

The Mitzvot of Health and Exercise

*Practical Directions and Mystical Insights
Including the Halakhot of Martial Arts and Chinese Medicine*

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Yehudah Ben Teima says:

*Be courageous as the leopard, Light as the eagle, swift as the deer, and strong as the lion,
[so that you will be able] to do the will of your Father in Heaven. Avot 5:20*

Ba'ey Gufa Takif Gibar KaAri

One needs a body strong as a lion (in order to merit Torah).

Zohar 3, 160a, Otzar HaZohar 4, 823b

One of the most important elements in the path to G-d is the health and strength of the physical body. Throughout the generations our Rabbis have emphasized how important is the Torah commandment to be healthy and strong. In our many sins today, unfortunately many people in the religious community do not properly observe this most important obligation. In order to fulfill the Biblical obligation to maintain our health, the performance physical exercise should be viewed as a part of the fulfillment of this Torah commandment.

Even with right eating there cannot be good health without exercise. These are the words of one of the world's greatest physicians who just so happened to also be one of the worlds greatest Rabbis. I am speaking, of course of RaMBaM (Maimonides).

In his law code, the Mishneh Torah (Deot 4:14,15) **Maimonides writes that one is to "exercise and exert oneself greatly."**

These words of advice are more than a simple admonition. RaMBaM's Mishneh Torah is a book of laws, not a book of suggestions! Therefore, exercise is required by Jewish law, period. In many sectors of today's religious Jewish communities exercise is almost never performed, and if performed only in minor amounts. In our many sins, one of the greatest ills that affects religious Jewish people is obesity, and this is not caused by a hormonal problem, but rather through poor diet.

Some members of the community have begun to realize the importance of cardiovascular work. Yet, so many others, including many prominent Rabbis still have a very flippant attitude towards any type of sport or exercise.

They consider exercise and sport to be "bitul Torah" (a waste of study time). What makes this attitude even more insulting is that it contradicts the very words of Maimonides recorded in his Moreh Nebukhim (Guide to the Perplexed). It is best that I let Maimonides speak for himself.

"For there are many things that are necessary or very useful according to some people, whereas according to others they are not at all needed; as is the case with regards to the different kinds of bodily exercise, which are necessary for the preservation of health according to the prescription of those who know the art of medicine . . ."

Thus those who accomplish acts of exercising their body in the wish to be healthy, engaging in ball games, wrestling, boxing and suspension of breathing . . . are in the opinion of the ignorant engaged in frivolous actions, whereas they are not frivolous according to the Sages."

(Moreh 3, 25; Pines ed. vol. 2 pg. 503)

Those within the Torah community who do not actively support and promote physical strength and exercise are not in keeping with the letter or the spirit of the holy Torah

Even the Kabbalah holds that the strengthening of the body is important thing. According to one discussion in the Talmud, physical strength was a prerequisite for receiving the Divine spirit that reveals prophecy.

There is much to discuss regarding the Kabbalistic importance of having a physically fit and strong body. Throughout Kabbalistic literature there is discussion of the essential relationship between force (tzura) and form (homeyr). In order for anything to exist in the real of form (the physical world) there must originally exist its spiritual counterpart (force) which is its soul. Everything in the universe follows this pattern of force and form, body and soul.

The source of this is in the realm of the supernal sefirot. The primordial light of G-d was too vast and bright to be received by the created forms below. Without the benefit of G-d's sefirotic lights, the lower forms could not exist. G-d, therefore, congealed aspects of His primordial light into a selection of vessels of sorts which would siphon the light and concentrate it into a form which would be condensed enough for the individual lower creations to receive.

The forms through which the primordial light was condensed became known as the vessels, i.e., the sefirot. Thus was created the necessary relationship between light and vessel, force and form, body and soul. One is the source of life, the other is the manifestation of life. One without the other is incomplete.

It is this concept that truly separates Judaism from many of the other religions of the world. Judaism holds that the physical world is integrally good and not something to be avoided or transcended.

Our ultimate home at the end of the cycles of reincarnation is not some spiritual plane far removed from the physical world. Our ultimate reward and home is the resurrection, where body and soul will be perfectly united in holiness, living here eternally upon the physical earth. The process of the rectification and preparation of the physical world to receive and reveal its inherent holiness takes a considerable amount of time, specifically seven thousand years.

In the realms above, the supernal sefirot simply did not just receive the primordial light as a glass being filled with water from the faucet. Before the vessel could receive the primordial light it had to be strong enough to do so. Therefore, the vessel's receiving of the primordial light was a slow process of entering the vessel a little bit, thus expanding its boundaries and then withdrawing. This process continued over and over again until the vessel was finally strong enough to receive it's full measure of the light.

One might ask the question why did not G-d create the vessels finished and ready to perform their tasks? The answer to this reveal G-d's plan of mercy for His universe. Nothing in the universe is created in its finished state. Everything comes forth in an infancy state with the purpose of growth and maturity.

