Ki Heim Chayenu: The Health Benefits of Jewish Religion and Law

By Shani Axelrod

Every evening, in the Maariv prayer, Orthodox Jews worldwide proclaim- “Ki Heim Chayeinu VeOrech Yameinu” - for they are our life and the length of our days. The Torah and its laws are truly a spiritual lifeline, providing a connection to the Divine. Interestingly, a plethora of scientific studies indicate that a Torah observant lifestyle can also literally lengthen life and improve its quality.

Historically, Jewish law and practices have been shown to decrease mortality and provide health benefits. In the mid 1300s, the Black Death was brought to Europe, leading to the deaths of 25 million people over a period of 50 years. The plague spread rapidly but skipped over areas erratically. The Black Death today is known to be caused by Yersinia pestis, bacteria that lived in fleas feeding on rats. The plague spread primarily by inhalation and human contact, a problem in the Middle Ages characterized by undeveloped sewage systems and primitive sanitation habits. While they still died of the disease, Jews were affected at lower rates, a statistic which is attributed to the stringent sanitary practices in Halacha. Jews washed their hands multiple times a day, while the average gentile at the time could go half a lifetime without ever washing his or her hands. In general, sanitary conditions in Jewish areas were superior, as halacha prohibits prayer and Torah learning in places of foul odors. Furthermore, according to Jewish law, corpses are not allowed to remain unburied for prolonged periods of time—a practice which can lead to the spread of bubonic plague, typhus and other diseases. The lifesaving benefits of handwashing during the Bubonic Plague continue in modern day medicine [1]. Handwashing is one of the most critical factors in infectious control. In fact, handwashing is said to be the single most crucial intervention to prevent the spread of infection to patients from healthcare providers. Halacha requires Jews to wash hands for hygienic and spiritual reasons multiple times a day. Upon waking up, using the restroom, before and after a meal, after cutting nails, touching a corpse and before birchas kohanim, Jews partake in hand washing rituals [2]. Such behaviors offer protection from the spread and contraction of disease.

Many halachic requirements, including the Jewish ritual of tefillin, have been found to be beneficial to heart health. A recent study has shown that the act of wrapping and wearing tefillin daily can potentially prevent heart attacks. Interestingly, this study backs up earlier Israeli findings indicating that observant men had less heart attacks on average than the overall population. In this particular study, the participants included religious and irreligious men, whose vitals were measured, in addition to their blood levels of circulating cytokines. Cytokines are molecules that adversely affect the heart and cause inflammation. The study found that daily tefillin-wrappers had lower cytokine levels than others, and also exhibited improved blood flow. Furthermore, tefillin seems to offer a sort of preconditioning by producing slight discomfort, which can provide protection from acute ischemic reperfusion injury. Such injury occurs amidst a heart attack when the heart lacks oxygen and experiences injury when re-oxygenated [3]. Remote ischemic preconditioning (RIPC) involves the brief vascular obstruction of organs and limbs, which has been found to protect against later cardiac events. Such preconditioning has been found to increase arterial diameter and blood flow while decreasing inflammation. This study found that even acute tefillin use increased blood flow volume and brachial artery diameter, and chronic use of tefillin results in reduced chemokine secretion and decreased leukocyte inflammation. In a previous study, Israeli men were found to have similar mortality rates regardless of religious affiliation, with the one exception being myocardial infarction, which occurred less amongst Orthodox populations. The wearing of tefillin may have been the factor that contributed to this observation [4].

In a study of 673 17-18 year-old adolescent Jewish residents of Jerusalem, plasma levels of triglyceride, cholesterol and low density lipoprotein were higher amongst secular individuals, and lower in the Orthodox participants. Previous studies of adults had suggested that coronary heart disease is related to religiosity, with Orthodox Jews smoking less and having lower levels of plasma cholesterol, triglyceride and low density lipoprotein cholesterol. These differences can be traced to the fact that the diet of...
secular subjects included more fat, saturated fatty acids and less carbohydrates. The results of the adolescent study is hypothesized to be due to the laws of kashrus giving constraints on food consumption [5]. The above findings are consistent with the lower incidence of myocardial infarction amongst religious groups. The Israeli Ischemic Heart Disease Study found that the 5 year incidence of acute myocardial infarction among secular men was 5.8%, while it was 2.9% among Orthodox men. Major CHD risk factors include smoking, and high levels of LDL and plasma cholesterol—all of which were shown to be lower amongst Orthodox groups [6]. In another Jerusalem study, secular participants had a significantly higher risk of myocardial infarction compared to the Orthodox subjects. Psychosocial factors were thought to play a role in this observation. Jewish communities are characterized by social support and cohesiveness, and there is evidence that such community structure can reduce coronary heart disease. The practices of prayer and belief in a Supreme Being may be protective as well [7].

