

The Obligation of Proper Hygiene and of Preventative Measures

CHAZAL FAMOUSLY “grant the physician the license to heal.”¹ The *poskim* explain that a physician not only has permission to practice medicine but has a mitzvah and obligation to do so.²

What about the imperative to live a healthy lifestyle in order to lessen the likelihood of ill health in the first place? Are there sources in the Torah that discuss this and place this obligation upon each individual? Or may individuals disregard the notions of general health maintenance and only seek medical attention when falling ill?

There are indeed many sources both in the written and oral Torah that enjoin us to guard our health and observe a healthy lifestyle. In fact, the *Rambam* declares, “The goal of the entire Torah is twofold—enhancement of the soul **and enhancement of the body**!”³

At first glance, this assertion of the *Rambam* appears to contradict another of his statements found in the introduction to his commentary on the Mishnah. There he writes, “The destruction of the soul comes with the enhancement of the body, and the enhancement of the soul comes with the destruction of the body.”

So which is correct? Is the “enhancement of the body” the “goal of the entire Torah” or “the destruction of the soul”?

The answer is that there are two sorts of enhancement of the body. Pursuing one’s bodily desires, physical

enjoyment, and living a life of decadence are indeed the destruction of the soul. The same is true of a **love for the physical body**. Historically, that which unites all of the various sinful movements, great artists, and philosophers is the great reverence they had of the body and its natural beauty. There are, moreover, hundreds of thousands of people alive today who waste their days in focusing on and developing their physical attributes. This outlook is thoroughly harmful, and it is this form of enhancement of the body that destroys the soul.

A wise person with Torah perspective perceives the physical body as a “ministering vessel,” a mere host for his holy soul. His individuality is not embodied by his body but by his soul. Since Hashem fastened his soul to his body, it is his duty to protect his body, support it, and strengthen it so that it can continue to serve the soul as it should do. The following are the words of the *Rambam*:⁴

Perhaps a person will say, “Since jealousy, desire, honor, and the like are an evil path and remove a person from the world, I will thoroughly desist from them and distance myself from them to an extreme degree. To the extent that I will not consume meat, nor drink wine, nor will I marry, live in attractive living quarters, wear pleasant clothing—just sackcloth and coarse wool and the like, as do the non-Jewish

1 *Bava Kamma* 85b.

2 See *Shulchan Aruch*, Y.D. 336:1 and *Taz ad. loc.* 1.

3 *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:27.

4 *Hilchos Deios* 3:1–3.

monks." This is also an evil path and it is prohibited to pursue it.

A person must direct his heart and all of his acts exclusively toward knowing Hashem. His acts of sitting, rising, and his speech should all be trained toward this matter. How so? When he conducts his business activities or works for a living, his intentions shall not be purely to benefit financially. Rather, he should work in order to provide his body with that which it needs in terms of food, drink, accommodation, and marriage. Similarly, when he eats, drinks, and engages in marital relations, he should not intend to perform these activities merely for the physical enjoyment, to the extent that he only eats those things that are sweet to the taste and engages in marital relations only for the enjoyment. Rather, he should intend to eat and drink only in order to sustain his body and his limbs.

It follows that a person who conducts himself in this manner during all of his days is constantly serving Hashem, even while he is conducting his business activities and even while he is engaged in marital relations. For his intention in all of these matters is to fulfill his earthly needs so that his body will be fit to serve Hashem. Even while he is sleeping—if he is doing so in order that his mind and body will rest so that he won't take ill and would be unable to serve Hashem—his sleep is itself a service of Hashem. Regarding this, the Chachamim said, "And all of your acts shall be for the sake of Heaven." This is what Shlomo HaMelech in his wisdom said, "In all of your ways, know Him and He will straighten your paths."

These words are clear and obvious. A person must maintain their general health in order to be able to better serve Hashem.

Famously, the Rambam, who was one of the great doctors of his time, did not content himself merely with composing books of medicine. He dedicated two entire chapters in *Mishneh Torah* to teaching the Jewish people the importance of preventative medication and

observing a healthy lifestyle so as to prevent illness and disease. These are chapters 3 and 4 of *Hilchos Deios*.

