

OBESITY: A BIG FAT PROBLEM

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The statistics are alarming. More than one-third of all adults and 17% of children in the United States are obese. Obesity-related health conditions account for 15.2% of total U.S. deaths each year and medical costs associated with obesity have been estimated at \$147 billion. In the last fifty years, the prevalence of obesity among adults has nearly tripled, increasing from 13.4 to 35.7%. The numbers are staggering; it is estimated that by the year 2030, 90% of the population will be overweight [1].

Public figures, like President Obama, the First Lady and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, have recently joined in the fight against obesity in America by coming up with new and often controversial ways to curb fat consumption by the public. Some of these measures include displaying caloric content of food items on restaurant menus, rigid school lunch programs, and bans on sugary drinks. But while politicians are hard at work, it is essential that we, Torah-observant Jews, analyze the *halachic* outlook on obesity and its roots.

Is obesity antithetical to the Jewish way of life? Is it *assur*, forbidden? The obligation of a Jew to avoid danger is found in the well-known verse in *Devarim* (4:15) when God proclaimed, “*v’nishmartem m’ode l’nafshoseichem*,” “You shall greatly beware for your souls.” The Rambam explained that because of this commandment to refrain from any obstacle that endangers a person, the Sages forbade many acts that could jeopardize a Jewish life [2].

Not surprisingly, researchers and clinicians today emphatically assert that obesity increases one’s risk of morbidity. Obesity has been associated with strokes, type 2 diabetes, respiratory problems, and heart disease. A simple weight gain of 15 pounds was found to increase the risk of a heart attack by 25% [3]. In addition, a recent study has clearly established that obesity actually promotes the growth of certain tumors and cancer progression [4]. Clearly, one must contend that any action that directly causes obesity would constitute endangering oneself and would be a violation of “*v’nishmartem*,” as understood by the Rambam [5].

Overeating, one noted cause of obesity, has long been discussed by countless *poskim* and has been strongly deemed inap-

propriate and *assur*. This can be gleaned from the verse in *Devarim* (32:15), which states, “*Yeshurun became fat and kicked. It thus deserted Hashem, its Maker*.” While the passage is often interpreted metaphorically, a literal translation is arguably just as accurate. Indulgence and overeating can pull us away from our Creator and the Torah life [6]. We can also see the Torah’s approach from the Jews’ wanderings in the desert after their redemption from Egypt. During those forty years, God caused delicious *manna* to rain down

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every day to nourish the nation. The *manna* provided all the nutrients that the people required. It did not contain any byproducts or extraneous matter (Sifrei on *Bamidbar* 11). However, the people, not satisfied with the *manna*, complained. God responded by sending fowl from the sky and the nation carnivorously overindulged. This gorging was considered inappropriate for the holy Jewish nation and the people were severely punished for their behavior (*Bamidbar* 11:31). While it is true that God placed us on this earth to enjoy its pleasures, there is a fine line between enjoying the food that He intended for us to have, and drowning ourselves in five-course Shabbat and holiday meals. Serious medical conditions are linked with gluttony, such as metabolic syndrome (also known as, insulin resistance syndrome), and are proof enough that a habit of overeating directly damages the body [7].

While eating in excess is clearly a causative factor of obesity, the consumption of trans-fats, another significant contributor, has been spoken about *ad nauseam* in the media. There has been relatively little *halachic* literature written on the subject. Trans-fatty acid, or “trans-fat,” is commercially produced in the making of margarines, baked goods, and packaged foods. It is estimated that the average person’s intake of trans-fat is about 3% of their total daily calories. Although it is not linked with as many diseases as obesity, research has found that trans-fats are strongly associated with cardiovascular health risks. The dangerous quality of

trans-fats is that they increase a person's LDL ("bad") cholesterol while simultaneously decreasing HDL ("good") cholesterol. This is significant because high LDL cholesterol levels are the primary cause of death by coronary heart disease [8]. In 2006, investigators found that people with a high level of trans-fat intake had 2.4 times the risk of having an acute heart attack as compared to those with lower intakes. The researchers claimed that by reducing trans-fat intake, an estimated 10-19 % of coronary heart disease cases in the U.S. could be prevented [9]. In that same year, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) required that all foods indicate their trans-fat content on their product labels [13]. If the health risks posed by trans-fat consumption are so significant and widely recognized, should trans-fat be forbidden by today's *poskim*?

One way to approach this question is by analyzing a similar health issue discussed in contemporary *halacha*: smoking. Rav Moshe Feinstein famously wrote in 1964 and again in 1981 that smoking was permitted on the basis that "damage to health caused by smoking is only a small minority of cases" [10]. However, in light of the recent medical evidence regarding the inevitable detrimental effects of smoking, the more recent *gedolim* of our times, such as Rav Eliezer Waldenberg and Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl, have clearly forbid the use of cigarettes and smoking [11, 12]. In fact, the Rabbinical Council of America issued a ruling in 2006 asserting that given the increased knowledge of the risks of smoking, even Rav Moshe would have agreed that smoking is prohibited [13]. In the same way that new medical knowledge has led numerous modern-day *halachic* authorities to prohibit smoking, it is certainly conceivable that research being conducted regarding the dangers of trans-fat will inspire comparable prohibitions.

In order to make *assur* the consumption of trans-fats, *rab-*

banim would need to analyze and compare the many facets of obesity, trans-fat consumption, and smoking. One might argue that obesity and smoking are dissimilar. While both are dangerous, smoking is typically a voluntary action born out of a terrible habit. It is easy for *poskim* to prohibit the use of a cigarette, as there is no requirement or necessity for one to ever use such an item. However, food is an essential element of one's daily life. To forbid the consumption of all food in order to avoid obesity would be an impossible *psak*, or *halachic* conclusion. Another important consideration is that the effects of smoking are direct and toxic, whereas the harm caused by fattening food is delayed and indirect, requiring a number of biochemical steps to occur. In addition, there is a strong genetic component to obesity, since some individuals are more susceptible to the effects of their dietary intake. Therefore, if a *halachic* authority were to forbid obesity, the prohibition would need to be on the act of eating irresponsibly, not on the state of being overweight [13].

The consumption of trans-fats, on the other hand, is highly comparable to smoking. Like a cigarette, trans-fat is easily accessible and foods containing trans-fat can be so delectable that they create an emotional dependence or addiction for some people. However, this heavy ingredient is also remarkably avoidable, and stubborn trans-fat eaters may want to think hard before filling their pantries. Just as cigarettes are a choice, trans-fat is also a choice.

With all the known health risks associated with the consumption of trans-fat, *poskim* must quickly evaluate the matter in order to deliver a conclusive ruling. As the old adage says, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." We must take action soon if we are to prevent or at least decelerate the obesity epidemic that is so rampant in our times. ■

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