In this way, everything has the opportunity to learn as it grows. With knowledge comes awareness of G-d. With awareness comes the appreciation of G-d's grace. With appreciation of G-d comes the love of G-d. With the love of G-d comes merit and reward. And this is the whole purpose of creation: so that G-d could bestow His mercy and goodness on His worthy children.

For if we were all created full, there would be no option for growth. Without growth there could be no movement and thus no reward for movement. G-d would then not be able to righteously bestow His goodness. This would thwart the purpose of creation.

So, it is necessary for there to be a vessel in order for the light to be able to shine. It is also necessary that the vessel build itself and prepare itself in order to merit the reception of the light in its fullness. What does all this have to do with exercise, you ask?

I am sure you know the great Kabbalistic principle: As it is above, so it is below. Force and form follow one another. As the supernal vessels above needed to expand their strength in order to receive the fullness of the primordial light, so must we expand and strengthen our vessels, i.e., our physical bodies if we wish to receive our share of the supernal light, which is the spirit of holiness and Divine revelation.

Exercise, therefore, is not something simply physical, performed to make one look good. Exercise becomes an important Kabbalistic practice which prepares one's vessel, i.e., one's body to receive the spiritual light. Physical exercise is not for the sake of good looks, but rather for the sake of good health.

In the first of the primordial worlds, the light of the sefirot originally entered into the vessels full blast, all at once. The vessels were not strong enough to receive the light. They, therefore, shattered. The broken pieces became the source of evil in the universe. In order to repair this state of affairs, G-d proceeded to form new vessels, and, in order for these not to break like the originals, slowly introduced the light into them.

The Ari'zal teaches that a small amount of the primordial light first entered the vessel and then withdrew. The vessels expanded just a little bit to hold that light. The light entered again, this time a little stronger and then withdrew. The vessel expanded even more to support the light. This procedure of "pumping up" continued until the vessels were strong enough to receive the full light. As it is above, so it is below. Our physical bodies were created in accordance to the supernal sefirotic image. When we exercise our muscles, we increase our physical strength. When this is accompanied by proper mental and emotional discipline once can achieve a harmony of heavenly and earthly forces that truly manifests holiness (and all around health).

The spirituality of physical exercise is not something that should surprise anyone. Although neglected for years by the Torah observant community, Jewish history is full of tales about robust men of spiritual and physical strength.

Even in our century some Rabbis have come forward as praised the value of physical exercise. The great Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, HaRav Avraham Yitzhak Kook even wrote about the Kabbalistic value of exercise.

In his work Orot (Orot HaTehiya 34) he made the controversial statement that the performance of physical exercise is as important as, and performs a similar spiritual service as does the mystical Kabbalistic meditative practices. Only a very high level Kabbalist would have the prophetic insight to be able to recognize this.

While it is clear from Jewish law and the Kabbalah that physical exercise is important, still many people in the religious community do not participate in any body building physical activity. Especially in the yeshiva high schools is there a pitiful lack of physical education. Some rabbis mistakenly claim that physical education is a waste of time, time that should be spent learning Torah. While I most certainly support the constant learning of Torah, there are still other mitzvot which need to be done.

No one has ever dared suggest that prayer be abolished in lieu of Torah study. There is room in the busy day for both prayer and study. So why is it then that the Torah commandment to safeguard our health is not given the same emphasis.

In my opinion the lack of physical exercise on behalf of certain elements within the religious community is nothing other than sheer laziness! The religious community must be in peak spiritual shape and physical shape. This honors the name of G-d.

Physical exercise and rectification of the body are extremely important mitzvot with very profound Kabbalistic significance. Again, one should deeply explore ones heart so as to discover the true reason why there might be any aversion to exercise.

Working out in a gym is not the only way to develop physical strength. Maimonides specifically stated that ball games are also good for this purpose. I know of a number of Yeshiva students who are good basketball players. This type of activity needs to be encouraged. Whatever it takes to be in peak physical shape is a Torah requirement that must be addressed by every sincere seeker of G-d and observer of His Torah.

With all the talk of physical exercise for one's muscles, we must not forget that there is still yet another level of physical training. This is the practice of martial arts. I have been a student of martial arts since my teen age years. Of all the different styles that I have studied I have found the styles that have come from China, most popularly known as Kung Fu to be the most sophisticated and the best.

Over the years I have watched demonstrations of masters who could perform seemingly impossible feats. All these masters say that they are able to accomplish these feats, not through physical strength, but rather through the cultivation and directing of the life force energy in the body, which they call Chi (Qi).

As I advanced in my martial arts studies, I naturally was exposed to this and other correlating aspects of Chinese medical philosophy and practice. I have found them to be quite profound and extremely successful in the prevention and treatment of disease. In my opinion, traditional Chinese medicine, which includes the systems of acupuncture, acupressure, herbal medicine and Qigong offer tremendous healing benefits not yet known in the western systems of "modern" medicine.