There are several sources for this in the Gemara itself, a number of which are cited below:

Shabbos 82a

Said Rav Huna to his son Rabah, "Why do you not frequent [the shiur of] Rav Chisda, whose teaching is sharp?" He said to him, "For what reason shall I attend? Whenever I go to him, he discusses matters of the world with me. For example, he said to me, 'Somebody who goes to the bathroom shall not sit down directly, nor shall he squeeze too strongly. For the karshata sits on two "teeth," and [if he squeezes too strongly] perhaps the teeth of the karshata will come apart and he will be endangered.'" He [Rav Huna] said to him, "He is discussing matters of healthy living, and you dub them [merely] 'matters of the world'? All the more so shall you attend!"

This is an extraordinary episode. Rav Chisda would expound and teach how a person should conduct himself healthfully and safely in the bathroom, and Rabah thought that these were merely "matters of the world" and therefore didn't wish to attend the *shiurim*. But his father Rav Huna chided him, "He is discussing matters of healthy living, and you dub them [merely] 'matters of the world'? **All the more so shall you attend!**"

Clearly, healthy conduct is Torah itself and not merely "matters of the world." In fact, this aspect of the Torah is more important than many halachos, for "matters of danger are more stringent than matters involving prohibitions."

Berachos 40a

Said Rava bar Shmuel in the name of Rav Chiya. After every meal you shall eat salt, and after each drinking session you shall drink water, for if not you will be harmed.

The Gemara proceeds to discuss at length many types of healthy foods that prevent diseases.

Berachos 54b

Ten things cause a person to contract piles, etc.

The Gemara proceeds to discuss many similar medical axioms at length.

Shabbos 10a

The Gemara discusses not only the types of foods to eat but when during the day to eat them. It cites Abaye, who strongly advocates “*Pas Shachris*” (a bread or *Mezonos*-based meal for breakfast) and outlines its remarkable benefits.

Shabbos 41a

Chazal also offer advice as to the manner in which one should eat, such as, “A person who eats and does not drink—his eating is ‘blood.’ This is the cause of the onset of diseases of the intestines”; “A person who eats and does not then walk four cubits—his eating will be rotten. This is the cause of the onset of a foul odor.”

Nedarim 80b

In this Gemara, Chazal also discuss the importance of laundering, maintaining general cleanliness, and avoiding dirt. They specifically recommend cleaning one’s head, body, and clothes.⁵

Clearly, the *Chachamim* saw fit to include matters of health and hygiene in the Talmud—the basis for almost the entirety of the oral Torah, halachah, *Agaddah*, and matters of piety.

Many of the Rishonim even contend that matters of health and hygienic living help form the basis of some of the mitzvos in the Torah. In other words, the Torah forbade certain items due to the possible harm they may cause to the body and to one’s general health. Here are several examples.

⁵ See also *Nedarim* 81a.

Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 3:48

The mitzvos that are included in the thirteenth category are those that we enumerated in the halachos of forbidden foods, the halachos of ritual slaughter, and the halachos of vows and Nazarite vows. We have already clearly explained the benefits of this category of mitzvos above and in our commentary to Avos at great length. We will also add additional explanation when we enumerate those mitzvos individually.

It has been said that all the foods that the Torah prohibited are lowly, and there is nothing that is prohibited to us about which there can be any doubt that it is harmful, aside from the pig and forbidden fats. But the matter is not so. For the pig has more fluid than it should and contains much dirt and excesses. The majority of that which the Torah deems disgusting is due to its filthiness and the fact that its diet is disgusting.

You are already aware of the Torah’s aversion to even the sight of dirt, even in the open spaces in the camp and certainly within the areas that people dwell. If the Torah would have permitted the consumption of the pig, the markets and houses would have been filled with more filth than a bathroom, as can be seen in the lands of the French today! You are already familiar with the statement of Chazal, “The mouth of a pig is like moving excrement.”

Similarly, regarding the fats of the innards: It overwhelms and damages the digestive system and produces cold, tacky blood. It is more fitting that it be burnt than consumed.

Likewise, blood and neveilos (animals that died without ritual slaughter) are difficult to digest, and their nutritional properties are poor. It is also known that the state of a treifah (an animal that will die within twelve months due to illness or injury) is the onset of a neveilah.

You should know that these signs—namely, rumination and split hooves among land animals, and fins and scales among fish—their existence is not the very

cause of the permission [to consume them] and neither is their absence the very cause of the prohibition. However, these signs are a sign of a superior species over a lowly species.

Evidently, forbidden foods, *neveilos* and *treifos*, are forbidden due to the harm they cause to health. The pig is forbidden because of the dirt and filth it introduces to the surroundings, which are also damaging to health.

