

Parasha Va'etchanan

Does the Torah Allow Smoking?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

I have not corresponded with you for a very long time. I used to be a regular in your classes on Sunday Paltalk and The Virtual Yeshiva... way back. I hope you remember 'dreidyl' in your class. I am still on your mailing list and read your weekly writings. I also recently purchased your [Women at the Crossroads: A Woman's Perspective on the Weekly Torah Portion](#) and enjoy it very much. I have a question about something you wrote in an article many weeks ago but I am still curious. You mentioned that you have a morning drink of lemon juice and cayenne pepper. May I ask the purpose of this particular combination? I am striving to keep a very healthy lifestyle. Would you mind explaining this to me, please?

I hope all is well at B'erot Bat Ayin. I plan to visit Israel someday and I still plan on attending your Midrasha. It is my fondest wish. All blessings to you, Rebbetzin – thank you for all of the wonderful work you do. You touch so many lives...you do not even realize.

Hadassah Neal

Dear Hadassah,

I certainly do remember you from the Paltalk classes. You always had insightful comments. It's good to hear that you are striving to keep a very healthy lifestyle, as this is a mitzvah from the Torah, as it states in *Parashat Va'etchanan*: "You shall safeguard your souls [lives] very much..." (*Devarim* 4:15). Before I answer your particular question, I'd like to shed light on the general mitzvah of guarding our health, which our sages learned from the Torah verse mentioned above. Guarding our health is a mitzvah which we very much emphasize at [Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin](#), where we guide our students in cooking nutritional, wholesome meals and exercising their bodies. We also teach Rambam on nutrition and health. Rambam gives very detailed instructions on the mitzvah of keeping oneself healthy. Most are still very applicable today and concur with modern medical research. "Maintaining a healthy and sound body is among the ways of G-d – for one cannot understand or have any knowledge of the Creator, if he is ill. Therefore, he must avoid that which harms the body and accustom himself to that which is healthful and helps the body become stronger" (Rambam, *Hilchot Deiot* 4:1).

Physical Health: A Prerequisite for Spiritual Health

A Jew's mission in life is to come closer to Hashem through Torah and mitzvot. Our body is the instrument of our soul to attain this lofty purpose. Only through the body can we carry out the practical mitzvot, related to this world. G-d has commanded us to protect and guard our body to ensure that it is a fitting instrument for performing His mitzvot. Guarding our health is so important that our rabbis taught that it is part of the commandment to not forget the Giving of the Torah: "Guard yourself and guard your soul very much... lest you forget the day when you stood before Hashem Your G-d" (*Devarim* 4:9-10 *Kli Yakar* explains that "Guard yourself" means taking care of the body. As Rambam taught, physical health is vital for spiritual health. "It is a positive duty to take all due precautions and avoid anything that may endanger life, as it is written, 'Take care of yourself, and guard your soul.' The sages prohibited many things that involve a risk to life. Anyone who violates such prohibitions, saying 'I'm only putting myself at risk - what business is that of anybody else?' or 'I'm not particular about such things' deserves a lashing, while those who are careful about such things will be blessed" (*Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 427, 8-10). "Every person needs to learn from the healers which are the best foods for his particular constitution, place and time" (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 32:14; http://www.azamra.org/Heal/Parents_Guide/mitzvah.htm).

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Staying Away from Danger and Guarding our Health

When looking at the context of our Torah verse it is not clear how this verse refers to staying away from danger and keeping oneself healthy. According to the simple meaning, it warns us to be careful about idol worship. However, various Torah commentators explain it to refer to the mitzvah of taking good care of our souls and bodies. The word נֶפֶשׁ/ *nefesh* used in our *pasuk* is the lowest part of the soul or our 'physical body,' which refers to our 'lives.'

ספר דברים פרק ד פסוק טו

וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם כִּי לֹא רִאִיתֶם כֹּל תְּמוּנָה בַּיּוֹם דִּבֶּר ה' אֵלֵיכֶם בְּחָרֵב מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ :
 "You shall watch yourselves (your *nefesh*) very well, for you did not see any image on the day that Hashem spoke to you at Chorev from the midst of the fire" (*Devarim* 4:15).

