

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Im Tarutz
Why Exercise?

וְאִם-תָּרוּץ לֹא תִכָּשֵׁל.

If you will run, you will not stumble.

Mishlei (Proverbs) 4:12

Excerpted from

Body & Soul

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If you are an observant Jew, then you know that one of the really important things to do is to keep your body in top physical shape. That means: stimulate the muscles, give it proper usage, that's one of the things you ought to be doing. Whether you pick mountain-climbing on the weekends, whether you pick basketball, it doesn't really matter - that's already a question of which one do you enjoy more. But there is a need to do physical activity that will keep the muscle tone, the circulation, and everything else in good condition. Unfortunately, what happens is that the other things that matter blind us to this and most don't carry out their obligation to make sure that they have good physical condition. But it is an obligation that ought to be observed like all other mitzvos.

Rav Yaakov Weinberg ztztl



THERE IS A LONG-STANDING JEWISH MYTH - PROBABLY AS OLD as Hellenism and Chanukah - that exercising the body is very Greek and not so Jewish. But from a Torah perspective, physical exercise matters very much for keeping *both body and mind* healthy.

RAMBAM
MAIMONIDES
Exercise

As long as a person exercises, avoids overeating and keeps his digestive system healthy, he won't get sick and he will remain vigorous, even [occasionally] eating bad foods. But one who sits comfortably and doesn't exercise or who doesn't keep his digestive system healthy, even healthy foods and medicines won't keep him from pain and weakness his entire life. *Deos 4.14-15*

Rambam is speaking to the religious person who thinks:

“Health is hashgachah: if God wills it, I’ll be healthy; pain or weakness is min-hashamayim (Heaven-sent). Sure, we sometimes need to do our hishtadlus (effort) and take some medicine, but the main thing I need to is to daven (pray). After all, we pray for healing every time we daven.”

They might even hope they are protected under the principle of שִׁמְרָה פְּתָאִים ה' - *God protects the simple (Tehillim/Ps 116:6)*, which the Talmud applies to certain practices that are common despite being somewhat dangerous.ⁱ

To such a person, the Rambam responds: *No, it isn't good enough*

i. See *Shabbos* 129b, *Yevamos* 12b and 82a. For the practical application of this principle according to the level of risk, see Rav Yaakov Ertlanger, *Teshuvos Binyan Tzion* 1:137 and Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, *Teshuvos Achiezer* 1:23.

to pray for health and strength. If you're not doing the basic *hishtadlus* of eating healthily and exercising, you are to blame for many illnesses you may experience.ⁱ



*Rambam puts the responsibility for your health on you;
whatever happens, you're the one who is responsible.*

Rav Avigdor Millerⁱⁱ



Medical science has accumulated a preponderance of evidence that daily exercise strengthens all aspects of the body. Benefits of the right kinds of exercise include:

1. **Immunity:** daily exercise strengthens the immune system against the microbes that we encounter everywhere.
2. **Heart:** strengthens the heart and improves its efficiency (along with vascular benefits of better blood pressure and flow).
3. **Weight control:** although it mostly depends on controlling eating, exercise accelerates weight loss and helps keep it off.
4. **Sleep:** improves sleep efficiency, meaning getting the same amount of rest from less sleep. In fact, the amount of time you gain can exceed the amount of time you invest in the exercise.
5. **Mood:** can improve mood, relieving anxiety and depression.
6. **Locomotion:** one of the hallmarks of old age is difficulty walking due to painful knees, back and other joints. Daily exercise of all types can dramatically slow this decline.
7. **Cognition:** the right kind of exercise improves concentration, learning and long-term memory.¹²¹

i. See the *midrash* quoted on pp. 28 above and 289 below. See also Rav Hirsch, *Writings*, I.67.

ii. Rav Avigdor Miller on *Emanah and Bitachon*, p. 84.

8. **Well-being:** there appears to be no bodily function that doesn't benefit from exercise, especially alongside a healthy diet. Even functions that appear unrelated to exercise, such as hearing, are stabilized by regular exercise. Hearing loss can be an acute challenge for an elderly person (and their loved ones), and yet may sometimes be preventable by maintaining a vigorously healthy body.¹²² There are countless examples of this - *exercise makes life more livable for longer.*



For decades, people have thought of physical activity as injurious to joints. However, a couple of years ago, a handful of studies found the opposite, with the risk of osteoarthritis going down the more active you are. Our results show that activity is the driving force behind maintaining lubrication.

