

TO YOUR HEALTH!
The Torah Way to a Healthy Life
in Modern Times

A preventive approach to guarding our health,
according to the Torah and modern medicine

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Preface

You hold in your hands a wealth of guidance and good counsel, written in accordance with our holy Torah and modern medical knowledge, on the topic of how to guard your health.

Many have inspired me to write this guide:

G-d blessed me with wonderful parents – my dear father and teacher, Salman, son of Menashe and Khatun, of blessed memory (*niftar* on 4 Teves 5765/2004); and my dear mother and teacher, may she be granted long life. From my childhood, they raised me with the proper natural principles to preserve our health.

Years later, I became more knowledgeable in this subject, in the merit of many years of serving the *Gadol Hador* Maran Hagaon Harav Elazar Menachem Mann Shach, *zt"l* (*niftar* on 16 Cheshvan, 5762/2001). I was also required to know everything related to his health.

From the late Professor Amram Chaim Abuchatzaira, son of R' Masoud and Rachel, *z"l* (*niftar* on 2 Menachem Av, 5758/1998), I learned much about preserving health. Rav Shach traveled to Yerushalayim several times specifically to consult the professor about his health.

Guarding one's health, besides being a Torah obligation, brings its own natural reward: Who among us doesn't want a life of good health, with minimal obstacles and maximum potential, and the ability to fulfill our purpose in this world? Does anyone *not* want the blessing of longevity?

Some may argue that our health and life span are not in our own hands, for everything is decreed from Heaven. Yet, as I will discuss in the first three chapters, there are sources in the words of our Sages and in the words and conduct of the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim* demonstrating that the length and quality of our lives are directly connected to how we conduct ourselves in health matters. These chapters will also inspire you, the reader, with the spiritual energy to put theory into practice. I am convinced that you will find, just in these first chapters, new concepts that will

change your current worldview – as solidly based on Torah sources as you may have thought it to be.

Whenever I meet people whose faces and bodies testify that *something* is not well with them, that their lifestyle is unhealthy, that their quality of life is already tarnished (and who knows how much worse it will be in the future?), I ask them a little about their way of life. They answer, describing various health problems, and then they add, with a certain degree of resignation, “But what can I do, after all?”

It may be obesity, smoking, blood sugar imbalance, high blood pressure, weakened kidney function, difficulty walking, constipation ... the list goes on and on. Each time, I am amazed anew at people’s lack of awareness on the subject. It seems as if this is the first time they’ve ever heard that it’s possible to do something about their health! After we speak for just a few minutes, they want to hear more. They ask questions and want guidance.

Encounters such as these inspired me to write this book.

When I first studied Chapters 4 and 5 of the Rambam’s *Hilchos Dei’os*, in which he gives comprehensive directives on looking after one’s health, I was troubled. Due to changes in mankind’s physical nature, lifestyle, environment and food, it seemed impossible to fulfill the Rambam’s instructions. Later, however, when studying the laws in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* about guarding one’s health (*siman* 32), I was happy to see that the author, Rav Shlomo Ganzfried, *zt”l*, had adapted the Rambam’s directives to his times.

G-d granted me the knowledge to further update the principles of the Rambam to today’s situation, in accordance with current medical understandings.

The topics in this book warrant a much broader treatment, with far more thorough and detailed explanations, along with many citations of sources. But I have tried to find a middle ground, writing in simple, layman’s terms for easy reading and summarizing the most fundamental, practical principles that everyone needs to know.

The human body is formed with wondrous wisdom. We can never begin to understand all the processes taking place within us. The intention here is only to convey some idea of how the body

functions, with explanations that are sometimes lengthy and sometimes quite short. My aim is to enable the reader to use this information to protect and preserve his health, with G-d's help.

This book does not promote a specific healthcare regimen or recommend any specific diet. It teaches a way of life, providing essential information to which anyone – man or woman, young or old – can relate. The goal is to guide the reader to distance himself from practices that are detrimental to his health and to encourage him to adopt good practices.

It's important to remember this simple and logical principle: It is far easier to prevent an illness than to cure it. As the saying goes: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

I hope the reader will benefit greatly from this book and go on to become even more knowledgeable about this subject. The main thing, of course, is to put this knowledge into practice.

