

OY! OBESITY: A WEIGHTY ISSUE

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There are many Jews who believe that by eating only food that is *kosher*, they are following the strict letter of the law. However, even eating *kosher* food can contravene the spirit of the Torah. *Kashrut*, the set of Jewish dietary laws, is one of the most well-known facets of Judaism. Pork products are famously off-limits, time intervals between eating meat and dairy meals are standard, and extensive inspection of food, be it the *bedikah* stage of examining kosher meat or the checking of lettuce for insects, is routine. Abstaining from eating specific animals and killing permissible animals in the least painful manner, *shechita*, are among the many requirements set out in the *Torah* and explained by commentators.

According to Jewish belief, food is not simply a source of energy; rather, it is a means of connecting the *guf*, the body, to the *neshamah*, the soul. Food has sacred potential and becomes elevated by the consumer when he or she recites the appropriate *beracha*. The Rama wrote as follows: “It is a *mitzvah* to bring salt to the table before one makes *hamotzi*, because the table is like an altar and eating is like consuming a *korban* [1]. Eating, in a sense, is parallel to making an offering. With regard to offerings in the *Beit Hamikdash*, the holy temple, there was a time and a place for these sacrifices. Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Avihu, were smitten because they brought an unauthorized offering. Unfortunately, many Jews today believe that if they follow strict adherence to *kashrut* and make a *beracha*, their eating is “authorized.” However, just because food is *kosher* does not mean it is healthy. Eating too much food, even if it is *kosher*, is deleterious to both the body and the soul, as the *Torah* states, “you will eat and you will be satisfied” (Deuteronomy 11:15), implying that one should not eat when they are already satisfied.

In Orthodox Jewish communities, there is a heavy emphasis on food. From *Shabbat* and holidays to *bar-mitzvah* celebrations and weddings (and all of the pre and post-events that go with them), no occasion is complete without an abundance of lavish entrees and desserts. The presence of a panoply of *kugels* and cookies, however, is not a green-light to sample everything. Regardless, these *simachot*, or celebrations, pose a great challenge to one’s self control and sadly many succumb to the temptation to

overindulge. The fact that someone else is paying makes the food even more enticing.

When it comes to overeating, Maimonides writes, “excessive eating is like a deadly poison to the body of any man, and it is a principal cause of all illnesses” [2]. If obesity negatively affects longevity [3], why is the *mitzvah* to “Guard your lives” not taken more seriously with regard to proper nutrition? Poor dietary choices, coupled with a sedentary lifestyle, are clearly not a recipe for good health. While weight gain has both genetic and environmental causes, one can, at least, better take care of one’s own body by monitoring food intake and energy expenditure (*i.e.*, calories “in” vs. calories “out”).

Even eating kosher food can contravene the spirit of the Torah.

Obesity, of course, is not limited to Jewish populations. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (2009–2010) [4] more than 35% of adults and 17% of youths were obese. Obesity, the accumulation of excess body fat, results from consuming more calories than the body utilizes. This is exacerbated by lack of exercise and genetic predisposition. The diagnosis of obesity and its severity is widely defined by an individual’s Body Mass Index (BMI), calculated by the following formula: $BMI = \text{weight (kg)} / [\text{height (m)}]^2$. Individuals who have a BMI of less than 18.5 are considered to be underweight. Those with a BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 are considered average, between 25.0 and 29.9 are considered overweight, and above 30.0 are considered moderately obese. Those with a BMI higher than 40 are considered severely obese [5].

Obesity increases the risk of developing or exacerbating a variety of conditions. Coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, joint stress, stroke, certain cancers (breast, uterine and ovarian for women; colon, rectum and prostate for men), and sleep apnea amongst others have all been linked to obesity. When untreated, obesity usually worsens. Physicians will recommend a reduction in calories consumed per day, in addition to starting or adapting an exercise regimen. Unfortunately, even

if an individual desires to begin an exercise regimen, lethargy and joint-pain brought about by obesity make it very difficult. In severe cases, gastric bypass surgery or vertical banded gastroplasty may be employed.

In contrast to present times in which the unfortunate trend is to live to eat, our ancestors' way of life was to eat to live. In the desert, G-d provided the Jewish people with *manna*, a miraculous food. Each morning, everyone would gather his or her allotted portion. Although some would take too much, others too little, G-d however added or subtracted from their harvest so each person would have exactly what they needed [6]. Essentially, this was Divine portion control. Additionally, those same people wandered in the desert for 40 years. These Jews were certainly health conscious, incorporating both portion control and exercise in their daily routine.

