



THE IMPORTANCE OF LEISURE: RABBINIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Editor's Introduction: Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter, PhD, and Rebbetzin Shana Yocheved Schacter, CSW, work together at Yeshiva University's programs for rabbis and rebbetzins, teaching and mentoring rabbis and rebbetzins, based on their respective expertise: Rabbi Schacter, an accomplished scholar and noted speaker with decades of experience as a pulpit rabbi, teaches a variety of rabbinic skills. Rebbetzin Schacter, an accomplished psychotherapist, combines her professional knowledge with her experience as a rebbetzin to teach pastoral care and how to balance congregational life and family relationships. We asked Rabbi and Rebbetzin Schacter to draw from their own expertise and share their perspectives on the importance of leisure.

Rabbi Schacter

Any analysis of the role of leisure for men in traditional Judaism must begin with the assumption that the very concept needs justification. After all, how could there even be a legitimate notion such as leisure? Should not the study of Torah occupy one's entire time? Do we not regularly recite "*ki*

hem hayenu ve-orekh yamenu u-vahem nehegeh yomam va-laylah (For they are our life and the length of our days; on them we will meditate day and night)" in Maariv, every single day of the year? Are we not familiar with the *pasuk* of "*ve-hagita bo yomam va-laylah* (You shall contemplate it day and night)" (Josh. 1:8) which, according to one opinion of the Gemara (*Menahot* 99b), seems to require that Torah be

studied literally day and night? Does not the Gemara (*Megillah* 3b) state that one may suspend Talmud Torah only for very important extenuating circumstances, to bury the dead and to accompany a bride to her wedding? Leisure activities are not included in that very short list.¹ Since when, then, is leisure a legitimate activity worthy of consideration and analysis at all?

It is clear that while such rigorous

single-minded devotion may be aspirational, it is not practical. First, there is almost no one whose life revolves exclusively around full-time Torah study to the exclusion of anything else. It is manifestly obvious that, practically speaking, the vast majority of men do engage in other sorts of activities. But this is not only a *bidi'evd* reality, it is also a *lekhathila* one as well. Rabbinic sources already reject a requirement to study Torah day and night to the exclusion of doing anything else.² Furthermore, total focus on Torah study, or any other purely intellectual endeavor, is unhealthy and a recipe for diminishing returns; it is simply counterproductive. In a talk delivered in his yeshiva in Radin in 1903, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hakohen (the Hafez Hayyim) exhorted his students to care for their bodies, and not to learn too much, which, he feared, may weaken them and cause them to fall ill. “Therefore, it is necessary to rest and refresh and breathe clear air,” he told them. He recommended taking a walk in the evening or resting at home and, where possible, to go swimming “in order to strengthen the body.” He continued, “Too much diligence (*hatmadah*) is the design of the evil inclination (*azat ha-yezer*)” because it will lead one to cease Torah study entirely.³ Furthermore, the biblical command of “*Ve-nishmartem me’od le-nafshotekhem* (You shall greatly beware for your souls)” (Deut. 4:15) is recognized to be an obligation to care for one’s physical health and well-being and it is self-understood that such a focus demands time for rest and relaxation.⁴ In addition, for women whose obligation of Talmud Torah is more muted,⁵ the issue of leisure is certainly relevant and important.

And so the issue is not whether to engage in leisure at all but the kind of leisure activities in which to engage. Clearly the choice of venue is significant. In a responsum written in 1967, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein railed against those even otherwise observant Jews who spend their vacations and Jewish holidays in hotels that feature public Sabbath desecration, even where the kashrut may be beyond reproach.⁶ And in a 1980 responsum, Rabbi Feinstein underscored the importance of maintaining regular times for Torah study and proper standards of modesty (*zni’ut*) “even when one is seeking physical rest.”⁷

But what kinds of activities are appropriate? Most obvious is walking outdoors. The Rambam’s recipe for cultivating love and fear of God is well known:

והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו ויראתו בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואי הנפלאים הגדולים ויראה מהן חכמתו שאין לה ערך ולא קץ מיד הוא אוהב ומשבח ומפאר ומתאוה תאוה גדולה לידע השם הגדול כמו שאמר דוד צמאה נפשי לאלהים לא-ל חי.

*What is the path [to achieve] love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous great deeds and creations and from them elicits His infinite wisdom that has no price and no end, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], and yearn with tremendous desire to know [God’s] great name, as David stated: “My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living God” (Ps. 42:3).*⁸

For the Rambam, contemplating God’s creations through engaging with the natural world, achieved most directly by physically encountering it in the great outdoors, has infinite value.

