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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim

IN THE HEART OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

Ha-Rav Shlomo Aviner on...

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“Who wants to live?”

Would you like a magic potion to live a good, long life? Would you like to add ten years to your life, and increase your quality of life? It's very simple! Just strengthen the marvelous machine that G-d gave us in His kindness – the body! Obviously, the main thing is the soul, but you need a healthy soul in a healthy body. Besides proper nutrition, one of the prerequisites to achieving health is physical activity. If you are a farmer or a physical laborer, then thank G-d, you are active all day. Otherwise, your body can deteriorate. As our great master, Rambam, writes: “Another major principle of health is this: As long as a person toils and greatly exerts himself... he won't get sick, and he will get stronger... Yet whoever leads a sedentary life and doesn't toil... will suffer pain and weakness all his life” (Hilchot De'ot 4.14-15). He further writes: “If someone treated himself the way he treats the beast on which he rides, he would be saved from many pernicious illnesses. This is because you'll never see anyone over-feed his beast. Rather, he rations its intake so that it never unthinkingly overeats. People likewise make sure that their animal moves around and toils so that it remains healthy and never gets sick. Yet they don't do the same for themselves. They pay no mind to physical exercise which is the most important element for maintaining good health and in pushing off most illnesses” (Rambam, Medical Writings, Zissman Montner Edition I, page 32).

See the circular of the Director General of the Health Ministry (29 Nissan, 5765) which calls for physical activity and enlists findings from the World Health Organization, stating that a lack of physical activity leads to mortality and illness: Heart attacks; cancer; diabetes;

high blood pressure; obesity; etc. Physical activity also decreases stress and depression, prevents tiredness, increases work productivity, improves mental functioning and slows aging.

To summarize: Physical activity adds an average of ten years to one's life.

It is written about Hezekiah, King of Yehudah, that he repented, and then G-d added fifteen years to his life (Melachin 2 20; see Yevamot 50a). You should repent as well. Obviously, repentance is a spiritual matter, yet there is also "natural, physical repentance", as our master, Rav Kook, taught us regarding "sins against the laws of nature." He writes, "All improper behavior leads to sickness and pain. Individuals and societies suffer greatly from this...in terms of their sins that destroy their bodies and sap their strength." (Orot Ha-Teshuvah, Chapter 1).

So please! Engage seriously in your favorite physical activity. Aerobic activities that exercise the heart, blood and lungs; running; running in place; fast walking; swimming; bicycle riding; exercise; ball games; dance; etc... It's important! It's essential! Rabbi Eliezer Papo warns in his sefer "Pele Yoetz" about "self-love". Are there people who do not love themselves? Unfortunately there are, due to the "insane spirit" that possesses them, making them "knowingly destroy themselves," ruining their bodies. Therefore, "whoever has a brain in his head should consider well that a person should love himself, body and soul." He should "love his body more than his wealth", and he should "be benevolent to his body and show kindness to his spirit".

Some say that one should devote between at least 15 minutes and a half hour to physical activity. Some say it should be twice a week, others say three times, or even daily. The more the better, be it an hour or more.

One might say, "It's bittul Torah - Time that could be spent learning Torah!" Yet is sleeping not bittul Torah? Yet it's essential, and this is too. Moreover, you'll get that time back, with high interest, and years will be added to your life, as well as quality of life. You'll better be able to withstand physical stress, numerous illnesses and psychological pressure. Furthermore, this is itself Torah. Surely Rambam classifies good practices as fulfillment of a mitzvah. "Follow in His pathways" (Devarim 28:9; see Hilchot De'ot 1:5). This includes preserving one's health (ibid. 4:1).

Obviously, one must do only as much as one needs, and not exaggerate. We certainly are not talking about watching professional sports, which is a big waste of time. Rather, we are talking about the exercise people do themselves. Men and women, boys and girls, young and old.

You will certainly say, "But I am middle-aged...I am old...How can I start now?...Isn't it dangerous?" Indeed, exaggerated activity is dangerous. One must ask his physician and acquire instructional brochures from a health expert. Certainly one must work gradually as well, moving from the easy to the hard, and slowly increase the difficulty. One must also drink water during the activity. One should also take advantage of every opportunity to work his body: One shouldn't use an elevator but should climb stairs. One shouldn't use transportation if one's destination isn't far. One should walk. Park far away, or get off the bus a stop early. You make the effort and G-d will send you a blessing. The Prophet Yeshayahu (Chapter 58) enumerates blessings. Of one of them, Rabbi Eliezer said, "This is the most supreme blessing." He was referring to 58:11: "Hashem L-rd will make your bones strong" (Yevamot 102b).

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