection consists in being healthy and in the very best bodily state, and this only possible through his finding the things necessary for him whenever he seeks them. These are his food and all other things needed for the governance of his body, such as shelter, bathing, and so forth...It is also clear that this noble and ultimate perfection can only be achieved after the first perfection has been achieved. For a man cannot represent to himself an intelligible even when taught to understand it and all the more cannot become aware of it of his own accord, if he is in pain or is very hungry or is thirsty or his hot or is very cold. But once the first perfection has been achieved it is possible to achieve the ultimate, which is indubitably more noble and is the only cause of permanent preservation.⁸

In unambiguous fashion, Maimonides states that Torah is concerned not just with the human soul (i.e. the human ability to engage in philosophical speculation and discern knowledge in a correct manner), but also with the health of the human body. While the perfection of the soul has a qualitative superiority over that of the body, it does not trump it entirely, because a well functioning soul requires first and foremost a well tuned and healthy body (recall Hillel's comment about his "poor soul" being a guest in his body "here today and gone tomorrow"). Intellectual endeavors which seek to know and understand God cannot succeed if our bodies are neglected, are allowed to atrophy and are poorly fueled.

Every reputable medical study has shown that there is a direct correlation between nutrition and academic success. In communities where children live in squalor and suffer from malnutrition, poor hygiene and a lack of physical activity, high test scores and academic achievement are rarely attained. Showing up for that mid-term physics or history exam on an empty stomach following a night without any sleep is a sure recipe for academic failure, just as contemplating God's will and essence is near impossible if we are hampered by a hungry and tired body. We cannot be spiritually attuned if our bodies are out of tune.

Each and every day, several times a day, we remind ourselves just how vulnerable and fragile our bodies are when we recite *Asher Yatzar*. This prayer, based on a Talmudic discussion found in the Babylonian Talmud,⁹ is said immediately after we have relieved ourselves. But the prayer also implicitly forces us to acknowledge our responsibility to care for the bodies that God has given us.

⁸ *Maimonides Guide to the Perplexed III:27, from A Maimonides Reader, Isidore Twersky, Behrman House Inc., West Orange NJ, 1972, pp. 314-315*

⁹ *Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 60b*



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OUR BODIES, OURSELVES

Now that we have reacquainted ourselves with our tradition's voice on the subject of health and self-care perhaps we should go one step further. The texts we have encountered all speak of the necessity to care for the body for the primarily utilitarian purpose of supporting the soul and enabling one to engage in intellectual/philosophical pursuits which engender encounters between the human and divine. What we have not considered, though, is the possibility that maintaining and promoting our physical health through regular physical exercise can provide us with meaningful and profound spiritual moments.

As a competitive cyclist who manages to carve out time during a very busy and challenging work week I have benefited immensely from a regimented and physically demanding workout regime, which has made me fit and dramatically improved my health. The commitment to my athletic endeavor has also led me to carefully monitor the quantity and quality of the food I eat, and the amount of rest and sleep I get.

More importantly, I have had some of the most intense spiritual experiences while riding my bike. Whether it is competing in a race and feeling the adrenaline flow through my body as I sprint to the finish line, or struggling up a steep grade after spending seventy-five miles in the saddle and feeling the lactic acid burn in my legs and the endorphins running through my system, I feel God's presence.

CONCLUSION

Eric Liddle, the late great Scottish Olympic track champion and Protestant missionary, once said of the sensation he experienced when he ran, "God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure." Athletic training and competition provide me with opportunities to have similar transcendent moments.

But you do not have to be a competitive athlete to experience the same healthy high. A good walk, a swim, a hike, a session of yoga, game of tennis or even an hour working in the garden can yield the same spiritual sensation. Choosing your food wisely, drinking enough beneficial liquids, getting enough rest – all of these contribute to a robust, glowing spirituality. Give it a try. Your body will thank you – and so will your soul.



HEALTH AND SELF-CARE – TEXT 1

משנה סנהדרין ד:ה

...לפיכך נברא אדם יחיד, לשלם המאבד נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו אבד עולם מלא. וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו קיים עולם מלא. ומפני שלום הבריות, שלא יאמר אדם לחברו אבא גדול מאביך. ושלא יהו מינין אומרים, הרבה רשויות בשמים ולהגיד גדלתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד וכלן דומין זה לזה, ומלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון ואין אחד מהן דומה לחברו. לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר, בשבילי נברא העולם...