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the *Netziv*, explains this Torah verse as follows: "This expression includes the mitzvah of guarding our bodies and souls. If our verse would only refer to guarding our souls it should have been written in the active form וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם *u'shemartem* – you shall guard. However, the passive form וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם *v'nishmartem* – you shall be guarded – refers to guarding the body. (*Emek D'var, Devarim* 4:15). The passive form of the verb 'to guard' can only refer to the health of our body, since we make our active free choices with our souls, while our bodies must passively follow. The *Netziv* refers us to the following anecdote in the Talmud, about being careful not to engage in behavior that may endanger our lives: "Our Rabbis taught: It is related that once when a certain pious man was praying by the roadside, a soldier came by and greeted him. Yet, he did not return his greeting. So, the soldier waited for him until he had finished his prayer. Then he said to him: "Fool! Is it not written in your Law, 'Take good care of yourself to keep your lives diligently?' (*Devarim* 4:9). It is also written, 'Take, therefore good heed of your souls (lives)!' (*Devarim* 4:15). When I greeted you, why did you not return my greeting? If I had cut off your head with my sword, who would have demanded satisfaction for your blood from me?" (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 32b). Likewise, *Tosfot* mentions our verse as a source for the prohibition to cause injury to the body (*Tosfot, Babylonian Talmud, Shevuot* 36a).

Is Cigarette Smoking Permitted According to the Torah?

In light of the mitzvah to take good care of our health, I would like to address the very important question of whether or not it is permitted to smoke, according to the Torah. We once had a potential tenant for our studio apartment. As my husband sat down with her to sign the contract, he noticed cigarettes protruding from her bag. When he asked her whether she smoked, she confirmed that she did. I happened to be in the kitchen at that time, so my husband asked if I was ok with having a tenant that smoked. I answered, "Absolutely not!" The potential tenant was fuming in anger that we hadn't mentioned the 'non-smoker-condition' for the rental beforehand. I felt that since we live in a health conscious community, it is the smoker's responsibility to ask whether we would accept a tenant that smoked. After doing some research on the topic, I was very much strengthened in my view point. I have a hard time understanding why so many observant Jews (openly) smoke, when today we know with absolute certainty that smoking is harmful. Years ago it wasn't so clear how harmful smoking was, so when we see 'older people' smoking, we can assume that when they started, they were unaware of the dangers. However, it is hard to find an excuse for the many young people, particularly yeshiva students, who openly smoke. How does smoking in our time mesh with the mitzvah of "V'Nishmartem"?

Rabbinic Rulings Regarding Smoking in Modern Times

Rabbis from previous centuries have permitted smoking cigarettes on Yom Tov, with the argument that smoking is '*davar sheshaveh lachol nefesh*' – 'something that is equally enjoyed by all.' Medical research beginning in 1964, clearly proved that smoking is a health hazard. Therefore, the real question is no longer whether or not smoking is permitted on Yom Tov; but, rather, whether or not smoking is permitted at all! There have been thousands of scientific studies detailing the hazards of smoking. The Center for Disease Control estimates that one out of every five deaths in America is caused by smoking. Other reports estimate that 15% of smokers eventually die of lung cancer. Studies indicate that smokers face a much higher mortality rate, an almost 67% chance of dying due to an illness directly attributed to their smoking! (Medical Daily, Oct 11, 2013: [Cigarettes Even More Dangerous Than Once Thought: 67% Of Smoking Deaths Linked Directly To Habit](#))