This point was made most sharply

by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. A transcript of a talk he delivered includes the following:

A man wakes at dawn and sees the sun rising or goes out at sunset and sees the fiery clouds which drape the horizon in the twilight of a weekday at dusk . . . must see in the splendor of sunrise and sunset, in this wondrous cosmic regularity, a reflection of the glory of God . . .

*In nature as a whole . . . the primeval will of the master of the Universe is reflected. A man goes outdoors on a fair summer’s day and sees the whole world blossoming; that man comes “to know” that there exists a Primary Being Who is the originator of all that is; in every budding flower, in every rose opening its petals, in each ray of light and in every drop of rain — “to know that there is a Primary being and that He is the Originator of all that is.”*⁹

This awareness — and appreciation — cannot be achieved at home, even by looking out a window. It requires direct unmediated connection to nature, out of the house, leaving behind a closed Gemara.

Indeed, references abound to instances where Jews in a variety of times and communities engaged in precisely this activity. For example, the 15th-century R. Yisrael Isserlein included a reference in his very first responsum to an older practice in Krems, a city in Austria, of davening so early on Friday afternoons that the rabbi and all communal leaders would be able to go for a walk (“*halkhu le-tayel*”) after the Shabbat meal on the banks of the Danube River and return home, all while there was still daylight.¹⁰ In a later responsum he actually referred to taking a walk on Yom Tov (“*holekh be-Yom Tov le-tayel*”) as a “*dvar mizvah*” (a matter

that is considered a *mizvah*).¹¹ A century later, R. Mosheh Isserles (Rama) wrote that he engaged in the study of non-exclusively Torah disciplines “only on Shabbat, Yom Tov and Hol ha-Mo’ed when people go walking (*holkhim le-tayel*).”¹² In the 18th century, R. Yaakov Emden even permitted taking a walk on Shabbat to the bourse, or the city’s center of business activities, clearly reflecting that such an activity was common at the time.¹³ But not every time of day is appropriate for this activity. R. Yisrael Meir Hakohen was very disturbed by those who took a stroll during the time when a Torah discourse was taking place in the *bet midrash* and, to make matters worse, while engaging in frivolous talk.¹⁴ But, on principle and in general, this kind of leisure activity has much support in Jewish sources.¹⁵

What about other kinds of leisure activities? There are sources opposed to going to a track to watch horseracing, going to a theater, and even going to a stadium to watch a sporting event on the grounds that they are a *moshav lezim* where frivolous activities (“*lezanut*”) take place.¹⁶ Practically speaking, however, many of us are comfortable in the theater or at a sporting event and consider these to be acceptable forms of leisure.

Other activities enjoy a broader range of support:

- R. Hayyim Yosef Azulai (the Hida) reports that he remembers as a young man visiting the Tower of London and seeing strange exotic animals

tied up in chains. This testimony is cited in an article that addresses the appropriateness of visiting a zoo, referring also to evidence that Rabbi Yisrael Isserlein went on Shabbat to see a pair of lions that had been brought to his city.¹⁷

- Playing chess was a well-known accepted leisure activity, with stories often told about Hasidic Rebbes playing that game on Christmas Eve.¹⁸

- Visiting museums also enjoyed a measure of support. *The Jewish Chronicle* (London) published an article in 1935 in which Rabbi Kook is cited as saying, “When I lived in London, I used to visit the National Gallery, and my favorite pictures were those of Rembrandt.”¹⁹

- Playing ball was universally accepted as legitimate, and there is evidence that it was done by Jews throughout medieval times, although there was a sharp disagreement between R. Shlomo Luria (Maharshal) and R. Mosheh Isserles (Rama) as to whether or not it is permitted on Yom Tov.²⁰

- Engaging in physical exercise was widely accepted as legitimate. R. Hayyim Soloveitchik used to box with his students; R. Yosef Yozel Horowitz (later “the Alter of Novaredok”) and R. Aharon Walkin (later the author of *She’elot u-Teshuvot Zkan Aharon*) used to wrestle one another as young men in Riga; Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky was known to be the best swimmer in the Lomza Yeshiva; and R. Shlomo Goren (later the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel) reported that he did fifty pushups a day.²¹

There is, thus, no doubt that leisure activities are central for the personal and spiritual growth of the human being and the Jew.²²

In one of his posthumously published works, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wrote:

*The service of God is perpetual, without cessation . . . Halakhah, which requires a particular form of life consecrated to the one goal of fulfilling God’s will, penetrated with its glowing lamp into the hidden places of concrete human existence, physical and spiritual, omitting nothing, oblivious to nothing. . . Worship begins with physiological functions like nutrition and copulation, with the intimate feelings of the individual, with love of parents, and then moves through all of man’s public manifestations, his conduct in every nook and cranny of reality, culminating in connections to friends and companions, in business dealings, in professional work that serves society, in the manufacture of economic-industrial products, in social and national initiatives . . . Halakhah is concerned with each and every stage of life and leaves its distinctive marks on all of them.*²³