I would like to thank Rabbi Yehudah Marks for translating the book from the original Hebrew, Mrs. Dvora Freimark for editing, Mrs. Yehudis Mayer for proofreading and Mrs. Eden Chachamtzedek for the page layout and design.

With blessings for good health, with G-d's help,

Yechezkel Ishayek

Introduction

Dear Reader,

This book might be the most riveting book you ever read... because it's not about someone else's life – it's about yours!

It offers you the most precious gifts: your life and your health.

So why do I say it might be the most riveting book you ever read? Because some people take one look and refuse to read further, fearing that what they read might obligate them to change lifelong habits. If you manage to read the whole introduction, there's a good chance that you will benefit from everything this book has to offer.

If you find it difficult to read the introduction, don't despair. Put the book aside until a time when you may be more receptive. I believe that time will surely come.

If you're encountering this book before you've reached the age of thirty, you probably won't relate to it. Under forty, you may still view it with suspicion. But if you're over forty, I believe you will take its message seriously.

Know, however, that the earlier you start to put the book's teachings into practice, the healthier you will be as you age – and the more you'll be able to guide your children, of whatever age, to look after their health.

Once you've read the first chapter, where we learn that looking after our health is one of the foundations of the Jewish religion and a Torah mitzvah, you will understand that this is an obligation just like all the other Torah mitzvos, and is not dependent on age and feeling.

Life's "Bank Account"

Life is like a bank. From the moment each person enters this world, he has his own account containing the gifts he received from the Creator, the Manager of the bank. In exceptional

situations, the Manager sometimes allows people to overdraw on their account, but that is a special spiritual reckoning, connected with prayer, Torah study and other merits that the person may have.

This book, however, deals with standard, everyday management of the account, in which overdrafts have serious consequences. As we shall see, the Torah itself commands us to relate to this “health account” in accordance with the laws of nature as we know them, without exception.

The “account” that we are born with includes the assets described in *Midrash Tanchumah (Parashas Pekudei 3)*: “The Creator decrees in advance whether the person will be weak or strong, male or female, wealthy or poor, handsome or ugly, tall or short and so on.”

Maintaining the “Bank Balance”

From the moment we’re born we deal with this bank, each person with his own ATM. We don’t need a bank teller’s approval for our transactions; we decide for ourselves whether to make a deposit or withdrawal. As we’ll discuss, we can also turn a withdrawal into a deposit and vice versa.

Let’s take eating as an example. Eating is necessary, three or four times a day, every day of our lives. If we eat nutritious food, we have made a deposit! If we eat junk food, we’ve made a withdrawal and the body will have to cover the cost by depleting the reservoir of energies bestowed on it at birth.

Until about age thirty, most people have a large reservoir of youthful energy, stamina, resilience and strength. Therefore, they may not yet feel the effects of the withdrawals they have made. (This is why readers under thirty may not take this book seriously; they have not yet felt the ill effects of their withdrawals.) But after age forty, in most cases, a person’s stores of energy begin to dwindle. People start to feel the effects of their misguided behavior, though how they’ll be affected will depend on their build, strength and genetic makeup.

My advice to you, even if you’re relatively young, is: Don’t miss this opportunity! Take the time now to learn about your body’s workings and how to ensure that they continue to function

efficiently. It's important to keep in mind that most illnesses do not strike suddenly or without warning; an illness is usually the result of disproportionate withdrawals over many years.

When a bank account is \$300 in the red, no one is very concerned – neither the owner of the account, nor the bank manager. But when the overdraft numbers creep slowly upward, the bank clerks start phoning, warning that the overdraft is growing. The person may ignore these warnings, until one day the phone rings and the bank manager himself is on the line, informing the account holder that this is the final warning and his credit is about to be cut off!

The account holder may yell and scream, get angry or beg for another chance, but by then it's too late. After making withdrawal after withdrawal, with no regard for the fact that he's going deeper and deeper into debt, he's now faced with the inevitable result.

So it is with our health – except that the consequences are far more drastic and critical than losing our line of credit. We're speaking not of money to live on, but of life itself.

Therefore, I implore you, as a friend: Learn from others' mistakes, from their bitter experience – and save yourself before it's too late!