As the knowledge of the health risks associated with smoking became more widespread and universally acknowledged, many Halachic authorities changed their ruling to reflect the emerging reality, using extremely harsh terms against smoking, with many authorities outright forbidding it. These contemporary authorities include Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv *zt"l*, the Tzitz Eliezer *zt"l*, Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul *zt"l*, and Rav Ovadia Yosef *zt"l*, who, contrary to their earlier *p'sakim*, in their later rulings, came out strongly against smoking. Other *poskim*, including Rav Aharon Kotler *zt"l*, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *zt"l*, the Debreciner Rav *zt"l*, Rav Shmuel HaLevi Wosner *shlit"a*, Rav Chaim Kanievsky *shlit"a*, Rav Moshe Sternbuch *shlit"a*, the Rivevos Efraim *zt"l*, and Rav Asher Weiss *shlit"a*, wrote unequivocally about the dangers of smoking and how it is not permitted, with some even referring to smoking as 'suicidal.' In fact, many well-known Rabbis, including Rav Elyashiv *zt"l*, Rav Aharon Yehuda Leib Steinman *shlit"a*, Rav Michel Yehuda Lefkowitz *zt"l*, Rav Moshe Shmuel Shapiro *zt"l*, Rav Nissim Karelitz *shlit"a*, and Rav Shmuel Auerbach *shlit"a*, signed a *Kol Koreh* in Av 2004 against smoking, even imploring those who do smoke to do everything in their power to stop. It is recorded that Dayan Yisrael Yaakov Fischer *zt"l*, who permitted smoking (including Yom Tov), at the end of his life, when he was dying of lung cancer, gathered ten men together to publicize in his name that smoking is truly and unequivocally prohibited in order to be '*mezakeh* the *rabbim*' (strengthen the public) with this ruling.

Why Lemon & Cayenne in the Morning?

I have learned from my nutrition teacher, Shoshanna Harrari, the habit of drinking water first thing in the morning, followed by a drink with lemon juice and cayenne pepper to promote general cleansing and detoxification. It also aids digestion and suppresses cravings. This way I start my morning in a good way, without overeating.

Cayenne pepper contains vitamin C, vitamin B6, vitamin E, potassium, manganese, and flavonoids. Cayenne pepper is also used in traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic medicines to help treat circulatory problems. There are several studies regarding cayenne pepper's ability to stimulate the circulation and the health of the heart, aid digestion, and help regulate blood sugar. Furthermore, it increases the temperature of your body and kick-starts our metabolism. Cayenne also strengthens the immune-system, preventing colds and sore throat. Be sure to always buy [non-irradiated cayenne pepper](#) (and all spices) since irradiation negates the health benefits of spices.

Lemon water is a blood purifier and an antiseptic that prevents disease, gets rid of impurities and helps the body eliminate waste more efficiently. It also stimulates the liver's natural enzymes by helping to oxygenate the body and dissolve uric acid. Lemons are packed with antioxidants and electrolytes like potassium, calcium, and magnesium. The vitamin C in lemon transforms toxins into digestible

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material. Lemon stimulates the secretion of gastric juices, which aids the digestion of our breakfast that will follow. Since proper digestion, as the Rambam teaches, is critical to a healthy body, this drink is a great way to set the stage for a day of healthy digestion.

I use the juice of about half a lemon together with a few pinches of cayenne. You have to work yourself gradually up to the spiciness of cayenne. Use only enough to feel the heat but not so spicy that it's hard to get down. I sip the drink with a straw in order to protect the enamel of my teeth from the acidic lemon. I'm planning on getting a [glass drinking straw](#), which unlike plastic straws, will not leech any harmful chemicals.

General Guidelines for Maintaining Optimal Health

We need to put effort into keeping ourselves healthy in order to have a clear mind that can understand Hashem and a strong body that can do mitzvot. Therefore, we must accustom ourselves to develop healthful habits as Rambam teaches. Whereas there are general guidelines of how to maintain good health such as exercising, getting adequate sleep and staying away from artificial additives and refined foods, like white flour and sugar; there are many different opinions on cultivating healthful habits, which differ from person to person. I, personally, try to sleep seven hours, exercise daily, eat nice quantities of dark green leaves, while abstaining from flour and sugar, except for fruits, and unrefined honey. We all need to learn to listen to our body so we can develop the life habits that works best for each of our individual needs.