I would add leisure activities to this list. They too need to be determined by appropriate values and engaged in for appropriate purposes. Shlomo ha-Melekh taught us (Mishlei 3:6), “*Be-khol derakhekha da’ehu* (In all your ways you should know Him).” Hazal taught us (Mishnah Avot 2:12), “*Ve-khol ma’asekha yihiyu le-shem Shamayim* (And all your activities should be for the sake of Heaven).”



Find more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Dr. Schacter at <https://www.yutorah.org/rabbi-dr-jacob-j-schacter>

Endnotes

1 My thanks to my wife, Yocheved Schacter, for reminding me of this idea.

2 See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13 (other intellectual disciplines); *Hil. Talmud Torah* 1:12 (business); *Shulhan Arukh, Yore De'ah* #246:1, 4.

3 See Nachum Amsel, "Sports and Judaism," *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values* (Jerusalem and New York, 2015), 217 (Hebrew), #48.

4 See, for example, R. Moshe Sternbuch, *Sefer Ta'am va- Da'at*, vol. 3 (on Devarim) (1962), 41.

5 See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Talmud Torah* 1:13.

6 R. Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Mosheh, "Iggerot Hashkafah"* (Jerusalem, 2011), 365, #1.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 370, #4.

8 See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:2.

9 R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *On Repentance* (Northvale and London, 2000), 131-32.

10 R. Israel Isserlein, *Terumat ha-Deshen*, #1.

11 *Ibid.*, #77.

12 R. Moshe Isserles, *Shut ha-Rama* #7.

13 R. Yaakov Emden, *She'ilat Yavez*, vol. 1, #167.

14 R. Yisrael Meir Hakohen, *Mishnah Berurah, Hil. Shabbat* #290:7.

15 For additional examples, see R. Menahem Slay, "*Ha-Tiyul be-Sifrut ha-Shu"t*," *Ha-Ma'ayan* 16:3 (1976):17-35.

16 See R. Menashe Klein, *Mishneh Halakhot*, vol. 6, #270; R. Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Mosheh, Yoreh De'ah*, vol. 4, #11.

17 R. Zvi Aryeh Friedman, "*Ha'arot ve-He'arot*," *Ha-Ma'or* 69:2 (Kislev-Tevet 5776):100.

18 See "*Mishak ha-Shehmat be-Nitl' u-She'ar Yemot ha-Shanah*," *Hamachne Hachareidi* #1625 (January 2, 2014):36.

19 A. Melnikoff, "Rabbi Kook on Art," *The Jewish Chronicle* (September 13, 1935).

20 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 19 (2007), pp. 128-29; Robert Henderson, "Moses Provencal on Tennis," *Jewish Quarterly Review*

26:1 (1935):1-6; Saul J. Berman, "Playing Ball on Shabbat and Yom Tov," *The Edah Journal* 1:1 (2000):1-13; response by Elie Berman, in "Edah Journal Responses," Nachum Amsel, "Sports and Judaism," pp. 324-32, 213-21 (Hebrew); Maharshal, *Yam Shel Shlomoh*, Bezah, Ch. 1, #34; Rama, *Orah Hayyim*, Hil. Yom Tov #518:1.

21 Nachum Amsel, "Sports and Judaism," p. 217, #49, 52; p. 220, #70.

22 For further references that discuss this idea, see Yitzchak Blau, "Modern Orthodox Arguments Against Television," *Tradition* 44:2 (2011):53-71; Shalom Carmy, Avi Woolf and Yitzhak Blau, "The One Thing Money Can't Buy," *Tradition* 45:1 (2012):1-11; Norman Lamm, "A Jewish Ethic of Leisure," in *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (New York, 1971), 186-211; Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend, 1998); R. Aharon Reichman, "*She'elot ha-Nish'alot Biyme'i Ben ha-Zemanim*," *Hamachne Hachareidi* #1604 (July 18, 2013):24-25; #1605 (July 25, 2013):24-25; David Singer, "Is Club Med Kosher?: Reflections on Synthesis and Compartmentalization," *Tradition* 21:4 (1985):27-36; Shalom Carmy, "Rejoinder: Synthesis and the Unification of Human Existence," *Tradition* 21:4 (1985):37-51; David Stav, *Ben ha-Zemanim: Tarbut, Biluy u-Penai be-Halakhah u-be-Mahshavah* (Tel Aviv, 2012); Gil Student, "Is Leisure Kosher?," (August 18, 2014), www.ou.org/life/inspiration/leisure-kosher.

