

Is There a Halachic Obligation to Live a Healthy Lifestyle?

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Abstract. Jewish law requires protecting health and avoiding danger—but how far does that duty extend? This article examines diet, obesity, alcohol, smoking, work-related risk, and recreation through key halachic principles.

The *Rambam*^[1] writes “maintaining health and a sound body are among the ways of *Hashem*.” These words are echoed by the *Tur*^[2] who writes “it is proper to maintain health to be healthy and strong in your service of *Hashem*.” Health is a foundational core to Jewish living and law, for even the potential of saving a single life takes precedence over the strictness of laws, such as the keeping of *Shabbat*. Yet, on a personal level, the scope of health in Jewish life may seem confusing. It is obvious that one must be healthy to serve *Hashem* properly, but how healthy? May one eat unhealthily or be overweight? May they live an “unhealthy lifestyle?” May one put themselves in harm’s way for recreation such as sky diving?

In discussing this issue, the *Gemora* in *Tractate Berakhot*^[3] recounts a dramatic story of a pious man who refused to interrupt his prayer to greet a Roman officer. Once the pious man completed his prayer, the officer rebuked him, citing the verses of “*v'nishmartem me'od l'nafshotechem*^[4]” and “*rak heshomer l'cha*^[5].” Then he asked, “Why didn’t you respond? If I were to sever your head who would hold me at fault?” The officer, knowing these verses mean one must safeguard their life and health, questioned the pious Jew why he was unwilling to return a greeting at the risk of mortal danger. In this story the *Gemara* illustrates that safeguarding life and health is a *halachic* imperative, superseding acts of good and piety. While this concept is well known and oft quoted, there remains ambiguity as to how far this commandment extends.

The *halachic* requirement of “*v'nishmartem me'od l'nafshotechem*” is split into two general categories: health promotion and disease/risk prevention. These points are codified into law by the *Rambam*^[6], who stated “one must avoid that which harms his body and must accustom himself with things that improve health and strengthen the body.” However, while promoting health is paramount, avoiding risk carries greater stringency. There are, in fact, many laws that prevent engagement in seemingly innocuous behavior, such as drinking beverages left out uncovered^[7], due to potential risks. Furthermore, it is brought in *halacha*^[8] that engaging in risky behaviors is punishable by law, while avoiding risk is merely praiseworthy. It is among such ruling that the *Rema*^[9] brings down the principle of “*chamira sakana m'isura*,” which obligates one to be stricter in avoiding danger to life than avoiding all other prohibitions. There is thus clear instruction to maintain health and avoid risk to health and life. However, what is the extent of this requirement?

When it comes to the threshold of allowable risk there some distinction between vocation and recreation. The *Gemora*^[10] questions a case of a day laborer who put himself in harm's way while working. To explain this risk, the *Gemora* says it was done to make a livelihood. The concept of accepting risk for work can also be derived biblically where the *Torah*^[11] says "for on them his life depends" which *Rashi* explains to mean for his wages the person risks his life. From here the *Noda BiYehudah*^[12] expounds that some risk is permissible for livelihood but not for unnecessary recreation. R. Aryeh Lipshutz^[13], while quoting this response and concluding a lengthy response of his own on the topic, states "anything that is common within the world to do there is no worry of risk."

Contemporarily, the concept of risk in recreation was expounded in an early ruling regarding smoking where R' Moshe Feinstein^[14] discusses the concept of "*shomer pesaim Hashem*." He explains that since only a minority of smokers become afflicted, *Hashem* protects their "foolish behavior^[15]." This *psak* is based on the concept of "*dashu bo rabim*," that even if a behavior incurs a certain amount of risk to the individual, if it is considered normal and commonly practiced, it is not *halachically* prohibited. It is therefore evident that there is a certain amount of tolerance for unhealthy behaviors within the halachic framework. For example, although eating an unhealthy diet is associated with a litany of poor health outcomes, since eating unhealthily is common, the concept of "*shomer pesaim Hashem*" may be applied to justify the unhealthy behavior. Obviously, "*shomer pesaim Hashem*" is not a *carte blanche* permission and must be considered in proper context. For instance, a person with diabetes or hyperlipidemia would not be allowed to eat an unrestricted diet, as doing so would violate "*v'nishmartem me'od l'nafshotechem*" due to the acute risks to health. Furthermore, the concept of "*shomer pesaim Hashem*" is also dependent on current cultural and medical guidelines. This was evident from the early responsa allowing current smokers to continue, in comparison to contemporary responsa that forbid it. In another vein, currently adult consumption of alcohol is considered normal and medically acceptable in moderation. In contrast, habitual drinking and alcoholism are unacceptable given the direct health risks. Yet, as the culture shifts away from drinking alcohol and medical science substantiates the risk of consuming small quantities, this permission may change in the future.

It is clear from these sources that the *Torah* places great responsibility on each individual to sustain a healthy lifestyle and, even more so, to protect oneself from harm. Furthermore, these *halachos* extend to everyday life, encouraging healthy behavior and risk avoidance. While small risk is allowed to make a livelihood, recreational risks would seem to be more restricted. That being said, "*shomer pesaim hashem*" provides precedent to justify actions that, although unhealthy, are considered "normal." However, one must be careful to not be too flippant. One should not place themselves into status of a "*pesi*" or fool. By strictly keeping the *Torah* commandments for health and well-being they may fulfill what is says in *Tehillim*^[16] "the law of *Hashem* is perfect, restoring the soul... making the simple one wise."

[1] *Rambam, De'ot* 4:1.

[2] *Tur, Orech Chaim* 155.

[3] Tractate *Berakhot* 32b.

[4] *Devarim* 4:15.

[5] *Devarim* 4:9.

[6] *Rambam, De'ot* 4:1.

[7] *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 116:1.

[8] *Shulchan Arukh, Choshen Mishpat* 427:10.

[9] *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 116:5.

[10] Tractate *Bava Metzia* 112a.

[11] Deuteronomy 24:15.

[12] Noda BiYehudah II, Yoreh Deah 10.

[13] *Shaalot U'Teshuvot Shem Aryeh, Yoreh De'ah* 27.

[14] *Iggeros Moshe, Yoreh Deah* 2:49.

[15] More recent scientific evidence changed this ruling, and now, nearly all *Poskim* agree that smoking is halachically prohibited.

[16] Psalm 19:8.

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