Professor David Burris, University of Delaware



The joint at the elbow moves like a hinge, as do the other two bones that meet at the knee. How can two bones move about each other without painful friction? The answer is amazing. First of all, the two ends of the bones are covered with a special layer of cartilage which is very smooth and shiny. Then, the whole area of the joint is surrounded by a special capsule. The inside of this capsule is lined with a remarkable membrane that actually produces a specially designed lubricant. This lubricant, called synovial fluid, fills the whole area of the capsule, acts as a cushion between the two bones, and ensures that all movement is smooth and friction-free. The more physical activity that is done, the more your little factory will produce the vital fluid.

Rabbi Avrohom Katz, *Designer World*, 115-116

Specific benefits of various types of exercise include:

| Type | Benefits |
|---|---|
| Cardio (aerobic) <i>E.g., fast walking, jogging, swimming, cycling</i> <i>Even moderate walking 30 minutes a day can be extremely beneficial.¹²³</i> | Stronger heart, better circulation, lower blood pressure, lower blood glucose, reduced risk for heart disease, improved cholesterol levels; ¹²⁴ stronger bones, weight control, ¹²⁵ improved balance, increased stamina, more efficient sleep, cancer prevention, ¹²⁶ stronger immune system, ¹²⁷ improved concentration, learning and memory; ¹²⁸ reduced stress, improved mood. ¹²⁹ |
| Resistance (strength) <i>E.g., calisthenics, weights, yoga</i> | Stronger bones, rejuvenated muscle tissue, improved balance, delayed frailty |
| Flexibility <i>E.g., stretching, yoga</i> | Reduced risk of pain & injury |
| All movement | Maintain healthy, pain-free joints ¹³⁰ |

For further inspiration, see the exercise habits of great Torah leadership, p. xxv above and Ch. 25 below. If busy rabbis can do it, perhaps we can (and should) too. See also Ch. 23, mitzvos 4, 5 and 1.



Heart disease is a benign condition that need not exist. It is totally preventable and reversible!

Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, Cleveland Clinic



RAV YISROEL SALANTER

Doctor's Orders

Rav Salanter used to say: “One who is ill is exempt from all mitzvos except for one: *And you should guard your health exceedingly.*” Once someone entered into his room,

during his stay in Halberstat, and found him standing before an open German book, involved in strictly precise exercises according to the principles and guidelines of that book, because the doctor had ordered him to do so.

Rabbi Dov Katz, *T'nuas HaMusar*, 342

Rav Yisroel Salanter, famous for his phenomenal genius in all areas of Torah, is not ruling that an ill person is exempt from literally all mitzvos other than self-care. He's using hyperbole to teach that caring for your health is an indispensable mitzvah.

He knows his audience: people trying to live a life of Torah and mitzvos often denigrate the body and material matters. After all, we're not Greeks, are we?

But his lesson by example is far more compelling than his hyperbole. Here we have an eye-witness account that he himself was neither negligent nor lazy about following his doctor's orders - he was religiously meticulous with exercise.

But couldn't he at least have had a *sefer* (Torah book) open while exercising? Was it really necessary to follow the German book so meticulously? Isn't there a slight *bittul zman* (wasting time) here?

Clearly not: this Gadol HaDor (leader of his generation), who famously ate a piece of cake in shul on Yom Kippur during the cholera epidemic of 1848 (to encourage others to do so), is teaching us by example that it is not *bittul zman* to do physical exercises per your doctor's orders.



Don't look for "tikkunim" and don't occupy yourself with "hevelim." Go immediately to a doctor today before the situation gets worse.

HaRav Ben-Tzion Mutzafi *shlita*



New technologies make it easier than ever to avoid the slightest worry about *bittul zman*. For instance, try listening to a *shiur* (class) while walking. In fact, the number of minutes of downloadable *shiurim* far exceeds our available time. Your exercise time may be the only opportunity to listen to essential *shiurim* from world-class teachers.



I don't like to exercise. But there are hundreds of shiurim that I want to listen to. So I figure I might as well move my legs while I'm listening.



Action Plan:

1. Make a list of subjects that you could learn via recordings.
2. Obtain and organize those *shiurim* on an mp3 player.
3. Schedule on your calendar three times per week to listen.
4. Since you're anyway listening, why not move your legs?
5. Feel good about taking care of your health *while* learning.

| | Subjects I need to learn, am not currently learning, and could learn from a recording | ✓ |
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Strength training

Even if you accept that exercising the body is a good idea, weightlifting for sure isn't a Jewish value, right? That must be a completely *beheimah* activity.