A Jewish “Bank Account”

These words are not merely good advice, nor just a sensible recommendation. They are actually a Torah obligation. Every Jew is obligated to care for his health, as the Torah commands, “*V'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoseichem* – take great care to preserve your lives” (*Devarim* 4:15).

The Torah teaches us that our body is not our own personal property; we do not have the right to do with it as we please. The Creator entrusted us with our bodies to use to fulfill His Will. The body comes with a set of instructions detailing how we should care for it and look after it. Some of these instructions are found in the Written Law, while some are found in the Oral Law, taught to us by our Sages throughout the generations.

As believing Jews, we know this in principle, but we don't always grasp the far-reaching implications. Let's look at one graphic description, based on writings of the Chofetz Chaim, the

Maavar Yabok and Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (discussed in Chapter 1), and the *Sefer Chareidim* (see further, end of Chapter 7):

The *Peleh Yo'etz* writes: “Whoever doesn’t guard himself from everything harmful is answerable for his life and is destined to give accounting for all the lost time he has caused himself!”

Imagine that someone has passed away and is now standing before the Heavenly Court, which is examining his deeds and misdeeds. The court says to the defendant, “We find that for a period of fourteen years, you failed to don *tefillin*, to keep Shabbos, or to fulfill any mitzvos at all!”

The poor soul begins to scream, “How can you say that? When did such a thing take place?”

And the court explains: “Yes! It’s true! If you had looked after your health, you would have lived another fourteen years – and who knows how many mitzvos you would have fulfilled in those years?”

The implications are vast, indeed!

This book will help you follow the ways of our Torah leaders and live in accordance with their principles. By applying their directives to modern medicine and current data, you will, with G-d’s help, live a long and healthy life.

The Principles of This Book

To summarize the major principles of this book: Don’t think that you need to do anything extreme or undertake a regimen of intense activities in order to rebuild your body anew. Not at all. The Creator has formed, with amazing wisdom, the wondrous mechanism that is the human body. As the *passuk* in *Iyov* tells us, “*Umibesarai, echezeh Eloka* – I behold G-d through my body” (19:26). Even before forming you, G-d prepared everything needed for your body to function beautifully, including its wondrous powers of self-healing.

All you have to do is refrain from harming or destroying its functioning!

As a metaphor, we can quote the statement of our Sages: “When G-d created man, He showed him all the trees in Gan Eden and told him, ‘Behold My handiwork – how beautiful and how wondrous! Take heed not to spoil what I have created’” (*Koheles Rabba* 7:13). This refers to man’s spiritual role, certainly, but the plain meaning is also true.

To demonstrate the excellence of the Creator’s work, I will offer just three examples related to eating – situations that we experience every day without even noticing:

Let’s compare the human body to a car. A driver must supply his car with gasoline, motor oil, steering fluid, transmission fluid, water and antifreeze for the radiator and windshield wiper fluid, with each one poured into the correct opening. Imagine what the outcome would be if somebody would pour all these fluids into one opening!

Yet, for an entire lifetime, human beings have only one opening through which they ingest all the body’s nutritional needs! Even so, fingernails don’t grow on a person’s head nor hair on the palms of his hands.

(Based on *Sefer He’aros Ubiurim* on Rabbeinu Yona’s commentary to *Pirkei Avos*, by Rabbi Hillel Brisk, Jerusalem 5764/2004.)

Another wonderful example: The human body is a symmetrical creation, with two parallel ears, two parallel eyebrows, upper and lower eyelids that meet, upper and lower lips that close together, matching hands, fingers and feet and so on.

But if we consider our teeth, we notice that while the back teeth fit together when closed, the front teeth (incisors) don’t; there’s an overlap.

Check this out yourself: Close your mouth loosely, and with your finger, feel how your upper front teeth are close to the lower ones, but there is usually a small gap between the upper and lower teeth, with the upper teeth protruding slightly.

The reason for this strange phenomenon is that the purpose of the front teeth (the incisors) is to cut into the food, to bite off a piece. For this purpose, thin, sharp, knifelike teeth are needed. After this cutting is accomplished, the tongue moves the food to the flatter teeth at the back of the mouth (the molars) for grinding. If the front teeth were to close symmetrically onto the teeth

below, their edge would very soon be dulled from the movement of the mouth while grinding the food.

