

Rabbi Dovid Kaplan

The Torah requires us to do our utmost in guarding our health. To that end, Reb Mordechai Sopher has written a book that provides important guidance in this area. A healthy body is vital in *avodas Hashem*, as one's *middos*, learning, and davening are all affected negatively when one doesn't feel as well as he could. I would just add that in the pursuit of maintaining good health, a person should always keep in mind that it is a *means* towards being able to serve Hashem at maximum efficiency and not an *end* in and of itself, a mistake made by so many in the world who are into physical health.

May Hashem grant Reb Mordechai much *hatzlachah* in this and all his other endeavors.

B'vrachah,
Dovid Kaplan

Rabbi Zev Leff

חבר זאב לף

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*Rabbi of Moshav Matityahu
Rosh HaYeshiva—Yeshiva Gedola Matityahu*

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Dear Friends,

I have read portions of the book "Frum Fitness" by Mordechai Sopher. The author, in his own words, presents a "practical Torah guide to exercise and nutrition". Being a professional in the field of fitness and one who is Torah observant, the author is qualified to offer advice on how one can introduce exercise, nutrition, and a healthy regimen into a Torah observant lifestyle.

I found this work informative, thorough and inspiring in giving one an incentive to follow this good advice. I found the presentation in keeping with solid Torah values. (However I feel it necessary to present a caveat- it is well known that matters of health for various reasons change over time i.e. it was once believed that smoking cigarettes was very healthy. In that vein following the medical advice that the Rambam offers in Mishne Torah must be accompanied with the ongoing guidance of Daas Torah as to how to apply the information to anyone's personal situation.)

I recommend this work as a fine guide to be used to promote a healthy Torah life which is in fact a genuine Torah mandate.

I commend the author on a quality presentation and pray that Hashem bless him and his family with life, health and the wherewithal to continue to benefit the community in his unique fashion.

Sincerely,
With Torah blessings



Rabbi Zev Leff

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PART I

**EXERCISE:
WORKING OUT
IS WORKING IN**

“ומבשרי אחזה אלוק” —THROUGH
MY FLESH [BODY] I SEE GOD.”

Iyov 19:26

CHAPTER 1

EXERCISE AND FITNESS BASICS

DEFINING EXERCISE

Let's start this chapter with the most basic question: What is exercise?

Exercise is generally defined as an activity involving physical effort undertaken with the goal to maintain or improve physical health. This shows us that almost any physical activity done with the intention to be healthier can be considered exercise!

We should always be davening for health, both when we're not feeling great and when we're healthy. Include your physical health and fitness in your spiritual life because they're not two separate areas—they are one! The same way we keep striving to grow in our *middos* as we get older, we need to also strive to grow in our health. It is quite possible to improve in areas of physical fitness even as we age. Several clients in their fifties and sixties have told me that they feel healthier and fitter today than they did ten years ago from making lifestyle improvements.

EXERCISE DAILY

I help people figure out how to exercise correctly by considering their time, financial constraints, fitness goals, and resources. Someone who simply wants a healthy body will need a very different exercise

plan than a professional athlete. Most people should do three weekly aerobic workouts like walking, running, biking, or swimming. Aerobic workouts benefit the heart and lungs and train various muscle groups. They also burn fat while building muscle.

I recommend muscle strength training at least twice weekly, but if you prefer, you can do it more frequently. Muscles naturally weaken over time, so it is essential to continue strengthening the entire body. Even someone like an avid runner should also strengthen their upper-body muscles to have a balanced body.

Flexibility is also important for mobility, health, and performance. Those who enjoy being flexible can simply stretch, or do yoga or Pilates, which are stretching-intensive. I have grown to value flexibility training much more, as I'm getting older and experiencing the joy and benefits of being flexible. Stretching is also vital in maintaining healthier and less sore muscles.

In summary, I recommend that an average person does two to three aerobic and two or three strength training workouts weekly with daily focus on stretching. The intensity, duration, and style can vary based on personal preferences and constraints. Start with less and ensure you can handle your weekly exercise regimen before adding to it.