23 Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* (Jersey City, 2003), 164-65. Rambam's statement in his *Mishneh Torah, Hil. De'ot* 3:2-3, cited by Rabbi Soloveitchik, is very relevant to this point.

Rebbetzin Schacter

Brian is an investment banker who works long hours and seldom takes time to relax. He has moved up the career ladder steadily, though he does not enjoy his work. The atmosphere there is tense and high pressured, and he feels that he is on a trajectory that has taken on a life of its own. Brian's wife complains that she finds it impossible to live with him in this tightly wound state of his:

She rarely sees him enjoying himself and he is always preoccupied with the next work deadline, leaving her feeling as if she is walking on eggshells. He is aware that his strained existence has reached crisis proportions, but he has no idea how he got into this mess in the first place, nor how to now break this cycle of madness in order to pursue alternative options.

Ora is a physician in a solo practice. She loves her work, but never has enough time in the day to meet the demands of her position. Ora cannot remember the last time she went out to dinner, much less took a day off. The basic needs of her three children and the time demands of their after-school games absorb all her hours on weeknights and weekends. Lately, Ora has been having trouble sleeping and feels anxious often; she has been losing weight and knows that it is related to never feeling that she can meet the needs and expectations of her family and patients. She panics about work responsibilities when she is not there and about her family and other non-work matters when it is impossible for her to attend to those.

Leisure time should be spent away from work, domestic chores and school, free from the tasks of daily living. Furthermore, many of us are busy every hour of our day and cannot rest until every "t" is crossed and "i" is dotted. This intense lifestyle is counterproductive. As long as we are so busy that we do not allow for any white space in our lives, we cannot feel happiness or be introspective and assess our needs.

Brian and Ora are each headed for a personal and professional crash if they don't find time to reflect on what is going on in their lives, and recognize that small or large changes must be

made. They must each plan the space to try to understand how they got to their dangerous crossroads and take responsibility to make meaningful changes, one small step at a time.

Leisure time is the best way to offset stress and manage the feeling of being overwhelmed by life. Whether we are overextended as in the cases of Brian and Ora, or just involved with a balanced life of commitments to family, friends and work, leisure time is something precious to incorporate in our lives in regular intervals. Even just short periods of time help us relax: a moment to think, reflect and put coping strategies and de-stressors in place. Thinking about the blessings in our lives, experiencing the gratitude for all that is good is a very important way to begin each day. Exercise, even moderate exercise such as walking and talking with a friend and/or family member regularly, is a modest but stellar way of integrating leisure time in our daily routine, and helps avert the dangers of overdrive, burnout, anxiety and depression.

I think about leisure time as having two important stages. The first is to choose and pursue activities and people who relax us. This may involve hobbies we are good at or which we simply enjoy. Sometimes they are solo pursuits, others are done with friends, family or strangers. Physical activities (swimming, tennis, bicycling), socializing, art (creating or museum-going), music (playing an instrument or listening), eating, and other experiences that gratify our senses are all part of leisure time. Only when we are relaxed can we move on to the second stage: self-awareness.

Self-awareness is the key to success in professional and personal arenas. The *Harvard Business Review* (<https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it>),

among many professional and popular literary sources, cites self-awareness and self-care as the most important variables in determining success for leaders. When we are aware of our strengths and weaknesses, and we can see ourselves for who we are without being self-denigrating or overly self-confident, we can put necessary supports and interventions in place to be our best selves on the job and in our personal relationships.

Brian was concerned about asking for help at work, because he feared that his value would be diminished in the eyes of his superiors and peers. Because Brian was overwhelmed and did not feel cared for, he isolated himself and remained unaware that he needed more validation and support from his superiors and peers. It was the relentlessness of his work schedule that prevented him from self-reflecting and self-assessing, thus perpetuating unmet needs. Furthermore, this ongoing deprivation led him to abuse his position of power (status and money), and he went so far as to purposely or impulsively engage in boundary violations.

Brian began hacking into the accounts of his colleagues and stealing information in an effort to look brilliant and garner the praise and validation which eluded him. This behavior could have been avoided if Brian had the space to introspect, and connect his egregious behavior with his need to be acknowledged and admired by his superiors. Leisure time could have made this self-awareness a possibility and he could have satisfied this need in an acceptable way. Instead, Brian broke professional boundaries and now ran the risk of

being caught committing a serious crime.

