

# The Rise of Eating Disorders in the Jewish Community

By: Gwen Caplan

In Judaism, the care of the soul, or neshama, is accompanied by a profound respect for the body, known as the *guf* — the vessel for the soul's journey. Despite this emphasis, there exists a troubling lack of awareness regarding the importance of physical well-being. In contemporary times, concerns about health often revolve around issues like drinking, smoking, and exercise neglect. Yet, lurking beneath the surface lies a more insidious threat: the rise of eating disorders. The prevalence of eating disorders within the Jewish community poses a complex challenge, one that is often concealed and misunderstood. The clandestine nature of these disorders not only jeopardizes individual well-being but also undermines the collective health of our community. It is imperative that we shine a light on this issue and take proactive steps to address it.

Within the Torah (Bible) teachings, *Shmiras HaGuf* (guarding of the body) makes an early appearance in *Sefer Devarim* (Book of Deuteronomy), as *Moshe Rabbeinu* (Moses), at the end of his life, communicates the everlasting wisdom of *Matan Torah* (giving of the Bible) and the commandments to *Bnei Yisrael* (children of Israel). He urges them at this crucial time to “take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children’s children” [1]. There are many different interpretations as to what this *Pasuk* (verse) means when it says that

one should do their utmost to watch themselves. The *Kli Yakar*, for one, suggests that this is referring to taking care of one’s health, as he writes “‘Guard yourself’ means look after your physical body. It does not add ‘exceedingly’ as it does after the second part of the verse which refers to guarding one’s soul, because one must be even more careful to protect one’s soul than one’s body” [2]. In addition to highlighting the critical need of protecting one’s soul, this also highlights the value of taking proper care of one’s body. The delicate equilibrium between the two aspects invites a more sophisticated comprehension, exposing the unbreakable bond between the soul’s health and the careful maintenance of the body.

The Torah provides a meticulous roadmap for managing our sustenance through the intricate laws of *Kashrus*. While numerous dietary regulations, such as abstaining from the consumption of meat and milk together [3] or selecting animals with specific characteristics [4], fall under the category of *chukim* (decrees beyond immediate human comprehension), it is crucial to recognize that these guidelines are inherently designed for our benefit. In the intricate tapestry of the 613 commandments, *Hashem* (G-d) has bestowed these regulations upon us with our well-being in mind. Although we may not always grasp the precise health or overarching reasons behind these dietary restrictions, the underlying principle remains clear — *Hashem* imparts these directives for our ultimate welfare.

Beyond the confines of Kashrus laws, the role of food in Judaism transcends mere sustenance, weaving through various aspects of our faith and culture with profound significance. From marking pivotal occasions to enriching communal celebrations, food serves as a conduit for spiritual connection and communal joy. In moments of triumph and fulfillment, such as the completion of Torah study (siyum) or the communal celebration of newlyweds (sheva brachos), food takes center stage as an integral part of the experience. These occasions are connected with the concept of Seudas Mitzvah, where festive meals become expressions of gratitude and spiritual fulfillment, binding individuals together in shared moments of celebration and reflection.

Thus, even via the most joyous of Jewish traditions a paradox arises: food can unintentionally have detrimental consequences on some individuals. “Because of the frequency of Seudas Mitzvah, people with an eating disorder may find an excuse to restrict caloric intake with a religious justification. For example, someone with anorexia nervosa may see there will be a large feast of lamb at an upcoming holiday, so they will practice the disordered behavior of caloric intake restriction in the week before. Or the large meal may prompt purging behaviors or excessive exercise in someone with bulimia nervosa. As a final example, in a person with ARFID, where the individual assiduously avoids certain kinds of food or food groups, Kosher eating laws may provide a built-in excuse to refuse to eat certain foods, effectively

hiding disordered eating symptoms” [5-6]. These unfortunate realities highlight the significance of understanding how eating disorders can quietly creep into religious rituals, even during the holiest and most joyful times in our faith.

Apart from the problems that arise from festive occasions such as seudas (meals), there are other facets of Jewish life that may unintentionally encourage negative conduct. Driven by social expectations, young women searching for a shidduch (soulmate) could feel pressured to meet an ideal of thinness, which could ultimately result in weight loss and, in some situations, the development of an eating disorder. In a similar vein, individuals can grow unsatisfied with the unrelenting quest of perfection in overseeing an exactingly balanced schedule that integrates secular professions or studies with limudei kodesh (Jewish religious studies). Some individuals revert to the destructive cycle of an eating disorder as a means of coping in hopes of reclaiming some semblance of control. Eating disorders can also arise from the juxtaposition of religious traditions, such as the inability to exercise on Shabbos (Sabbath) and Chagim (holidays) as well as the increased food consumption during these periods.

While Judaism highlights the importance of caring for the body, it is intriguing to observe a lack of obedience in this area. Prominent scholars like the Rambam emphasize the significance of food decisions on personal health and the negative effects of both insufficient and excessive consumption in their teachings

[7]. This viewpoint is supported by Rabbeinu Yonah, who cautions against the possible negative effects of overindulging [8]. The Mishnah Berurah supports a conscious attitude to eating, stressing the importance of food for health rather than just for enjoyment, echoing these ideas. He even goes as far as to compare individuals who eat solely for pleasure to animals [9]. An intriguing detour occurs when a study on American Jews finds that the holy day of Shabbos becomes an occasion for overindulgence, which greatly increases the prevalence of overweight and obesity among the American Orthodox Jewish Community [10]. Beyond Shabbos, this excess continues as people use religious justification to defend their eating patterns during the week by stating, “it’s an opportunity to make a bracha (blessing)” or “it’s a mitzvah to partake in a seudas mitzvah”, which is inconsistent with the beliefs of the aforementioned scholars on appropriate nutrition and self-care.