Many people start or continue to exercise to achieve these goals:

- Losing weight
- Building stronger (and sometimes bigger) muscles
- Improving endurance
- Increasing flexibility and mobility
- Feeling better emotionally
- Enjoying a fun activity

Your first step toward bringing more exercise into your life is to list and clarify your goals. What do you want to achieve, and why? Which goals are long term, and which can you achieve before you go to sleep tonight?

Once your goals are clarified, then you can explore which types of exercise will help you reach those goals. To get ideas, continue reading this book, and also speak to friends, neighbors, relatives, coworkers, and fitness professionals.

When you've found the types of exercise that seem to work for you, then it's time to do them consistently. Remember to follow what interests you, but don't be afraid to try something a bit out of your comfort zone.

My brother-in-law is a great example of this. He was interested in martial arts but disliked exercising. Then he found a local karate class that he really enjoyed, went regularly, and today is in fantastic shape.

Be prepared to put in effort. Just like we put time and energy into finding a spouse, *kehillah*, *rav*, and Torah learning that's right for us, we need to be prepared to put in time and energy into finding a type of exercise that we enjoy.

REMEMBER TO MOVE

Do you ever feel inconvenienced or annoyed when you need to walk a bit extra, run after your children, or make any seemingly unnecessary movements? There are several motivational sayings that I like to use to remember not to be physically lazy. Once I heard from a famous runner that "your health is your wealth." If you prioritize your fitness and make healthy living important, then this is truly a form of wealth. I also like to remember my own original line, "Never shy away from a workout." I do not mean this in the sense of going to the gym daily, but instead, to appreciate the great blessing of using the body. Due mainly to modern technology, people can easily fall into the trap of being inactive. I give myself and others the simple advice, "Remember to move!" It is perfectly okay to break a sweat. Even the most basic movements, like carrying groceries, cleaning, or carrying little kids up the stairs can strengthen the body and improve strength and mobility.

When we use our bodies, we are benefitting our mental and physical health. If we take the stairs, park further away, or walk while talking on the phone, we can naturally get stronger without even stepping foot in the gym. The physical inconveniences of life become viewed as beneficial, which turns many frustrating situations into blessings.

GETTING STARTED

“אם בחקתי תלכו ואת מצותי תשמרו”—IF YOU WALK WITH MY STATUTES...”

Vayikra 26:3

If you’ve found the types of exercise you want to try, *ashrecha!* But if you haven’t yet, like many people that I meet, don’t worry. Don’t listen to the *yetzer hara*, who might try to discourage you before you’ve even started. There are so many options available for every type of person at every phase of their life.

Many people take their first step in exercise by simply walking. Walking is free, healthy, and not overly strenuous. It improves muscle strength as well as heart and lung fitness. If you want a more intense workout, just walk faster, farther, or find a hill. A 20-minute walk will help you break a sweat, burn some calories, and you’ll feel great afterward. Many of our great sages were known to go for walks. Rabbi Akiva and his students would walk through the ruins of the Beis Hamikdash in Yerushalayim. The Chazon Ish walked daily to the sand dunes outside of Bnei Brak in order to benefit his health and find inspiration. David Hamelech was also known to walk daily, and he wrote in *Tehillim* how his feet carried him to many holy destinations.

To emulate our great sages, add daily exercise by actions like taking the stairs instead of the elevator. Stairs are a good indicator of fitness,

because if you're out of shape you'll likely breathe heavily walking up a few flights.

I have a client who exercises at work by climbing the stairs of his office building during his breaks. And I'm always impressed by a friend who often runs to shul, getting in some exercise while fulfilling his mitzvah of going to pray with *zerizus*.

I know many people who do little formal exercise but are active and constantly using their bodies. They manage to be in decent shape. Throughout history, most of our ancestors got their exercise this way—from their normal daily activities of walking and working. However, our lifestyles today are generally less active, and that is why we should set aside time to exercise.

Take frequent breaks throughout the day to stretch your muscles a bit. This can improve flexibility, and you'll leave the office feeling less stiff. During long phone conversations, try walking or even riding a stationary bike. I enjoy catching up with my parents on the phone while I run on the beautiful hiking trails of Eretz Yisrael.

