

A Taste of Torah – Nourishment in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Va'etchanan: "Guarding Our Health"

Does the Torah Permit Cigarette Smoking?

Is Healthy Eating More than a Personal Lifestyle Choice?

Several years ago, I was shopping in a supermarket when I noticed a young mother pushing her toddler in a shopping cart. As they passed the checkout counter, the little boy eagerly reached for a brightly colored package of candy. Smiling lovingly, his mother gently removed it from his hands and replaced it with a bunch of fresh, succulent grapes. The child protested loudly, convinced that she was depriving him of something wonderful. Yet the mother understood what he could not: genuine love sometimes means denying immediate pleasure in order to protect long-term well-being.

Watching this simple interaction made me wonder how often I resemble that child, craving more than my body truly needs. Modern society surrounds us with foods, drinks, and habits that promise pleasure while quietly undermining our health. We are constantly encouraged to indulge our appetites without considering the long-term consequences. At the same time, many people regard healthy eating as little more than a lifestyle choice, a matter of personal preference or appearance. Does the Torah view caring for our bodies in the same way, or is there a deeper spiritual purpose behind the choices we make every day?

Moshe addresses this very question as he prepares the Jewish people to enter the Land of Israel. His words reveal that safeguarding our physical health is far more than sensible advice. It is an integral part of our sacred calling as servants of Hashem.

How Does Parashat Va'etchanan Teach Us to Care for Our Bodies?

As Moshe prepares the nation to enter the Promised Land, he reminds them of the unparalleled revelation at Mount Sinai (Chorev):

ספר דברים פרק ד פסוק ט

וְנִשְׁמְרֶתֶם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם כִּי לֹא רָאִיתֶם כָּל תְּמוּנָה בַּיּוֹם דִּבֶּר ה' אֵלֵיכֶם בְּחֹרֵב מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ:

"You shall therefore guard yourselves exceedingly, for you did not see any form on the day that Hashem spoke to you at Chorev from the midst of the fire" (*Devarim* 4:15).

In its immediate context (*peshat*), this verse warns us never to forget that although we heard Hashem's voice at Sinai, we saw no physical form. Since Hashem transcends all physicality, we must never attempt to represent Him through an image or idol.

Yet the Torah's wording contains an additional lesson. Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, known as the Netziv, notes that had the Torah intended to command us only to protect our souls, it could have written, "Guard your souls exceedingly" (**וְנִשְׁמְרֶתֶם מְאֹד אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם**). Instead, it uses the reflexive expression, "Guard yourselves" (**וְנִשְׁמְרֶתֶם**), which he understands as referring to the body. The phrase "for your souls" (**לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם**) then reveals the purpose: in order to safeguard the soul, we must also safeguard the body (*Ha'amek Davar, Devarim* 4:15).

This brief grammatical nuance reveals a deeper perspective. The Torah does not separate body and soul into unrelated realms. Rather, they are inseparable partners. The soul carries our Divine mission, which it can only fulfill through the body. Every word of Torah we study, every mitzvah we perform, every act of kindness we extend to another person depends upon the health and strength of the body Hashem has entrusted to us. Caring for our physical well-being, therefore, becomes an integral part of safeguarding our souls.

What Does נֶפֶשׁ (Nefesh) Really Mean?

Rabbi Baruch Epstein expands this idea by demonstrating that throughout the Torah, the word נֶפֶשׁ/nefesh often refers to the living person as a whole rather than to the soul alone. Consequently, when the Torah commands us to guard our nefesh, Chazal understand this mitzvah as including the responsibility to protect our physical bodies (*Torah Temima, Devarim 4:9*).

The Torah itself provides many examples of this broader usage. Regarding the prohibition of chametz on Pesach, it states, “Only that which may be eaten by every nefesh” (*Shemot 12:16*), where nefesh clearly means every person. Likewise, when recounting Ya’acov’s family descending to Egypt, the Torah says, “Your fathers went down to Egypt with seventy nefesh” (*Devarim 10:22*), referring simply to seventy people. Similarly, the verse, “When a nefesh brings a meal offering to Hashem” (*Vayikra 2:1*), plainly describes a person bringing a korban. These and many other examples demonstrate that the Torah frequently uses nefesh to describe the whole human being rather than the soul in isolation.

Therefore, when the Torah commands us to guard our nefesh, it is not speaking only of the soul in the abstract. Rather, it commands us to protect the entire person, including the body through which the soul lives and serves Hashem. Accordingly, Chazal derive from these verses the prohibitions against injuring ourselves or causing unnecessary harm to our bodies.