What a kindness of the Creator! What homemaker could imagine a kitchen appliance that automatically changes its knives as needed? “Behold My handiwork – how beautiful and wondrous!” (*Koheles Rabba* 7:13)

Here’s a third wondrous example that generally goes unnoticed: What sustains us? Food! Its nutrients are absorbed into our bloodstream, keeping us alive.

As is well known, when a person needs a transfusion, a sterile needle is inserted into a vein. Sterile fluid in a sterile container travels through a sterile tube and enters our bloodstream. If no infection occurs, we thank G-d.

Consider: We consume bread, meat, fish, fruit, vegetables... Who sterilizes all these foods? G-d tells us, as it were, “Don’t worry. I have prepared for you antiseptic saliva, stomach acid, digestive juices and more. These break down germs to such a degree that by the time the food is ready to be absorbed by the small intestine it’s sterile.” If we had to sterilize the food ourselves, we’d need a giant decontamination plant to do it. Instead, it’s all done by our digestive system, without us even giving it a thought. “Behold My handiwork – how beautiful and wondrous!”

The aim of this book is to provide you, the reader, with accurate knowledge and instruction. It will heighten your awareness and teach you how to pay attention, to care for your body, and protect it from harm and illness. With G-d’s help, your body, which was created with such wondrous wisdom, will stay healthy throughout its long life.

This is not intended as a medical textbook, but rather as a guide toward a lifestyle of healthy behavior. Brief, simple, logical and convincing explanations are given in everyday language, making it user-friendly and easily understandable.

Through deep study and reflection on the words of our Rabbis and on the principles of nutrition that are now known and accepted by researchers and physicians, together with training in the follow-up of medical tests as preventive medicine, I have arrived at an understanding of the practices that are essential for maintaining good health. A list of these principles – eight “do’s”

and twelve “don’ts”– appears on the inside front cover of this book, under the heading, “The Do’s & Don’ts of Good Health.”

True, the “don’ts” that need to be avoided may well be things that you’ve been used to doing all your life, either from lack of knowledge or lack of awareness. But once you become used to these new practices, you won’t feel at all limited or deprived. As the Maharsha writes, “Habit becomes second nature” (*Taanis* 4a). As for the “do’s,” there aren’t very many and they’ll quickly become routine – you won’t even notice that you’re doing them.

And what do you get in exchange? Quality of life! Good health – secured by the Rambam’s guarantee (described in Chapter 3)! Hearing the siren of an approaching ambulance, you’ll know that, thankfully, it’s not coming for you. You won’t even know where your local hospital is located. These are priceless gifts. Any person who wants a long life, with quality of life, should adopt these practices – the sooner, the better.

It’s important to stress that although this book is meant to be of practical use and although it attempts to encompass many issues, no book can take the place of a doctor. Any change in lifestyle should be undertaken only under a doctor’s supervision. Any change in a person’s physical condition requires the attention and diagnosis of a qualified physician. Nothing should be ignored – and this is especially true regarding the eyes.

Chapter 1 of this book deals with the Torah obligation to guard one’s health, quoting our Sages over the generations and offering examples from the lives of our great leaders. It deals also with the common but mistaken belief that since everything is decreed from Heaven, there’s no need to make an effort to look after one’s health.

Chapter 2 contains direct quotes from the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* concerning health practices.

Chapter 3 discusses the importance of preventive medicine, with passages from the Rambam, including his famous guarantee.

Chapter 4 explains how to relate to your public-health doctor as if he were your own personal physician, and how to understand standard lab tests, such as blood tests.

Chapters 5 through 8 discuss matters of fundamental importance to good health: avoiding harmful foods, the importance of drinking water, proper digestion and elimination.

From Chapter 11 until the book's conclusion, I offer practical advice on how to live a healthy lifestyle all day: how to look after your body; advice on stopping smoking, including directives for *yeshivah bachurim*; and a discussion about how to prepare for Yom Kippur and other fast days.

I wish you happy reading and – above all – much success in implementing the practices presented here.

Yechezkel Ishayek

One of the best gifts we can give our children is healthy parents.