Some manage to get work done while standing, biking, or even at a treadmill-style desk. If you don't have the time for traditional exercise, think creatively about ways to add more movement into your life. Be conscious of your daily activity and strive for more.

Many people have fitness watches these days, which are excellent tools for tracking your daily steps, exertion, heart rate, and more. I've seen people get very motivated to exercise after they started using one.

I have a client who enjoys going in his pool. I made him a deal that anytime he goes in his pool, he needs to do at least 20 minutes of aerobic exercise beforehand. He accepted the challenge and he regularly sends me updates that he did the workout and is now cooling down in the pool.

If you need some help brainstorming exercise options, here's a short list of some common types of exercise:

Walking	Dancing
Jogging	Rollerblading or skating
Sprinting	Martial arts
Hiking	Sports
Swimming	Stretching/Yoga/Pilates
Weightlifting	Calisthenics
Cycling (real or stationary)	Rock climbing
Going to the gym	Exercise classes

All of these options can be customized by doing them alone or with others, in a variety of settings, or during different times of the day.

DON'T RUSH IT

כל התחלות קשות—THE BEGINNING
OF ANY PROCESS IS CHALLENGING.”

Mechilta D'Rabi Yishmael, Parashas Yisro

Starting to exercise can be difficult. There's muscle soreness, wanting to quit, and fending off many *yetzer haras* in the lazy department. You can always find a good reason to stop. So how do you make it through the tough beginning?

I advise easing in and not trying to advance too quickly. When I started my career as a personal trainer, I would often push clients too hard at the beginning because they wanted to see quick results. I noticed that clients were more likely to stay with a long-term exercise plan with lighter workouts than with intense workouts. This taught me the importance of easing into exercise and how results come with time and consistency. That's also what my rabbis said in yeshiva regarding Torah study! Time and consistency.

With whichever exercise type you go with, focus on having one good day at a time. Building a healthy lifestyle requires daily work. A slow and steady approach will achieve better results and build more sustainable fitness in the long term. Doing intense workouts can be fun for an hour, but they might knock you out for a week. Even at my advanced level of training, I've learned that doing much of my exercise at a lighter intensity is optimal for avoiding injuries, recovering more quickly, and even performing better.

When consistently doing exercises at a certain level, you can incrementally increase the intensity through longer or more strenuous sessions. Just like you can't become a *talmid chacham* overnight or an expert in any field without time and effort, fitness needs to be built up with time. (See appendix I for three success stories from my clients.)

Remember that when you enjoy your exercise, it will be much easier to reach your goals. And remember to constantly thank Hashem that your body has the ability to exercise.

DISCIPLINE IN LIFE, DISCIPLINE IN WELLNESS

We all face challenges in our Torah lives, and we navigate them by learning Torah, knowing what to do halachically, seeking guidance, and having *emunah* and *bitachon*. Exercise can also give us strength to face difficulties, stay resilient, and overcome adversity as we develop our ability to push through fatigue, hunger, and the desire to quit. Reminding myself that I have completed marathons motivates me to push myself in other areas of life. An inspiring concept I heard from a running coach is that "working out" should really be called "working in," because when you push yourself physically, you build the muscles to grow mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Many teenagers and young adults become more hardworking, responsible, and mature from being challenged physically and mentally.

Even older folks can! Challenges are positive for our growth, and exercise can help push our limits.

FIND A CHAVRUSA

Just like in learning, having an exercise *chavrusa* who's a good match for you can be a lifesaver. As you know, a *chavrusa* helps you with accountability (showing up), and consistency (not giving up). Plus, when you're busy talking, your exercise time will go by faster, and you might even get a better workout without realizing it.

In addition to walking with my wife and children, I enjoy running with friends because we often talk as we train. As a running coach, I often train with people at what's called "conversational pace," which is a pace that still enables us to hold a conversation. This technique is beneficial for breathing and takes the focus off of the physical exertion.

