

The Mitzvah of Self-Care by Dr. Shani Fox

My father of blessed memory taught me an important lesson. When I was 15, he was nearly taken from us in a terrible automobile accident. Fortunately he survived that event and, despite some physical limitations, proceeded to live a life exemplary for its celebration of each day, each hour. There was no wasted time, no insignificant human interaction. He was a clear example that in a life well lived, every moment contains a chance to create a blessing. I have since gone on to become a physician, and the lessons of my father's life are the same I now use to guide my patients toward radiant health. Many of us consider caring for our health a standalone project, yet another thing to do along with caring for our families or earning our livelihoods, something to which we struggle to dedicate time. But consider for a moment what contributes to our health. Is it not a combination of physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing? Don't all aspects of our lives – relationships, work, study, worship – affect our health, and doesn't our health affect our ability to engage in all of our occupations?

If we view our health as both influencing and influenced by all of our occupations, then we can see that to nourish health is to ensure that we flourish in our relationships and activities. Just as my father never missed an opportunity to appreciate life, we can, by noticing the potential for health in each hour, even each minute, create blessings for ourselves, for those around us and for all of Creation. This concept – that every moment counts in the nurturing of health – is marvelously consistent with Jewish spirituality. Judaism is striking in its constant urging to review our behavior, down to the finest detail. The multitude of brachot that correspond to the most mundane and also the rarest of occasions exist to remind us of Hashem's presence at all times and in all things, bringing to our attention the spark of holiness in each aspect of our day. What would our health be like if we took a similar approach, noticing all the things that contribute to it?

Adopting such a conscious approach to health is not as difficult as it might seem. In our highly commercialized age, it is easy to believe that health depends on taking lots of medications or supplements, or by making appointments here and there. While purchased items and services may be valuable in varying degrees for different individuals, their omnipresence tends to obscure the fact that much of the support we need to maintain radiant health has been available to us *mibreshit*: since the completion of Creation. Elements of nature such as light and darkness, air and water and the extraordinary design of the human frame have the ability to contribute richly to our health, if we but dedicate our awareness to them.

Breath is central to our existence, yet how many of us fully utilize this life-giving capacity? Under stress – even day-to-day stress – our breath becomes rapid and shallow, and our cells are deprived of the amount of fresh oxygen they need to function optimally. Sit back for a moment, close your eyes, breathe in deeply, and exhale with a sigh. Do this five to ten more times, making the exhale a little longer than the inhale. Notice how you feel. In addition to better utilizing the aeration and detoxification capacity of the lungs, deep breathing calms the nervous system and reduces both physical and mental/emotional stress. Incorporating a few deep breathing sessions throughout the day helps all of our organs function more efficiently and breaks the acceleration of mental stress. Try a few deep breaths next time you feel any agitation coming on. See if you can incorporate 100 deep breaths over the course of the day, and marvel at how we are surrounded by an invisible substance that both invigorates and calms us.

Light and dark also play an essential role in our health. Many of the hormones in our body function according to circadian rhythms. Hormones which are designed to make us alert and active are at their highest levels during the day. Hormones that repair cellular damage and restore the health of our tissues peak while we rest at night. The gland that oversees the ebb and flow of these hormones is located within our heads, and its activity is regulated by the amount of light transmitted through our eyes. Thus sufficient natural light during the day and true darkness at night are essential to harmonious hormonal orchestration. To optimize your circadian rhythms, get outdoors daily! Thirty minutes or more of natural light each day does wonders for the spirit as well as normal hormone function. At night, maximize the darkness in your bedroom. Block light coming in through the windows with dark curtains, and turn any digital displays away from your eyes. In addition to optimizing your body's restorative activity, don't be surprised if the true dark deepens your sleep. Synchronizing ourselves to nature's natural rhythm pays off in improved health.

Water is essential to life and good health, yet many of us don't drink enough to fully enjoy its benefits. Think of washing a sink full of dishes: is it easier with just a little water in the bottom of the sink, or with a sink that's nearly full? Our digestive systems too need adequate water to flush wastes out of our bodies. Keep filtered drinking water nearby and sip it throughout the day. While different people have different hydration requirements, the optimal intake for a person of average build is about eight cups of water per day. Work gradually toward this optimal level and notice the improvement in your energy and the clarity of your skin. Your body will thank you!

A wise medical colleague of mine recently noted that there is nothing in modern medicine that can beat the benefit of thirty minutes of daily exercise. Celebrate the extraordinary structure of your body by intentionally engaging in healthful movement every day. There are many types to choose from, but even simple walking greatly enhances circulation, strengthens our bones and keeps our joints – which are designed to move - functioning smoothly. I can always tell which of my patients are exercising regularly: the benefits of exercise on mood and vitality are visible in their shining eyes and radiant spirits.

By intentionally incorporating air, light and water into our self-care and by celebrating the magnificence of our physical design, we honor Hashem's Creation even as we enhance our health minute by minute, day by day.



Dr. Shani Fox, naturopathic physician, provides heartfelt care that incorporates the best of science and traditional medicine. By teaching her patients to be champions for their own health and wellbeing, she helps them resolve the stress and health issues that prevent them from living life to the fullest. Her particular talent is for helping people with longstanding health issues such as allergies, autoimmune conditions, hormonal imbalances and cancer whose needs have not been adequately addressed by the conventional medical system. Dr. Fox practices at Insights to Health in Portland, Oregon, USA and can be contacted at drfox@insightstohealth.net.