But physical strength is indeed an important Torah value:

PIRKEI AVOS

Strength

Rabbi Shimon ben Yehudah says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: beauty, **strength**, wealth, honor, wisdom, seniority, sagacity and children are beneficial both for tzaddikim and for the world, as it says, *The splendor of young men is their strength and the beauty of the elders is their sagacity* (Mishlei/Prov 20:6). Avos 6.8

For the Torah weakens a person's strength and one needs great strength to toil in Torah... Similarly, regarding doing mitzvos, one needs strength to do them, to bury the dead, to visit the sick, and all the mitzvos the vessel of the deed is causative, and strength is required for doing all of the mitzvos. *Midrash Shmuel to Avos 6.8*

How does strength benefit a tzaddik (righteous person)? *Midrash Shmuel* explains it quite simply: since our body is our tool for Torah and mitzvos, a physically weak person will underperform as a Jew.

But without strength training, strength will decline with age. The late Professor Harry Lodge, MD,ⁱ summarizes the challenge:

Most aging is just the dry rot we program into our cells by sedentary living, junk food and stress.

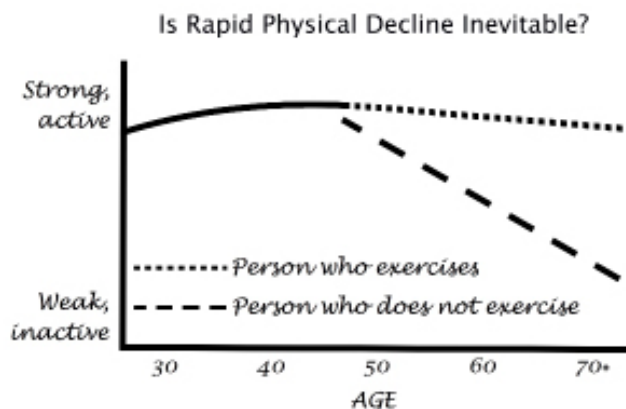
By cutting out junk food *and exercising properly*, he explains, we can eliminate decaying cells and replace them with new cells. Strength training on all major muscle groups is essential for this cellular exchange.

A related benefit of strength training is its effect on the joints. While all physical activity stimulates joint-protecting synovial fluid,

i. 1958-2017; Robert Burch Family Professor of Medicine, Columbia University Medical Center.

weight-bearing exercises cause the synovial fluid to thicken, protecting joints from potential injuries.

If you ever see someone walking with a cane or walker, or confined to a bed, that's possibly someone who did not do strength training. By around age 50, your muscles start to decline.



This natural decline is inevitable, but it can be greatly slowed by a muscle training routine. *And the steep decline can be slowed at any age.*

The Rambam trumpets this ethic:

RAMBAM

MAIMONIDES

Purpose of Strength

One should desire a healthy, strong body in order for his soul to be directed towards knowledge of God, for it is impossible to understand and to consider wisdom while one is hungry or sick or suffering any pain. Therefore, one who walks on this path all of his days serves God constantly.

Deos 3.3

The ethic of self-care is a greater issue than merely accepting God's

love and showing appreciation for our amazing bodies. Physical vigor is necessary for *avodas Hashem* (Holy service). A strong body enables every human endeavor, including the pursuit of wisdom.ⁱ



Want to reduce body fat, increase lean muscle mass and burn calories more efficiently? Strength training to the rescue! Strength training is a key component of overall health and fitness for everyone.

Mayo Clinic



The Importance of Exercise in Judaism

By Rav Zamir Cohen *shlita*ⁱⁱ

Used with permission

The muscles of the body were designed to move in order to function properly. A muscle that is stagnant for a long time will eventually degenerate and lose its function. When muscles are exercised, they become stronger, revitalized and regenerated - not weak or worn out. Therefore, Maimonides considers physical exercise to be essential for maintaining a healthy body.

When Maimonides says “exercise” he doesn’t necessarily mean what we call exercise today. One doesn’t need to exercise in an extreme way, all he has to do is perform exercises that will rejuvenate and strengthen all of his muscles. This will ultimately reinvigorate the person to serve God.