Of course, I am well aware that there are those who say that *Moreh Nevuchim* is not the true Torah of the *Rambam* and was only written to convince the confused people of his generation seduced by Greek philosophy.⁶ And of course, the *Gra* famously said that the *Rambam* himself had been negatively influenced by philosophy.⁷ Nevertheless, many of the great Chassidic masters very much venerated the *sefer Moreh Nevuchim*, particularly the *Divrei Chaim*, who cites it constantly in his *sefer* on *Chumash*. Furthermore, Rav Gershon Henich of Radzhin, in his introduction to the *Sefer Beis Ya'akov* (authored by his father) explains at length that all of the words of *Moreh Nevuchim* are based on Kabbalah.

The Ralbag

The *Ralbag* also maintains that the Torah forbade the consumption of those creatures that “are not good for the health of our bodies.”⁸ He adds that it is also not unexpected that one mitzvah may have many benefits (both spiritual and physical).

However, during his lifetime, there were many who opposed the *Ralbag's* positions. The *Rivash* relates that while the *Ralbag* was a great sage of the Talmud and authored a fine commentary on the Torah, his observations include positions that are forbidden to condone.⁹

Sefer HaChinnuch

The *Sefer haChinnuch* adopts a similar view, expressing it in five separate places in his *sefer*. In mitzvah 73, he

contends that the prohibition of consuming a *treifah* is due to its harmful influence on a person's health. He writes similarly regarding the prohibition of consuming forbidden fats in mitzvah 147 and non-kosher animals in mitzvah 154. In mitzvah 166 and mitzvah 178, he notes that relations with a *niddah* or a *zavah* is also harmful to health.

Ramban

Of greatest significance is that the *Ramban* is also of this view. In *Parashas Shemini*, he asserts that eating forbidden fats damages the reproductive organs, which is why the Torah forbade them.¹⁰ In *Parashas Kedoshim*, he states that the reason for the prohibition of *Orlah* (the fruit of the first three years of a tree's harvest) is that the fruit during these years is harmful.¹¹ In *Parashas Metzora*, he explains that *zivah* (the emission experienced by a *zav* or *zavah*) is the sign of an illness, which is why a *korban* must be brought upon their recovery.¹² Finally, in *Parashas Re'eh* he expresses this view about all forbidden foods.

In his *drashah* “*Toras Hashem Temimah*,” the *Ramban* reiterates that the forbidden species “have properties that are bad for the body and soul.”

The *Ramban's* words carry particular weight, for he was a man of wide-ranging and inconceivable greatness, leader of the Rishonim, and the great Kabbalist of his time.

We should note that the *Rambam*, in his enormous wisdom, included in *Sefer Kedushah* of *Mishneh Torah* three groups of halachos: *issurei biah* (forbidden relationships), *ma'achalos asuros* (forbidden foods), and *shechitah* (ritual slaughter). This implies that these three are the basis for the holiness of the Jewish people. Fascinatingly, it is with regard to these three halachos that we have found that the Rishonim also attribute reasons of health and hygiene as the basis for the mitzvah.

6 See the *Rivash* 1:45. For this reason, the *Rivash* cautions against adopting the positions espoused in *Moreh Nevuchim* in several instances.

7 Y.D. 179:13.

8 *Shemos* 23:19.

9 Ibid.

10 *Vayikra* 11:13.

11 Ibid. 19:23.

12 Ibid. 15:11.

The *Abarbanel* disagrees entirely.¹³ He holds that it is a mistake to explain that the reason for the prohibition of *ma'achalos asuros* is that they are damaging to one's health, as there are many permitted foods that are unhealthy and many prohibited ones that are not. Moreover, there are many non-Jews (who consume *ma'achalos asuros*) who are healthy and strong. We can only conclude that these foods are forbidden only because they are detrimental to the soul, not the body.

13 Ibid. 11:13.

There is more: Kabbalists cite the *Ari haKadosh* as arguing that the purpose of the mitzvos is to affect the "upper worlds and the *Sefiros*" and are not related to the physical world at all.

However, one understands the "reasons" for the mitzvos; it is clear that a just and G-d-fearing man must lead a healthy lifestyle and accustom himself to a manner of conduct that should protect him from illness or disease.

These essays were written during various stages of the coronavirus pandemic. Facts and knowledge about this virus change daily. Torah is forever.