The Rambam similarly rules that one who curses himself transgresses the Torah’s command, citing the verse, “Only guard yourself and guard your soul exceedingly” (*Hilchot Sanhedrin 26:3*). Thus, what first appears to be a command regarding the soul becomes, in halacha, an obligation to protect the entire person. Recognizing the body as the soul’s indispensable partner prepares us for Rambam’s remarkable teaching that preserving our physical well-being is itself part of the path of serving Hashem.

How Does Caring for Our Health Become Part of Serving Hashem?

Rambam offers practical guidance for fulfilling the mitzvah to safeguard both body and soul in our daily lives. He teaches us not to eat merely for the sake of pleasure-seeking or to fulfill our appetites: “...Put it to heart to eat and drink in order to keep your body and limbs healthy. Avoid eating whatever your palate desires like a dog or a donkey. Rather, eat what is good for the body, whether bitter or sweet. Do not eat what is harmful to the body, even if it is sweet to your palate...” (*Hilchot De’ot 3:2*).

These striking words challenge the values of our pleasure-driven culture. Advertisements constantly encourage us to indulge every craving, while Rambam teaches us to pause and ask a different question: “Will this food strengthen the body Hashem entrusted to me, or will it weaken it?” This does not mean that the Torah opposes enjoying delicious food. On the contrary, Hashem created fruits, vegetables, grains, herbs, nuts, and countless other wholesome foods with extraordinary flavors, colors, textures, and aromas for our enjoyment. Rather, pleasure should accompany nourishment, not become its purpose.

He continues by revealing the deeper purpose behind healthy living: “Physical health and well-being are part of the path to G-d, for it is impossible to understand or have any knowledge of the Creator when one is sick. Therefore, one must avoid anything that damages the body and cultivate healthful habits...” (*Hilchot De’ot 4:1*).

How different this is from the way our culture often views health. We may exercise to improve our appearance, eat well to lose weight, or seek longevity simply to enjoy more years of life. While these are worthwhile goals, Rambam points us toward an even higher purpose. We care for our health so that we may learn Torah with a clear mind, pray with concentration, perform mitzvot energetically, and dedicate our lives more fully to serving Hashem. Every nourishing meal can therefore become an act of avodat Hashem.

How Can We Fulfill the Torah's Command to Safeguard Our Bodies Today?

The Torah’s command to safeguard our bodies requires more than choosing nourishing foods. It also

obligates us to refrain from practices that knowingly place our health in danger.

One of the clearest contemporary examples is cigarette smoking. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein ruled in 1981 that it is forbidden to begin smoking (*Igrot Moshe, Choshen Mishpat* 2:76). Today, with the overwhelming scientific evidence linking smoking to cancer, heart disease, stroke, chronic lung disease, and many other serious illnesses, leading halachic authorities such as Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and many others rule that smoking is strictly forbidden because it violates the Torah's command to safeguard our lives (see Rabbi Chaim Jachter, *The Prohibition to Smoke*).

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed writes that the Torah obligates those who smoke to make every reasonable effort to overcome their addiction, while recognizing that breaking such dependence is often an extraordinarily difficult struggle. At the same time, he emphasizes that our greatest responsibility is preventing people from beginning to smoke in the first place, since avoiding a harmful habit is far easier than overcoming years of addiction (Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, *The Prohibition Against Smoking*).

Even if we do not smoke, Rabbi Melamed's principle extends far beyond cigarettes. Every day, we choose whether to cultivate habits that strengthen or weaken the body Hashem has entrusted to us. Whether through the foods we eat, the exercise we take, or the lifestyle we embrace, these ordinary decisions become opportunities to fulfill the Torah's timeless command: "You shall guard yourselves exceedingly." By caring for our bodies with wisdom, gratitude, and self-discipline, we preserve the precious vessel through which our souls can continue learning Torah, performing mitzvot, and revealing Hashem's light in the world.

How Can Ordinary Decisions Fulfill the Mitzvah of Guarding Our Health?

The choices we make each day may seem small: whether to eat the wholesome food before us or reach for the processed snack, whether to exercise or remain inactive, whether to cultivate habits that strengthen our bodies or slowly weaken them. Yet the Torah teaches that these ordinary decisions are anything but ordinary. Each one is an opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah, "You shall guard yourselves exceedingly."

When we begin to view our bodies as sacred gifts entrusted to us by Hashem, caring for our physical well-being is transformed from an act of self-interest into an expression of gratitude and devotion. Even the simplest daily choices become opportunities to honor this precious gift of life.

Like the loving mother who guided her child toward food that would truly nourish him, Hashem, our compassionate Father, lovingly guides us through His Torah toward choices that sustain both body and soul. By following His wisdom, we discover that true nourishment is far more than satisfying our appetites. It is about preserving the body so that it may continue to serve as a faithful partner of the soul as they grow together in Torah, perform mitzvot with joy, and reveal Hashem's light in the world.

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