



Lesson #17: Guard Yourself Very Well By Evonne Marzouk and Rabbi Yonatan Neril¹

The Jewish tradition places a strong value on being healthy. The Torah states, “Guard yourself and guard your soul very much”² and “You shall guard yourselves very well.”³ Jewish Sages explain that these verses refer to the mitzvah (commandment) of protecting one’s physical body and health.

Maimonides (Spain, 1135-1204) explains this obligation as that one needs to distance oneself from things that might damage one’s body, and accustom oneself to a healthy lifestyle, because it is not possible to understand the ways of G-d when one is sick (Mishna Torah, Hilchot Deot 4:1). The body was given to us as a vessel whose primary function is to house the soul so that the soul can dwell in this world and fulfill its purpose.

According to Sefer HaChinuch (Spain, 13th century), it is our responsibility to guard against natural occurrences which may harm our bodies – not only things that can end a person’s life but also things that can damage a person’s body.⁴

This commandment is codified in the Shulchan Aruch,⁵ the primary compilation of Jewish law (Rabbi Yosef Caro, Israel, 1488-1575). It states that we should avoid “any matter that threatens human life... to remove it and to guard against it and to be very careful about the matter.”

There are many applications of this mitzvah to guard our health. Jewish law employs a term-- *Ba'al Nefesh Yachmir*, or “A master of the spirit will be stringent”-- when a sage senses a cause for concern but does not find it appropriate to forbid something to the public.⁶ One relevant item for all of us and our families is the reduction of exposure to chemicals such as pesticides. Rabbi Zecharya Goldman notes how this category in Jewish law—of a sensitive and disciplined soul being mindful—is a fitting response in modern society to the danger posed by pesticides.⁷

Humans today benefit in significant ways from the use of pesticides. Consumers benefit from pesticides through wider selections and lower prices for food and clothing. Pesticides also play an important role in protecting homes and businesses from termite infestations, and prevent the outbreak of disease by controlling rodents and insects.⁸ The general public also benefits from the use of pesticides for the control of insect-borne diseases and illnesses, such as malaria.⁹

Unfortunately, the widespread use of pesticides, sometimes in indiscriminate ways, also leads to a number of negative effects. Pesticide poisoning can result from a single or short-term exposure, causing death. There are also risks of chronic impacts from long-term exposure to pesticides. When pesticide residues enter streams or groundwater, natural resources can be degraded, and pesticides that drift from where they are applied can harm or kill other plants, birds, fish, or other wildlife.¹⁰

¹ Brief sections of this article are taken with permission from “Guard Yourself Very Well,” a commentary on Parshat Vaetchanan, by Rabbi Akiva Gersh, available online at <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/torah/vaetchanan-guard-yourself-very-well/>.

² Deuteronomy 4:9.

³ Ibid. 4:15.

⁴ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzva 546, of putting a fence on one's roof

⁵ Shulchan Aruch, Rabbi Yosef Caro, Israel, 1488-1575, Choshen Mishpat 427, 8-10.

⁶ Rabbi Goldman, founder and director of EarthKosher, writes about this and Jewish legal perspectives on conventional (non-organic) produce in his e-book "Judaism and the New Age: Halakhic Perspectives," in the essay entitled "Is one obligated by Halakha to eat organic food?"

⁷ “Judaism,” Op. cit. 3.

⁸ “Benefits of Pesticide Use,” Environmental Protection Agency, available at <http://www.epa.gov/agriculture/ag101/pestbenefits.html>.

⁹ “The Use of DDT in malaria vector control,” WHO position statement, World Health Organization, 2011. Available online at http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/69945/1/WHO_HTM_GMP_2011_eng.pdf

¹⁰ “Risks of Pesticide Use,” Environmental Protection Agency, available at <http://www.epa.gov/agriculture/ag101/pestrisk.html>.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency writes that “Long-term exposure to pesticides may cause serious health effects such as birth defects, learning disabilities, organ damage, and forms of cancer, including leukemia, breast cancer, and brain tumors.”¹¹

Children face more significant exposure risks from pesticides than adults, because they behave and play differently than adults. For example, children play closer to the ground, and may be exposed to pesticides in dust and soil due to normal “hand-to-mouth” activity in small children. In addition, because children have different metabolisms than adults, their bodies have different capacities for breaking down, metabolizing, and excreting pesticides. As a result, pesticides may have more toxic effects in children, or lead to different symptoms.¹²

How can we protect ourselves and our families from pesticides?¹³ One thing we can do is reduce sources of exposures to our children in food, water, dust, and soil and in the home and at work. For example, the Environmental Working Group (EWG) provides a Shoppers’ Guide to Pesticides in Produce which can help you identify healthy food for your family.^{14,15} If you are considering Community Supported Agriculture, choose a farm that uses Organic or Integrated Pest Management (IPM) methods to reduce pesticide use. You can also help create a safer learning environment for children by encouraging school administrators to adopt better pest management policies in schools.¹⁶

In a recent landmark ruling, Israel's Chief Sephardic Rabbi Shlomo Amar wrote about the health-related concern from pesticides, stating that eating “bug-free” leafy vegetables poses a health risk due to the high pesticide use in growing them. The Jewish legal ruling was issued following lab tests conducted on such crops, and recommends that the public purchase regular leafy vegetables and clean them “in the old-fashioned way.”¹⁷ This ruling casts a new light on the mitzvah to protect our health.

By becoming more conscious of our Jewish obligation to protect our health, we can also learn to live in a way that protects the land and sustains our resources for the long term. Let us become more healthy in body and soul, and in so doing, create a healthier world.

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¹¹ “Pesticides and Their Impact on Children: Key Facts and Talking Points,” US EPA publication, online at <http://www.epa.gov/oppfead1/Publications/pest-impact-hsstaff.pdf>

¹² *Childhood Pesticide Poisoning*. Published in May 2004 by the Chemicals Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP Chemicals) with the assistance of UNEP’s Information Unit for Conventions. Available online at <http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/Portals/9/Pesticides/pestpoisoning.pdf>, p. 12.

¹³ Many of the suggestions below are drawn from *Childhood Pesticide Poisoning*, p. 18-19.

¹⁴ The website is available at <http://www.ewg.org/foodnews/>.

¹⁵ Please see the following Note from Canfei Nesharim’s Science and Technology Advisory Board for more context when thinking about preventing chemical and pesticide exposure to your children, <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/tubshevat/note-from-board/>.

¹⁶ This guide, along with many other helpful resources, is available at <http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/ipm/brochure/>.

¹⁷ “Rabbi Amar: ‘Bug-free’ vegetables dangerous”, *Ynet News*, published 11/6/12. Article online at <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-4300824.00.html>