Guarding Your Health

Hebrew/English Source Sheet

This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk of Canfei Nesharim, as part of the Jewcology project. Translations are from Judaica Press unless otherwise noted.

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a) Verses from the Torah
   1. Deuteronomy 4:9
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b) Rishonim (Medieval Rabbinic Authorities)
   1. Maimonides, Mishna Torah, Hilchot Deot 4:1
   2. Maimonides, Mishna Torah, Hilchot Rotzeach
      11:4

c) Codification in Jewish Law
   1. Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, 427: 8-10

d) A Hasidic Perspective
   1. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, Likutey Moharan
      I, 22:5

I. Verses from the Torah

Deuteronomy 4:9
But beware and guard yourself very well, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest these things depart from your heart, all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children,

Deuteronomy 4:15
And you shall guard yourselves very well, for you did not see any image on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire.

II. Rishonim (Medieval Rabbinic Authorities)

Maimonides, Mishna Torah, Hilchot Deot 4:1, translation by Gideon Aronovich
A healthy and wholesome body is akin to the ways of G-d, because it is impossible to understand and know (the ways of G-d) when one is ill. Therefore a person needs to distance oneself from damaging influences and accustom to a healthy lifestyle.
Maimonides (Spain, 1135-1204), Mishna Torah, Hilchot Rotzeach 11:4, translation by R’ Joshua Flug

Any hazard that is potentially lethal there is a positive commandment to remove it and to beware of it and to be extremely cautious in this matter as it is stated “be careful and guard yourselves very well.” And if one does not remove them or places obstacles that lead to danger one has violated a positive commandment.

Sefer HaChinuch (Spain, 13th century), Mitzva 546, of putting a fence on one’s roof, translation by Yonatan Neril

"...A person needs to guard themself from things that happen in the world, because G-d created His world and built it on the laws of nature, and decreed that fire burns and water extinguishes the flame...And He, Blessed be His Name, built it on the laws of nature, and decreed that fire burns and water extinguishes the flame...And He, Blessed be His Name, created His world and gave it into people's hands, and His Wisdom designed, since people are physical, He commanded them to guard against natural occurrences, because nature, which is given into people's hands, will act on people if people do not guard against it [its natural forces].

And the Sages of blessed memory forbad many things in order to guard against damaging things and from negative occurrences, since it is not fitting for a person to hold a belief in damaging themselves. Therefore it is fitting for a person to put their attention to all the things that can potentially cause damage to the person, and a person who transgresses on them is liable to rabbinic lashes of rebellion."

Discussion Questions:
1. From which Torah sources do the Sages understand our obligation to protect our health?
2. What can these sources teach us about our responsibility to protect our bodies and health?
3. To what extent are these values reflected in the modern understanding(s) of protecting our health?

III. Codification in Jewish Law

Rabbi Yosef Caro (Israel, 1488-1575), Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, 427: 8-10, translation by Yonatan Neril
"And therefore, any matter that threatens human life, it is a positive commandment to remove it and to guard against it and to be very careful about the matter, as is written, "guard yourself and guard your soul" (Deuteronomy 4:9). And if a person does not remove it and leaves the matter which results in danger, a person nullifies a positive commandment and transgresses [the negative commandment] of "do not place blood" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

The Sages forbade many things because there is in them life-threatening danger…including not placing one’s mouth on a flowing pipe and drinking, not drinking at night from wells and ponds, lest one swallow a leech and not see it… Anyone who transgresses on these things and related items, and says, ‘Behold I endanger myself and others,’ or ‘I am not careful in this,’ [the Court] gives him lashes of rebellion, and one who guards themself from these will come good blessing."

IV. A Hasidic Perspective

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Ukraine, 19th century), Likutey Moharan I, 22:5, translated by Moshe Mykoff, Breslov Research Institute: Jerusalem, 1990

And every person must show great compassion for the flesh of the body, illuminating it with every insight and perception that the soul perceives. The body should also be informed of this perception, as in (Isaiah 58:7), “Hide not from your own flesh.’ Specifically from “your own flesh.” Do not hide your eyes from showing compassion for your flesh—the flesh of your body.

For it is necessary to show great compassion for the body, to see to purify it, so as to be able to inform it of all the insights and perceptions which the soul perceives. This is because the soul of every human being is continuously seeing and comprehending very exalted things. But the body knows nothing of them. Therefore, every person must show great compassion for the flesh of the body. He should see to purify the body so that the soul will be able to inform it of all that she is always seeing and comprehending.

Now, when the body is in this category, it benefits the soul. For there are times when she [the soul] falls from her level. However, if the body is clear and illuminated, the soul is capable of picking herself up and returning to her level because of the body. That is, through the pleasures of the body, she will be able to recall and ascend to her own pleasures. For now that the body is also good and right, it doesn’t get trapped in the pleasures.

Discussion Questions:
1. According to these sources, what is the relationship between taking care of your body and taking care of your soul?
2. How could this understanding deepen your own commitment to protect your health?
3. If you took this understanding as your own, what might you do differently?

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