The conflict between our revered commentaries' or mefarshim's teachings and the reality of excessive food consumption presents a profound dilemma, potentially leading to cognitive dissonance. This theory tells us that discomfort arises when our beliefs clash with our actions, often driving individuals to seek resolution. In the context of weight management, this internal struggle can escalate into an eating disorder if left unaddressed. Renowned eating disorder specialist Temimah Zuker, based in New York City, has noted a significant demand for her services among Orthodox clients. She highlights the unique challenges faced

by this community, particularly during Jewish holidays marked by elaborate family feasts [11]. Indeed, these occasions, while deeply ingrained in tradition, deviate from the recommended practice of consistent, moderate meal consumption essential for maintaining optimal health. Recognizing the complexity of these dynamics is crucial in promoting a deeper understanding of the intersection between tradition, belief, and individual well-being within the Jewish community.

While some might attribute this phenomenon to societal pressures on women to conform to a specific appearance rather than cognitive dissonance, compelling evidence challenges such assumptions. Notable conclusions were drawn from a study that concentrated on Chareidi Jews (ultra-Orthodox Jews), a community that is frequently more culturally isolated than other sects of Judaism. The hypothesis that women from culturally isolated backgrounds are not susceptible to disordered eating was refuted by the findings, which showed no discernible variations in the prevalence of disturbed eating between Chareidi and secular Jewish women [12].

According to recent research, observant Jewish women may be more likely than their secular colleagues to experience eating disorders. Although I suggest that this tendency could still be linked to the cognitive dissonance theory, there are other possible causes that could put this group at a higher risk for eating disorders. There is evidence that Jewish women and

their secular counterparts experience similar levels of social pressure to succeed and compete in high-stakes contexts. Nevertheless, various sects may experience this pressure at varying intensities. A study looked into the relationship between self-esteem, amount of religious adherence, and the frequency of disordered eating disorders among Orthodox Jewish females in Israel, and its findings showed an intriguing correlation: a girl's chance of developing disordered eating disorders and body dissatisfaction was inversely correlated with her level of religious observance. This was ascribed to high levels of observance that correlated with a decrease in the emphasis placed on women's physical appearance and a lowering of the pressure to succeed and achieve outside the home. Moreover, the research indicated that girls who practiced more of the faith were less likely to have eating disorders because they internalized traditional Jewish values, including the preference for modesty above outward beauty [13].

Although eating disorders are becoming more common in all branches of Judaism, Jewish women who are exposed to Westernized society are more likely to acquire eating disorders. An investigation on the relationship between extrinsic religious orientation and disordered eating pathology (DEP) in modern Orthodox Israeli adolescents was conducted in a separate study. One hundred twenty adolescent female Modern Orthodox participants filled out an anonymous survey about their religious orientation, DEP, body dissatisfaction, and adherence

to the Superwoman Ideal — a notion of a woman juggling multiple roles, like worker, homemaker, volunteer, student, or other time-intensive occupations. The results show a strong relationship between extrinsic orientation and DEP, which is mediated by a higher degree of Superwoman Ideal adherence. Following this adherence, there is a higher level of body dissatisfaction, which is known to be a proximal risk factor for DEP. The research explores the consequences of these findings, taking into account the relevance of these findings to clinical knowledge as well as particular cultural influences within the Modern Orthodox population [14].

While Judaism advocates for healthy eating, it's crucial to acknowledge that certain traditions, such as the custom of regular large meals, may inadvertently jeopardize community health. To mitigate the risks of health issues like binge eating disorder or excessive weight gain, striking a balance between celebrating joyous occasions and adhering to healthy guidelines is paramount. Additionally, it's imperative to recognize that certain branches of Judaism, particularly modern orthodoxy, may be vulnerable to detrimental influences from Western culture concerning eating habits and body image. Acknowledging the prevalence of eating disorders within Jewish communities is essential, as research emphasizes their significant occurrence. Despite the joy and purpose inherent in Judaism, it's essential to acknowledge our susceptibility to negative societal influences. Understanding these nuances is

key to grasping the intricate relationship between religious practices and mental health within our community. A crucial initial step in mitigating harmful behaviors is to actively raise public awareness about eating disorders. Teaching our children healthy eating habits should be regarded with the same importance as imparting knowledge of halacha. By prioritizing education and awareness, we can promote healthier attitudes towards food and body image within our community.

### **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I would like to thank Hakadosh Baruch Hu for the strengths and the wisdom He has endowed upon me, as well as for providing me with role models and mentors I can turn to for guidance. My heartfelt appreciation goes to my parents for their unwavering support in nurturing my dreams and aspirations. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Babich and Dr. Schuck, whose knowledge has enriched my understanding of the healthcare field. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Babich for believing in me and for encouraging me to write this paper and beyond.

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