MISHNAH SANHEDRIN 4:5

...The first human being was created singly for this reason: to teach you that if anyone destroys even one single life, Torah estimates this as if they had destroyed a whole world. Conversely, if anyone saves a single life, Torah estimates this as if they had established a whole world. And also, [the first human being was created singly] to ensure peaceful human interactions, so that no one person can say to another, “My ancestor was greater than yours.” And also, so that heretics have no grounds for arguing that there is more than one God in heaven. And also, to tell how great the Holy Blessing One is; for when a person mints coins with a single stamp, they all come out looking the same; but the King, the King of all Kings, the Holy Blessing One mints every human being with the stamp of the first, and yet not one looks like another. Hence, every single person must proclaim, “The world was created for me.”...

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In how many ways does this text illustrate the importance of each human being?
- Can you think of a different image to the minting one that teaches the same lesson?
- Why do you think that human beings were created with bodies?
- For what reasons, according to this text, should we look after our bodies?



HEALTH AND SELF-CARE – TEXT 2

רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות דעות ג:ב

...וְכִן כְּשֵׂיֵאכֹל וְיִשְׁתֶּה וְיִבְעוֹל, לֹא יֵשִׁים עַל לְבוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת דְּבָרִים הַלְלוּ, כְּדִי לִיהֲנוֹת בְּלִבָּד, עַד שְׁנִמְצָא שְׂאִינוֹ אוֹכֵל וְשׂוֹתֶה אֶלֶּא הַמֵּתוּק לְחֵיד; וְיִבְעוֹל כְּדִי לִיהֲנוֹת; אֶלֶּא יֵשִׁים עַל לְבוֹ שְׂיֵאכֹל וְיִשְׁתֶּה, כְּדִי לַהֲבִרוֹת גּוֹפּוֹ וְאַבְרָיו בְּלִבָּד. לְפִיכָּךְ לֹא יֵאכֹל כָּל שֶׁחֵחֵד מִתְאַוֶּה, כְּמוֹ הַכֶּלֶב וְהַחֲמוֹר, אֶלֶּא יֵאכֹל דְּבָרִים הַמוֹעִילִים לוֹ, אִם מְרִים אִם מְתוּקִים. וְלֹא יֵאכֹל דְּבָרִים הַרְעִים לְגוֹף, אִף עַל פִּי שֶׁהוּן מְתוּקִים לְחֵיד.

MAIMONIDES *MISHNEH TORAH* LAWS OF PROPER BEHAVIOR 3:2

...Hence, when a person eats or drinks or has sex, they should not consider they are only doing these things for enjoyment, so as to avoid the situation where they come to eat and drink only what tastes good [lit. sweet] and have sex only for pleasure. Rather, a person should consider that they eat and drink only so as to maintain the health of their body and its limbs. Hence, a person should not eat anything their palate happens to crave, like dogs and donkeys do – rather, they should eat things which are beneficial to them, whether bitter or sweet. And they should not eat things which damage the body, even if they taste good.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What, according to Maimonides, are the risks inherent in eating, drinking and having sex?
- Do you agree that we should only eat and drink to maintain the health of our bodies?
- If Maimonides were to design an eating plan, what would it look like?
- How, according to this text, should we look after our bodies?



HEALTH AND SELF-CARE – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי יומא פה:ב

...נַעֲנֶה רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר וְאָמַר: וּמָה מִלֵּה, שֶׁהִיא אֶחָד מִמֵּאֲתַיִם וְאַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁמוֹנֶה אֵיבָרִים שֶׁבְּאָדָם - דְּוָחָה אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת, קָל וְחוֹמֵר לְכָל גּוֹיָו - שֶׁדְּוָחָה אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת... רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן בֶּן יוֹסֵף אָמַר: (שְׁמוֹת לֵא) כִּי קִדְּשׁ הָיָא לָכֶם - הִיא מְסוּרָה בְּיַדְכֶם, וְלֹא אַתֶּם מְסוּרִים בְּיָדָהּ. רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן מְנַסֵּיא אָמַר: (שְׁמוֹת לֵא) וְשָׁמְרוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשַּׁבָּת, אֲמָרָה תִּזְרָה: חֲלַל עָלָיו שַׁבָּת אַחַת, כְּדִי שְׂיִשְׁמֹר שַׁבָּתוֹת הַרְבֵּה. אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אָמַר שְׁמוּאֵל: אִי הוּאֵי הַתָּם הָוָה אֲמִינָא: דִּידֵי עֲדִיפָא מְדִידָהוּ, (וַיִּקְרָא יח) וְחִי בָהֶם - וְלֹא שְׂיָמוּת בָּהֶם.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *YOMA* 85B

