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The Mitzvah of Proper Diet

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How aware and observant are we of all the mitzvot of the Torah? I am forced to ask this question specifically to the religious community because there are certain obligatory mitzvot that are not being properly observed.

Mitzvot are generally described as belonging to two major categories, those between man and G-d (beyn adam l'Makom) and those between man and his fellow man (beyn adam l'havero). Yet, there is a third category of mitzvot that in our many sins is all too often overlooked; these are the mitzvot between a man and himself (beyn adam l'atzmo). These mitzvot, between a man and himself are those that define one's character, shape one's health and thus lay the necessary foundations for the observance of all the other mitzvot. Within this category of mitzvot beyn adam l'atzmo lie the fundamental Torah principles of health and proper eating.

The commandments to "safeguard our souls" (ref. Dev. 4:9, 15) have traditionally been considered to be the Torah law obligating us to safeguard our physical health. Yet, if one investigates any enumeration of the 613 mitzvot one does not find this mitzvah being anywhere in the count. When I asked my Rav, Ya'akov Peretz (shlita) of Yerushalayim why there was this apparent discrepancy, he answered me with a known rule of Torah enumeration. Whenever there is a general rule which applies as a basis for the observance of all the mitzvot, the rule is not counted as a specific mitzvah because it counts as a fundamental observance necessary for all the mitzvot. Safeguarding one's health is thus a necessary prerequisite for the observance of all Torah and mitzvot.

The importance of safeguarding one's health is not just good advice; it is actual Torah law, a fundamental observance upon which rest our entire Torah path. RaMBaM writes in ever so many places about the importance and obligation of robust physical health. RaMBaM clearly expresses to us why the mitzvah of good health is of such vital spiritual importance. In his Hilkhot Deot (4:1) he writes, "Since 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, one must avoid that which harms the body and accustom oneself to that which is healthy and helps the body become stronger."

As he clearly states, physical health is a prerequisite for spiritual accomplishment. RaMBaM is clearly expressing the sacred relationship between physical and mental / spiritual health.

RaMBaM does not stop with just making general statements about the nature of the physical-spiritual relationship; he proceeds to enumerate in great detail precisely what is expected of us in order to accomplish our required goals of physical health.

With regards to that which, as he stated above, keep us healthy and helps the body become stronger, the RaMBaM states in Deot 5:2, "One should eat food that is healthy for one's body." The concept of "health food" is well known in our culture today. What is so unfortunate is that "health food" is viewed as some type of alternative style of eating as opposed to being the norm. Indeed, the "normal" types of foods regularly consumed in our society have been scientifically showed to be of terrible nutritional value, harmful to our bodies, and thus as RaMBaM states also to our souls. Not for naught has the norm of the western diet been given the term "junk food." Indeed, this type of food and this type of diet is forbidden by Torah law because of its inherent danger to physical health.

In his Deot 3:2, RaMBaM addresses an apparent predilection to sweet foods and condemns this preference in sharp terms. "One should take care to eat and drink only in order to be healthy in body and limb. One should not eat all that one desires like a dog or a donkey. Rather, one should eat what is beneficial for the body, be it bitter or sweet. Conversely, one should not eat what is harmful to the body, even though it is sweet to the taste." In our many sins, all too often is this admonition overlooked and ignored in our communities today. In our many sins, all too many people violate the laws of healthy eating on a regular basis with impunity.

Not only is one required by Torah law to eat healthy foods, one is also required by Torah law not to overeat. RaMBaM states this clearly in Deot 4:15 and says, "Overeating is like poison to anyone's body. It is the main source of all illness. Most illnesses which afflict a person are caused by harmful foods or by filling his belly and overeating, even of healthful foods. This was implied by Shlomo in his wisdom: "Whoever guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from distress" (Mishlei 21:23).

Being that overeating is the major source of physical illness and that physical illness prevents us from having "knowledge of the Creator," (as RaMBaM stated above) and knowing the Creator is enumerated by RaMBaM as being the first and foremost of the mitzvot (ref. Yesodei Torah 1:1), it stands to reason that the sin of overeating more than just adversely affecting one's physical health actually prevents one from fulfilling the most essential and importance of the mitzvot, that of knowing the Creator. What greater sin than this can there be?

Overeating is a terrible problem in our society today. One does not have to look far to see the epidemic of terrible unhealthy obesity within the midst of every religious community. Being overweight is so common that it has become the norm. This too is a violation of the Torah law as outlined by RaMBaM. RaMBaM clearly states as Torah law that one should not overeat and again, he does not just make a general statement, he specifically defines for us the criteria of our behavior. In other words, it would be all too easy for one to interpret what is overeating at the personal level, with everyone doing what is right in their own eyes. But this is a recipe for

anarchy. RaMBaM very clearly defines for us a Halakhic definition of when a person should eat, how much one should eat and how much is too much to eat.

In Deot 4:1, RaMBaM says, “A person should never eat other than when he is hungry and never drink other than when he is thirsty... One should not eat until one’s stomach is full. Rather one should stop when one reaches close to three-quarters of being full.”

Now who today follows RaMBaM’s directives on this matter? In our many sins, many are those today who eat in such a manner that they violate the Biblical definition of gluttony. In other words, people just “stuff their faces” and eat what they want, when they want, regardless of the health and spiritual consequences. Religious people rationalize this behavior by saying if the food is permitted by Torah Law and one does say a berakha over the food both before and after eating, then the eating becomes a mitzvah, and who does not want to perform mitzvot for HaShem?