Ora was insecure and anxious about her medical practice. She frantically worked and her lack of confidence remained unaddressed. Ora became prone to shouting matches with her husband and children as an outlet of frustration and tension that could have been prevented with the benefit of leisure time to explore her fears and access proper help.

Boundary violations can take the form of speaking or behaving disrespectfully to others. In recent years we have unfortunately learned of leaders who otherwise have made positive contributions to peoples' lives and communities, but who were unaware of their own needs and turned to vulnerable others to satisfy those needs in horrifying scenarios. Consequently, it is critical to create leisure time in order to relax, re-energize, self-assess and get the support and nurturing we need. Collaboration, sharing and learning from others are essential practices to becoming and sustaining the best you. Leisure can help us recalibrate, ensure that we avoid looking inappropriately toward others to lay blame, or worse, engage in abuse. Leisure time is essential in achieving optimum balance in our work and personal lives. Whether we are stressed and overextended, or just busy with life's customary commitments and activities, leisure plays an essential role in relaxing, refreshing and reflecting.

Leisure: A Conversation with Rebbetzin Schacter

1) What is an ideal vacation/leisure activity?

An ideal vacation is one in which

you can disconnect from the current stressors of your life and engage in some pleasurable activities. This may mean traveling to a different geographic location, but most important, by not staying connected (through technology) to the source of stress (work). Once you have achieved a level of relaxation and perspective, you should take the time to examine the particulars of the stresses of your life. The ideal vacation will be long enough to de-stress, and if the challenges of life can only begin to be addressed at that time, it will be necessary to strategize during vacation as to what the next steps toward self-awareness and self-care will be.

2) What considerations should be given to the choice of venue?

The venue should be far away enough or different enough to feel like you are on vacation. Know yourself and your needs and choose accordingly. What is good for your friends and others may not be a good choice for you. Just make sure you have access to the comforts you enjoy. Going on vacation with friends is fine if there is alone time with your partner or yourself in order to accomplish the relaxation and self-care that is necessary to restore your confidence and energy.

3) How does our conception of leisure differ from previous generations?

I vividly remember that in the 1960s the Roshei Yeshiva of YU went to summer communities in order to breathe fresh air, walk, swim and learn in a different venue in order to re-energize and start the new year with greater strength.

I am also aware that, depending on the culture, people did or did not allow

themselves the time and luxury of vacations. In particular, those from a Holocaust background frequently felt too guilty to indulge in many more luxuries than a hard-working life allowed.

We live in a much more affluent generation and therefore have greater options when it comes to the choice of the quality and locations of our vacations. Paradoxically, with less disposable income, vacations were simpler and may have allowed for more “rest and relaxation.” How many of us announce that we need a vacation after the vacation because it was so intense and exhausting! Our fear of missing out may drive us to vacation in the same intense way that we work. Currently there is more of a focus on the exotic in travel and activities during leisure time as opposed to the benefits of clearing the mind, enriching the soul and restoring ourselves. We must keep this mission in mind while planning leisure time in order for it to accomplish the important goals outlined above.

4) How do we gauge how much time we need on a daily, weekly or yearly basis?

Like most other questions of “need,” it can only be determined on a case-by-case basis. Each person must assess his or her own needs. Having said that, the paradox is that until you are feeling relaxed and cared for, you may incorrectly assess your needs of self-care. Daily exercises of gratitude can create the positive mindset needed to distance yourself from the abundant pressures and corrosive negative thoughts that command the day. A common refrain is “I don’t have a minute to spare,” while really, everyone has some capacity to make leisure time a reality. Another trap is

to say, “if I can’t get such-and-such amount of time it won’t be worth anything.” Even small breaks from routine are remarkably effective in stimulating thoughts of self-awareness and self-care.

I believe that checking in with yourself must be done regularly, and that if you are practiced in taking your emotional pulse, you will know when a break is needed. One day a week is a reasonable time off to refresh and restore even if that day includes family and a limited amount of work responsibility. This means that if Sunday is the day and you are busy going to events for your children or caring for parents, you build in some private time for yourself as well.

5) How do we strike the balance between personal leisure time with spouse, immediate family and extended family?

The need to take care of ourselves before others applies here. Only when we are cared for in a basic way can we successfully care for our spouses and family. Think of this as a derivative of the mantra we hear on every airplane flight: “In case of emergency, place the oxygen mask over your own mouth before you assist others.”

Honest and clear communication is essential so that the proper balance is in place for individuals, couples and their families. Each person’s needs is important and compromises can be made through honest, respectful communication. I conceive of the strategy to plan leisure time in a series of concentric circles: The innermost circle is the individual, then the couple, then the immediate family, and finally the extended family. This can be accomplished in different ways according to the needs of each individual and family.