...Rabbi Eliezer said: If circumcision, which pertains to only 248 limbs of the body, takes precedence over the prohibitions of Shabbat, then all the more so the saving of the whole body should do so... Rabbi Yonatan ben Yosef said, “It is holy for you [Exodus 31:14]” teaches that Shabbat is given into your hands, you are not given into its hands. Rabbi Shimon ben Menasia said: “The children of Israel shall keep the Shabbat [Exodus 31:16]” – the Torah is saying, better that one Shabbat should be transgressed if it means that a person can thereby keep many more. Rabbi Yehudah taught that Shmuel taught: If I had been part of that earlier discussion I would have proved this [principle] even better, with the text that says, “You shall live by them [the commandments – Leviticus 18:5]” – and not die by them!...

STUDY QUESTIONS

- In how many ways do the various rabbis prove that the health of the body takes precedence over the prohibitions which apply to Shabbat?
- Which of these ways do you find the most convincing? Why?
- Why do you think the rabbis chose the example of Shabbat?
- For what reasons, according to this text, should we look after our bodies?



HEALTH AND SELF-CARE – TEXT 4

רמב"ם הלכות דעות ד:טו

וְכָל מִי שֶׁהוּא יוֹשֵׁב לְבִטָּח וְאֵינוֹ מְתַעַמֵּל, אוֹ מִי שֶׁמְשַׁהָּא נְקֻבִּיּוֹ, אוֹ מִי שֶׁמְעִיּוֹ קָשִׁיּוֹ, אֲפִילוֹ אֲכַל מֵאֲכָלוֹת טוֹבִים וְשָׁמַר עֲצָמוֹ עַל פִּי הָרְפוּאָה, כָּל יָמָיו יִהְיוּ מְכֹאֲוָבִים וְכָחוֹ תִשָּׁשׁ, וְאֲכִילָה גְּסָה לְגוּף כָּל אָדָם כְּמוֹ סֵם הַמָּוֶת, וְהוּא עֵיקַר לְכָל הַחֲלָאִים, וְרוֹב הַחֲלָאִים שֶׁבָּאִים עַל הָאָדָם אֵינָם אֵלָּא אוֹ מִפְּנֵי מֵאֲכָלִים רָעִים, אוֹ מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוּא מְמַלֵּא בִטְנוֹ וְאוֹכֵל אֲכִילָה גְּסָה אֲפִילוֹ מִמֵּאֲכָלִים טוֹבִים, הוּא שֶׁשְׁלֵמָה אָמַר בְּחֻקְמָתוֹ שׁוֹמֵר פִּי וּלְשׁוֹנוֹ שׁוֹמֵר מְצֻרוֹת נַפְשׁוֹ, כְּלוּמַר שׁוֹמֵר פִּי מִלְּאָכּוֹל מֵאֲכָל רָע אוֹ מִלְּשׁבוֹעַ וּלְשׁוֹנוֹ מִלְּדַבֵּר אֵלָּא בְּצָרְכָּיו.

MAIMONIDES *MISHNEH TORAH* LAWS OF PROPER BEHAVIOR 4:15

Any person who sits around and does not exert themselves, or anyone who does not properly relieve themselves, or whose belly is [distended and] hard – even if they eat the right foods and look after themselves medically, they will suffer pain their whole lives long, and they will be feeble. Over-eating is tantamount to poison; it is the root cause of all illness, and the majority of illnesses which afflict human beings come about either because of eating the wrong things, or because the person has over-indulged themselves, filling their belly, even with the right things. This is as Solomon taught in his wisdom: “He who guards his mouth and his tongue guards himself from trouble [Proverbs 21:23]” – that is to say, a person who guards their mouth from eating the wrong things or from gluttony, and who guards their tongue from speaking, except for what is necessary.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- According to Maimonides, what is the root cause of all illness?
- How does Maimonides prove this using the text from Proverbs?
- Where, according to Maimonides, does exercise fit into the picture?
- How, according to this text, should we look after our bodies?



HEALTH AND SELF-CARE – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

FROM THE *SIDDUR*

Praised are You, Lord our God King of the universe, who with wisdom fashioned the human body, creating openings, arteries, glands and organs, marvelous in structure, intricate in design. Should but one of them, by being blocked or opened, fail to function, it would be impossible to exist. Praised are You, Lord, healer of all flesh who sustains our bodies in wondrous ways.

– Siddur *Sim Shalom* p. 7





Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



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