There are many opportunities for this mitzvah. For example, a person who shows up early to an appointment will usually try to look for the closest parking spot - he may even argue with the other driver about the spot.

i. Cf. *Yeschayah/Isa* 11:9, *Yirmeyah/Jer* 31:33, *Hoshea* 2:22, 6:3.

ii. Rabbi Zamir Cohen is the founder and director of the Hidabroot organization.

But truthfully, if we arrive early to a meeting we should park the car a little farther away and take advantage of the opportunity to walk. The same is true for using an elevator. There are people who are willing to wait a long time for the elevator just to go up one floor. A wise person will seize the moment and take the stairs so he can activate the muscles of his body, and if time is not a factor for him, he should use the stairs even more.

Today however, we don't move enough. New technologies have made our daily activities insufficient for maintaining our physical health. We therefore need exercise regimens. Devoting a little time for exercise everyday can provide the necessary results. However, the idea of working out to shape and design the body as a goal in itself must be obliterated! This mindset is completely false and creates an opening for all earthly desires. Instead, one should always be mindful that one day this body will return to the dust, as the Mishnah states:

*Know whence you have come and where you are heading...
Where are you heading? To a place of dust, worm and maggot.*

Avos 3.1

The reason that Hellenism promoted of all types of sports (the word "sport" comes from the name Sparta, the Greek city) is because that philosophy doesn't consider the human soul to be transcendent, and therefore promotes physical cultivation as the greatest aspiration. In contrast, the Torah mandate for physical exercise is simply to be healthy. The body's function is to serve as a strong and healthy vessel for the containment of the soul. Its purpose is to help the soul withstand challenges and shape its spiritual world.

Exercise (along with proper eating and other health-promoting habits) is a component of Rambam's prescription for a long and healthy life. He concludes his discourse:

Whoever conducts himself in the ways that we have drawn up, I guarantee that he will not become ill throughout his life until he reaches advanced age and dies. He won't need a doctor. His body will remain intact and healthy throughout his life (unless he was impaired from birth, he was accustomed to one of the harmful habits from birth, or unless there's a plague or a drought in the world). Deos 4.20



Using the word “guarantee” is quite extraordinary for a rationalist like Maimonides, which he doesn't do anywhere else in the *Mishneh Torah*. While a modern doctor would never use that word, current medicine certainly confirms the great impact of lifestyle choices on health and well being. Rambam's encouragement, along with the example set by Rav Yisroel Salanter, should inspire all of us to make an effort at taming and training the *Beheimah*. The next chapter presents an exercise action plan that anyone can follow.



**SMART
EATING
#9**

Skip or reduce dessert

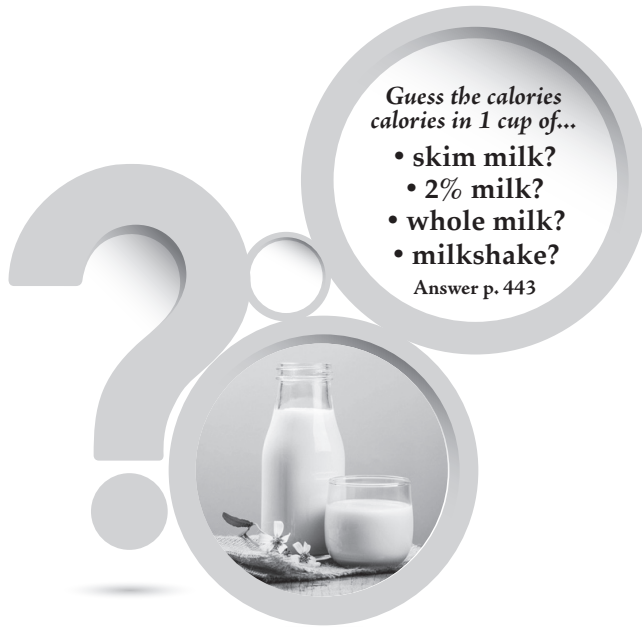
Believe it or not, you'll survive. Think:
“Any and all excess calories I eat will turn into fat.”

Summary of *Im Tarutz*:

- Exercise helps both the body and the mind.
- There are dozens of health benefits to regular exercise.
- Strength (as opposed to bodybuilding) is both a Torah value and medically sensible.
- If you have an opportunity to walk - *walk!*

Recommended further reading:

John Ratey and Eric Hagerman, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*



For up-to-date Body & Soul information,
videos, classes, events and activities, visit

TorahHealth.org



T O R A H
Health & Fitness