Woe to us that in our many sins we can be deceived by such a deceptive argument. We have a great Talmudic rule that one cannot perform a mitzvah while at the same time performing an averah (sin). Overeating is gluttony. Gluttony is a terrible sin, one that causes a serious spiritual blemish on the soul and all the more so causes terrible physical illness to the body. There is no justification for gluttony, period! And gluttony is not defined by modern standards; it is, like everything else, defined by the Laws of Torah!

Therefore, although we are obviously allowed to eat all the permitted foods that we so desire, this does not give us license to violate other mitzvot that govern the realms of health, proper diet or to commit the sin of gluttony.

RaMBaM does not consider this behavior to be mere wise words of wisdom; he actually considers this to be Halakha (Torah Law), for why else would he include these words in his great Halakhic code. RaMBaM writes in the Laws of Teshuva that over-eating is a sin that requires teshuva just as do the violations of all other Torah commandments. In Hilkhot Teshuva (7:3), he writes: “One should not say that teshuva applies only to matters of actions...rather just as one must do teshuva from these, so must one seek out one’s bad character and repent of it. ... Bad character includes: anger, jealousy, lust for money, pride, over-eating. One must do teshuva for these all.”

He also states in Deot 5:2: “One should not over-eat always seeking to fill one’s stomach. For those who over-eat regularly, this is the way of the wicked.” RaMBaM very clearly states here that one who regularly overeats is to be considered a rasha (evil individual). This is the same terrible term used to describe those who violate the Shabat or eat hametz on Pesah! Woe to us that we pay such little attention to those ever so important mitzvot the violation of which place us into the category of being deemed wicked.

The greatest troubles facing our decadent society today are the sins of over-indulgence and addiction. Today, most people are actually addicted to over eating. We all take an unhealthy snack every now and then, some more often than others. Now that kashrut certification is a booming business so many junk food products have become kosher. One can go into any

convenience store, gas station or grocery and purchase a bag of chips or another snack, a chocolate bar, a soda or other type of soft drink. The calories in a simple candy bar and soft drink alone add up to more than what can be found in a normal modest meal. We do not realize just what this insignificant snack does to overall health.

Even those who do not partake of such snacks seldom hold themselves back from rich and numerous portions of chulent (hamin) every Shabat. Yet, this traditional Shabat food also is very rich in calories, and all too many are those who over indulge in this Shabat treat, all too often disguising their gluttony under the false piety of saying that are eating “Likhvod Shabat Kodesh” (in honor of the holy Shabat). As we learned above, a mitzvah does not come about through an averah (sin). The honor of Shabat does not dismiss or override the sin of gluttony. Let this serve as a perennial lesson to all those who overeat and want to deceive themselves into believing that it is a mitzvah.

Shlomo HaMelekh laid down for us the basic rule for proper eating. In Mishlei 13:25, it is written, “Tzadik Okhel Lisovah Nafsho,” (one who is righteous eats only what is necessary for the sake of his health). Indeed, all of us eat more than what we need. We are not accustomed to eat out of need; we all eat out of desire. As such, most of us lack control with regards to how much we eat and what foods we choose. Thus because we succumb to the desires of the body, we pay the penalty of the damage done to both body and soul. This is surely not the way of a Tzadik, a righteous individual.

There is nothing wrong with eating sweet and desirable treats, as long as such eating is kept under control. There is nothing wrong with moderate eating of chulent on Shabat or a piece of cake, a chocolate bar, ice cream or soda pop. The emphasis must be on moderation. There is where our modern problems lie. Moderation is almost completely unknown by the majority of us. As such, we all fall into a lack of discipline to control what and how we eat. This leads us to gluttony (overeating). This leads us to ill health. This leads us to spiritual harm which separates our souls from our Creator. Again, we see how an apparently innocent act of a little extra taste every now and then can mushroom into a problem of terrible proportions.

There is a horrible epidemic of obesity in the religious communities today. Many, including Rabbis are grossly overweight. Their physical appearances are used as an excuse by many non-religious to condemn both the religion and the religious are being hypocritical and out of touch with sincere human concerns. The obese among us who choose not to discipline themselves in their eating habits indeed do create a Hillul HaShem (a desecration of HaShem’s Name). We cannot tolerate this and must do all we can to admonish those in our religious communities to observe the mitzvot regarding diet and health.

We can control our eating. We can control what we eat and how much we eat. It is all a matter of choice. But, let us make clear what exactly this choice is. The choice is to observe the Torah and follow the mitzvot of health and diet, or not. Our personal definition of being considered a religious individual might very well rest upon how we respond to this choice.

I began this essay asking the question whether or not we knew of the mitzvot of health and how to observe them. Now, in conclusion, I ask this; now that we know the Halakha (Torah law), are

we willing and ready to observe and obey them with the same vigor and devotion we bring to our observance of kashrut, Shabat and the other mitzvot we perform.

Again, I reiterate. Our personal self discipline or lack of it with regards to diet might very well define for us and for others whether we are or not truly religious souls. Let us ponder this carefully, and learn how to discipline what we eat and how much we eat. For as we grow in our physical health so we have the opportunity to grow in our spiritual closeness to our blessed Creator. What greater motivation than this can we have to improve our health, both physical and spiritual?

Another point RaMBaM makes with regards to physical health is that diet alone is not enough to maintain robust physical health. Aside from diet, RaMBaM requires of us that we perform physical exercise. In Deot 4:14, he writes, "As long as one exercises, exerts oneself greatly and does not eat to the point of being full...he will not suffer sickness and he will grow in strength."