

# Frum and Fit:



## Are We Fulfilling Our Torah Obligation to Take Care of Our Body?

BY JACK BOTWINIK

Many Orthodox Jews seem to think that as long as the food is kosher, what one eats is not so important. They believe that if having five servings of fresh fruits and vegetables daily were vital to our health, that fact would have made its way into the Torah.

Truthfully, it's simply convenient to think that as long as our nutritional intake is in line with societal norms, we are being responsible. But food today is not what it used to be. Over the past few decades, sugar and hydrogenated oils, as well as artificial sweeteners, coloring and preservatives, have infiltrated even the most innocuous products, such as breads and peanut butter. Who knows what these chemicals are doing to our ability to concentrate, to learn Torah, to harness our energy and enthusiasm for *tikkun olam*?

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### Feeding the Yetzer Hara

Eight hundred years ago, Maimonides wrote in *Hanhagot Habriyot (The Regimen of Healthcare)*:

*If a person cared for himself the way he cares for his horse, he would avoid many serious illnesses. You won't find a person who gives his horse too much fodder. But he himself eats to excess. He makes sure his animal gets proper exercise to keep it healthy. But when it comes to himself, he neglects exercise even though this is a fundamental principle in health maintenance and in the prevention of most illnesses.*

The Torah decrees, "*Venishmartem meod lenafshoteichem*, Be very careful about your lives" (Devarim 4:15). We are obligated to preserve our health. Practically speaking, this means we should eat healthy foods and do so slowly. It means we should drink plenty of water and eat only when hungry, and not to the point of being 100 percent full. It also means we should exercise regularly and get enough sleep.

Most of us live six days a week in the fast lane, and spend the seventh tak-

ing shelter from worldly stresses. On Shabbat we eat as a family, leisurely and relaxed. We are happy and content—plus to our health, since mood affects how we digest our food. On the other hand, there is also a tendency on Shabbat to eat to excess, precisely because the food is so good and so plentiful. There's a desire to unwind from the week's toil and to reap the harvest of our elaborate Shabbat preparations.

I often wonder why we place so much importance on insulating ourselves from looking at immodestly dressed women, lest it lead to improper thoughts and behavior, but have no qualms about laying out five different kinds of sugar-laden desserts on the Shabbat table. Can't these temptations lead us to have gluttonous thoughts and—even worse—gluttonous behavior? Doesn't the Torah tell us not to put a stumbling block before the blind? Some of our habits are not only not prescribed by Torah, they are arguably anti-Torah. We have only our *yetzer hara* to blame for our health deficiencies.

## A Nutritional Breakdown of the Typical Shabbat Meal

Food	Calories	Protein (g)	Carbs (g)	Dietary Fiber (g)	Total Fat (g)	Saturated Fat (g)	Cholesterol (mg)	Sodium (mg)
Red wine (4 ounces)	96	0	3	0	0	0	0	5
Grape juice (4 ounces)	75	0	19	0	0	0	0	10
Homemade challah (1 slice)	132	3	22	1	3	0	16	180
Gefilte fish (1 slice from loaf)	80	6	9	1	2.5	0	40	170
Chicken soup (1 cup with 1/2 ounce boiled chicken and 1/2 carrot)	126	10	11	1	4	1	21	377
Matzah balls (2, prepared from mix)	115	3	11	1	6	1	71	723
Roasted chicken leg (4 ounces, with skin)	264	30	0	0	15	4	105	99
Roast beef (3 ounces, very lean)	138	25	0	0	3	1	47	32
Broccoli kugel (a 2-inch-square piece made with margarine and real mayonnaise)	175	4	8	2	13	2	82	222
Potato kugel (a 2 1/2-inch-square piece)	274	6	37	4	12	1	71	427
Chocolate chip cookies (2 homemade)	158	2	18	0	8	4	30	178
<b>Total calories</b>	<b>1633</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>483</b>	<b>2483</b>

Note: These numbers are estimates; your own recipes are likely to vary.

Nutrition information provided by Shira Isenberg, a registered dietitian and writer. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in public health nutrition at Hunter College in New York.

### A Jewish Diet

The numerous Torah laws that center around food (*kashrut*, fast days, no eating before Kiddush) help train us to discipline ourselves, and this self-control is important when sticking to any health regimen. In addition, our determination to eat healthily is bolstered by the teaching that we eat for a purpose beyond gratification of the palate and satiation of the belly.

Still, how often do we overindulge and then rationalize our actions with Torah-based justifications? “But the food is kosher,” “it’s an opportunity to say a *berachah*,” “the chocolate cake was elevated via a *devar Torah*,” “it’s a *mitzvah* to partake of the *simchah* meal,” and so on.

Consider the holidays. On Rosh Hashanah, we have elaborate meals for two days straight. Chanukah is eight days of oily latkes and *sufganiyot*. On Purim, we overload our homes with *mishloach manot* sweets. On Pesach, we stuff ourselves with *matzot*, and on Shavuot we feast on high-cholesterol cheesecakes and blintzes and then try to stay up all night learning Torah—with the help of caffeine and sugar.

And let’s face it, the typical Ashkenazic diet is not terribly healthy: it contains a meager selection of fresh fruits and vegetables, is heavy on meat and is low in fiber. A variety of health problems including colon cancer, hemorrhoids, constipation and diverticulosis have been linked to diets low in fiber.

Years ago, before I became religious, I was engrossed in the religions of the Far East and would spend Friday nights at an ashram, where we did yoga stretches and meditation before sitting down to a wholesome vegetarian supper. We would eat in silence, savoring the food. Then we would form a circle, sing songs, share inspiring stories and thank the Universe for all that it has given us. Both the soul and the body were recognized as partners in fulfilling our purpose on this planet.

Enter Judaism. With my newfound knowledge of Judaism, I gained greater clarity about life and about my purpose in this world. Being an Orthodox Jew meant everything to me.

However, it bothered me that whenever I would attend an outreach seminar or lecture, soda, chips and salted pretzels were always served. One

time, I confronted the rabbi hosting the event. “Why can’t you put out juice and celery sticks instead?” I asked him. He replied that he had chosen junk food for practical reasons: healthy foods cost more, take longer to prepare and require refrigeration. Somewhat apologetically, he agreed with me that the body is a temple and that we ideally should not consume junk food. I was not satisfied and wanted to ask him (I didn’t), “What if it were more economical and convenient to serve pork chops?”

### Healthful Choices

Fortunately, as consumer demand for kosher food continues to grow, there are more and more products to choose from, including healthier alternatives. There’s a humorous observation that Ashkenazic foods all seem to start with the letter *kuf*: knish, kugel, kishke, kreplach, kasha, kneidelach, kichel, et cetera. The *gematria* of *kuf* is 100. If we want to live “*biz hundert un tsvantzik*” (until 120 years of age), we should add at least two vegetable side dishes, *yirakot*, to our meals. *Yirakot* starts with the letter *yud*, which is ten. And two *yuds*, which equal Godliness, add up to twenty. **JA**