There is so much medical evidence as to the authenticity of traditional Chinese medicine that many insurance companies have started to include their practices within their medical insurance policies.

This "Chi" that the Chinese speak of correlates almost identically to what traditional Jewish sources refer to as the Nefesh level of soul within the body. In Lev. 17:11, it is written that "the soul (Nefesh) of the flesh is in the blood."

According to the Chinese classics, the Chi is called the "commander of the blood." Regarding the relationship between the Qi and the blood it is written:

"Qi and blood are substances essential for life activities of [the] human body. They are separable but closely related through interdependence and interaction."

(300 Questions on Qigong Exercise, 1994 by Lin Housheng and Luo Peiyu, Guangdong Science and Technology Press, Guangzhou, China, page 23).

This correlation so intrigued me that I wanted to learn much more. Now, Nefesh means soul. It is the lowest of the five levels of soul and corresponds to the Asiatic realm of the physical. As is clear from Lev. 17:11, the Nefesh is the life force of the body. It is also the lowest level of human consciousness, again that level which connects the soul to the body. Therefore, any work which helps to nourish and cultivate Nefesh strength is of great value in the Torah path.

The study and practice of preventative medicine is a Torah obligation. Maimonides writes this clearly throughout his writings, even in Hilchot Deot (quoted above). If the cultivation of Chi/nefesh would help a Jew fulfill the mitzvah of health, then it is a mitzvah to learn about it. In brief this is how the Chinese interpret Chi (Qi):

"Qi (vital energy) is something by which the ancient people understood the phenomena of nature.

They considered Qi to be the essential substance forming the world and through its movement and change to be the cause of things coming into existence in the universe.

In light of this viewpoint, medical workers tend to think that Qi is the fundamental substance to constitute the human body and that its movement and change account for the activities of life.

It is mentioned in . . . The Law of Medicine, "A thing takes shape when Qi accumulates and the thing dies out when Qi dissipates." (ibid. page 21)

The concepts of Chinese medicine are most different than those of western medicine. Yet, no religious Jew should dismiss the Chinese medical system and the philosophy underlying it on the grounds that it is based upon foreign religions. Chinese medicine and its underlying philosophy are not Avodah Zarah (idolatry) as are similar practices that come out of India.

No one today would condemn standard western medicine as being forbidden by Torah Law because it was developed by Christian doctors. Similarly Chinese medicine cannot be dismissed simply because it is Chinese or that it shares certain non-idolatrous philosophical principles with oriental religions. The philosophical aspects of Chinese medicine are far removed from anything religious or spiritual as seen by the practices in the modern People's Republic of China. Medicine is medicine. Chinese medicine works. It does not use any spiritual components, only certain biological energies that are in all of us. Therefore it is totally permissible according to Torah Law.

One of the Chinese methods of preventative medicine is called Chi Kung. This is a system of calisthenics, stretching, breath control, relaxation and massage. Chi Kung practices are of many different kinds and a mastery of them may take a number of years training. But the medical benefits that come forth from them are surely worth the investment of time.

I highly advise that whoever has access to a teacher of Chinese medical practices should take advantage of the opportunity to learn. Even if there is no physical teacher available there are a number of good books on the market which explain these medical practices in an easy way for the layman.

In most major metropolitan areas there are Chinese doctors, who having been educated in China have come to the United States for their practice. I personally suggest only going to a Chinese doctor who has the appropriate, legitimate credentials. As with Rabbis, so it is with practitioners of Chinese medicine; there are a lot of people out there who claim to know a great deal, when in reality they know next to nothing. Always choose your Rabbi and Chinese doctor with the same amount of care.

With regards to the practice of martial arts, I have also found them to be of great personal health benefits. Not only am I able to defend myself in a hostile world, I am also strong and flexible of body. I highly recommend the study of authentic Kung Fu (from a qualified Chinese teacher) as another excellent method to maintain good health. Kung Fu study also enables it's practitioners to be able to defend themselves.

This is another Torah obligation. With regards to the practice of martial arts, I am very curious to what Maimonides was specifically referring to when he recommended boxing as a healthy activity (Moreh Nebukhim, quoted above).

The words used in Hebrew are "meshikhat hayadayim" which literally means the pulling or stretching of hands. This is a most accurate description of Chinese martial arts practice. Was Maimonides referring to some form of Kung Fu? I don't think we will ever know. However, Maimonides did live in a Middle East which had a very active trade relationship with China. It is not beyond belief that the greatest Rabbi of the age would know of Chinese martial arts.

Also, Maimonides makes mention of "suspension of breath." This is definitely a part of martial arts training, Chi Kung and of Jewish meditative practices. Exactly what he meant, we may never know. To sum up the matter of exercise, health maintenance and martial arts in a precise manner: they are all activities required by the Torah.

Also, if they were good enough for Maimonides, they are good enough for me. If any Rabbi wishes to challenge the requirement of the regular performance of exercise, health maintenance and martial arts, let him take up his argument with Maimonides.