Several studies have proved a prolonged life expectancy amongst religious Jews. Bnei Brak, Israel’s most religious city, has the greatest average life expectancy. In a Duke University study, individuals who attend religious services weekly were half as likely to have high levels of interleukin-6, associated with heart disease and cancer. In a Dartmouth Medical School study, 37 of 232 deeply religious patients recovering from surgery did not die within the first 6 months, while the rest did. Additionally, Orthodox Jews have lower rates of divorce and higher rates of marriage—which has been proven to have a positive effect on health [8].

Religious level also impacts diet and the health repercussions that result. In a study of Israelis, greater levels of religiosity were correlated with a healthier diet of less meat and dairy, and much more fish. Lower levels of smoking and stress amongst religious Jews contribute to longer life expectancy. In fact, it is predicted that an absence of religious involvement has an effect on mortality equivalent to 40 years of smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Religious people also may have more of a motivation to maintain a healthy body in order to have a longer life of spiritual fulfillment and service of God. Furthermore, religious Jews were shown to have better mental health and lower hostility [9].

Interestingly, decreased rates of mortality are related to Shabbos observance. In a study of deceased Israeli Jewish men and women, ages 35 and above, the number of deaths showed a dip-peak pattern around Shabbos. In many previous studies, collective religious involvement was found to lower mortality. Through the performance of shared religious festivities, an individual obtains a sense of internal regeneration and focus that allows one to face daily life and cope with difficulties, positively affecting health and mortality. Such holidays, though, must be periodically repeated to replenish this internal strength. In this particular study, researchers examined the incidence of mortality before and after Shabbos as well as holidays. Results found a clear dip-peak pattern preceding the weekend with less deaths on Shabbos, and an increase at the beginning of the week. This pattern was found to occur in all forms of death, both internal and external. The Shabbos affect hypothesizes that regular Shabbos observance gives meaning to the passage of time, while its religious collective action lends coping mechanisms that can postpone mortality [10].

In a 16-year study of religious and secular kibbutzim, researchers compared the mortality of the two populations. Aside from religion, both kibbutzim share similar social and economic structure and function, and are close-knit, cooperative communities. Members of both types of kibbutzim were nearly identical in ethnicity, education level, occupation, and advanced technology. For all genders, ages and major causes of death, mortality rates were distinctly lower on the religious kibbutzim. Studies have found that consumption of fatty acids and total fat is lower in religious populations, attributed to kashrus standards. Amongst Orthodox Israelis, blood cholesterol concentrations and prevalence of smoking is lower than the general population, while smoking and plasma cholesterol were found to be higher and more frequent on secular kibbutzim. In general, members of religious kibbutzim had less stress. Religious kibbutzim offer a sense of belonging that bolsters emotional wellbeing and a relaxation response to frequent prayer. Moreover, belief in an Almighty God places autonomy in a divine source, while secular individuals view the source as within people. Halachos and guidelines on how to live life offer a regulated lifestyle that reduces ambivalence and stress. On secular kibbutzim, the divorce rate was 11-fold higher than the religious kibbutzim.
Amazingly, over a ten-year period, there were only 10 divorces in 17 religious kibbutzim (.7% of couples). There is also a sense of connection among cohesive religious communities, with religion offering a stronger kinship through communal rituals and social support [11].

Certain types of cancer are less prevalent among religious Jews. The incidence of malignant melanoma was compared between Orthodox and non-Orthodox neighborhoods in Jerusalem and outside Tel Aviv. Within Orthodox Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, the incidence of malignant melanoma was considerably lower than in the non-Orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem and Givatayim. Malignant melanomas are largely caused by sun exposure. Orthodox Jews of both genders follow laws of tznius, covering their heads and most of their body throughout the year. Males and females are also less exposed to the sun in adolescence and afterwards, hence decreasing the risk of such cancers [12].

Many studies have been done relating religious involvement to health, but few have attempted to measure the impact of religious beliefs. In a study conducted on a group of Jewish adolescents, strength of religious beliefs was associated with increased physical activity. In Orthodox belief, the body is seen as a sacred object, a point of view which was found to be a predictor of healthy life choices among college students. Past research has determined that the belief in God having control over one’s life and health may develop healthier behaviors. The Torah commands, “take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously,” a mitzva to guard one’s physical health. The Rambam understands this to include harmful behaviors like drug use, while maintaining healthy habits like a proper diet and physical activity [13].

While religion has long been known to increase one’s emotional well-being, new findings of its health benefits are becoming more common. Judaism and its laws hold an infinite amount of wisdom and are shown to improve life in this world.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to Hashem for granting us the gift of the Torah and our health, and all the goodness that come along with it. I would like to thank Dr. Babich for providing me with resources and support for this manuscript and for teaching me about the wonders of the human body. I would also like to thank my parents for giving me their support and assistance in everything I do.

References