Glycemic Index (GI) is one demonstration of the relationship between energy from food and the extent of physical activity. GI measures the time it takes for a carbohydrate-containing food to raise an individual's blood sugar level. GI exclusively applies to carbohydrate-containing food because such food affects blood sugar levels more than others. This numerical index ranks foods as having a low (55 or less), a medium (56-69), or a high (70 and above) GI value, where glucose has a GI value of 100. In his medical writings (3:2), Maimonides provided his readership with advice on all aspects of daily life, including his suggestion to avoid sugary and deleterious foods, so that one can be healthy to serve G-d. With respect to eating habits, he suggested that:

[Man] should set his heart to eat and drink only to maintain the health of his body and limbs. Therefore, he should not consume all that the palate lusts for, like a dog or an ass, but should eat things that are beneficial to the body, whether they are bitter or sweet; and he should not eat things which are harmful to the body even though they may be sweet. [7]

With respect to sweet but potentially harmful foods, Maimonides was ahead of his time. Low GI foods have a slower and more steady release of glucose as compared to high GI foods which have a rapid release of glucose. A slower release allows for an individual to feel satisfied longer, making that person less likely to eat more. The quicker glucose release foods leave the individual unsatisfied.

Ludwig *et al.*, observed the effects that foods with varying GI values had on twelve obese teenage boys and found that consumption of high GI foods increased hunger while of low GI foods lessened hunger [8]. When individuals consume food with a low GI value, they have more time to burn energy because of the slow release of glucose. In contrast, food with a high GI surges

the bloodstream with sugar, which triggers the brain to signal the pancreas to release large quantities of insulin. This means that there is much less time to burn energy. Insulin, which regulates blood sugar, can more easily store excess glucose as fat than it can transport glucose to muscle cells, especially when there is a large quantity of glucose. When insulin removes large quantities of sugar, individuals feel fatigue, making them less inclined to exercise. Perhaps this is why Maimonides advised against the consumption of sweet food. A diet with foods low in GI can help lessen the occurrences of insulin-dumps, which otherwise increase body-fat and fatigue, and help to maintain healthy and controlled blood sugar levels throughout the day [9].

The aforementioned repercussions of consuming too many high-GI foods, are compounded in the modern convenience-driven society. Similar to *manna*, much food today is available and ready-to-eat. However, unlike *manna*, it is wrapped in plastic and often laden with unpronounceable chemicals and preservatives. An article discussing plastic food packaging's effect on obesity notes that, "Plastic is integral to being able to eat quickly and on the move with minimal mess—a recipe for overeating" [10]. Maimonides proposes self-control when he says, "A person should not eat until his stomach is replete but should diminish his intake by approximately one-fourth of satiation" [11]. These plastic-wrapped foods "incite us to consume more energy dense foods" by altering how an individual relates to the food they are eating since the consumer did not play a role in preparation [10]. Unfortunately, many ignore or are oblivious to the fact that a sedentary lifestyle requires fewer calories and eat as if this were not the case. When abused, these easily accessible snacks and meals can worsen an already precarious weight predicament, leading an individual to develop diabetes in conjunction with weight-gain.

A *beracha* is not an immunization against obesity and associated health-issues, such as hypertension and type 2 diabetes. Religious populations are less physically active than their secular counterparts [12] and the former are more obese than the latter [13], especially when this lack of exercise is combined with poor eating habits. Unfortunately, there is not much enthusiasm in Orthodox Jewish circles for health and exercise. Even advice from Maimonides seems to go unheeded: "Anyone who lives a sedentary life and does not exercise...even if he eats good foods...all his days will be painful ones and his strengths will wane" [2]. Maimonides admonished as to the ramifications of failing to exercise, even if one does eat properly. An issue in Orthodox Jewish communities is the lack of enthusiasm towards exercise. A study found that religious Israeli women were 30% less likely to engage in physical exercise than their secular counterparts [13]. Many day

schools do not have sufficient physical education and/or health programming and the weekly walk to *shul* may be the only exercise an Orthodox Jewish person performs.

The famous question “Do we eat to live, or live to eat?” should be asked of the Torah-observant community. The *Torah* and its commentators suggested a healthy lifestyle and forbid gross overeating. Perhaps the Orthodox Jewish community should take greater heed to the guidelines and recalibrate using Maimonides’

suggestions as the standard for a healthy body and soul. Food is a blessing and should not be abused, just as the body should not be abused. And just like saying *beracha* before eating is a *mitzvah*, the obligation to guard one’s life is of the utmost importance, as well. It is often taught that the human body is a loan from G-d. The *Torah* taught that one should return an item in an even better condition than the condition in which it was lent. The body is no different. ■

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