SLEEP, FOOD, AND WATER

“זריזין מקדימין למצוות—WE SHOULD BE QUICK TO DO MITZVOS.”

Sifra, Parashas Bereishis 22:3

“הנותן ליעף כח”—[BLESSED IS HASHEM] WHO GIVES STRENGTH TO THE WEARY.”

Morning Blessings

We all want energy throughout the day, but how do we achieve this? First, sleep well at night. Poor quality or not enough sleep causes exhaustion. A power nap can be a great refresher. (Read more about this in the sleep section below.)

Diet is also crucial. Be aware of how your body reacts to certain foods, such as caffeine and sugar. They can provide immediate energy bursts but quick drops. Drink enough water, especially before getting dehydrated.

Exercising in the morning can be invigorating. When I daven *neitz* and do an early workout, I feel much more energized than if I had slept later. Jumping into a cold mikveh is a bonus as well. Exercise prepares us for the day, and we feel fulfilled if we do it early.

The Torah teaches us to live a balanced life. Constant maintenance of our sleep, nutrition, exercise, and hydration affects our energy. Emotional control is also essential, and working on ourselves through Torah learning, *tefillah*, *hisbodedus*, and listening to inspiring *shiurim* can increase our energy immensely. I elaborate more on these energy-boosting techniques in the coming sections.

BREATHING

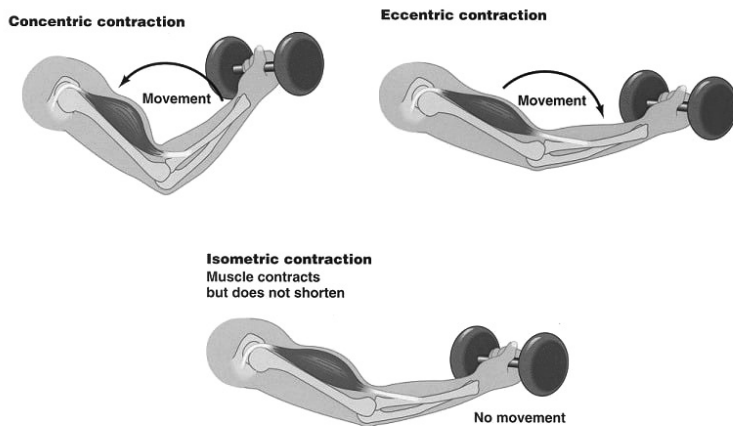
Let's start with a quick and basic definition of breathing. "Breathing, also known as respiration, is the process of taking air into the lungs and releasing it."¹ It's an essential function for all living things that rely on oxygen to survive. Unfortunately, most people do not pay attention to how they breathe. While we breathe automatically most of the time, there are hundreds of breathing techniques out there, including many in our *mesorah*. Breathing is not only for the purpose of survival, but rather a skill that should be used for us to function even better while exercising, when under stress, and during daily activities.

For the purposes of fitness goals, here are two very simple techniques:

- When lifting up weights (called a concentric movement), the instinct is to hold your breath. But this causes the face to turn red and pressure to build up in the head, causing lightheadedness. You need to focus on the exhale, which relieves pressure and provides an energy boost while you lift the weight.
- When returning weights to their original position (called an eccentric movement) it is essential to return oxygen to the body

1 Cambridge Dictionary.

through a strong inhale. Learning to control breathing during concentric and eccentric movements improves performance and safety.



Concentric, eccentric, and isometric movements

Breathing is even more necessary during aerobic exercise, in which the body uses oxygen to produce energy. Aerobic exercise includes running, biking, swimming, and walking. A famous breathing and running coach, Patrick McKeowan, teaches how to breathe correctly. He explains that when running, breathing is as essential as moving the legs. I ran several marathons without focusing on breathing at all, but now I see the importance of breath work, and I even have an altitude simulation mask to practice calm and controlled breathing. Perhaps surprisingly, experts like McKeowan say that breathing through the nose (nasal breathing) is the most beneficial and effective way to breathe. Nasal breathing better filters the air and allows it to absorb in the lungs. This method lets in a smaller volume of oxygen and must be practiced over time.