



Jewish Values

Parashat Va'etchanan

Guarding One's Health

"Venishmartem me'od lenafshotechem" – "And you shall guard yourselves very well" (Va'etchanan 4:15). Even though here, our holy *Torah* is instructing us to guard ourselves spiritually, *Chazal*, our Sages deduced from here that the *Torah* is also teaching us the importance of looking after our physical health. The *Torah* is commanding us to ensure, to the best of our ability, that we stay healthy. And if one falls sick, the *Torah* teaches us to go to a doctor and seek medical aid (*Shemot* 21:19). The reason is because if one is not feeling well, one will not be able to perform the commandments of the *Torah*, thereby undermining the whole purpose of one's creation. The *Torah* emphasizes the importance of guarding one's health by using the word *"me'od"* – very much, an expression that we rarely find in connection with another *mitzvah*.

Why does the *Torah* consider it necessary to emphasize the *mitzvah* of guarding one's health? *Rabbi Yisrael Salanter* writes, we know that whenever we are commanded to do a *mitzvah*, the *yetzer hara*, our evil inclination will try to stop us performing it. When we are told to do something, we automatically feel some resistance to do it. This is so that we can be deserving of reward, by choosing to do the correct thing. The *yetzer hora* works "across the board," trying to stop us doing any *mitzvot*. When a person is not well, he may be exempt from many *mitzvot*, due to his situation. In such a case, the only *mitzvah* incumbent upon him, is to try and restore his health. This being the case, the *yetzer hara* will focus on preventing him doing so. Therefore, the *Torah* uses the word *"me'od,"* to emphasize that one must do one's utmost to tend to one's health.



Presently, the world is suffering from a pandemic. Certainly, we are obligated to adhere to the instructions and rules issued by the experts of one's country, to ensure that one does one's utmost to prevent oneself from catching the disease or passing it on. This is a fulfilment of the *mitzvah* of "*venishmartem*." If one has caught it or even been in contact with those who have, if one does not fulfil the requirements of quarantine and distancing, one might ultimately be the cause of fatality in others, a very severe crime. Alternately, one might cause others to become ill or have to be quarantined, making them lose business, or suffer other financial loss. This is also a prohibition from the *Torah* – not to be *mazik*, damage another's possessions.

The *Gemara* (*Baba Kama* 60a) discusses what to do during an epidemic: "Do not venture out. Stay home and lie low." Running away to a different city only helps if it safe there. This does not apply in our situation. And so, we should avoid venturing out unnecessarily, until the wave passes. The *Ben Ish Chai* explains the above *Gemara*. Although we must take precautions and stay home, this does not justify being nervous or scared of becoming infected. Doing so greatly raises the chances of catching it. Many more people die than expected, because they are scared and worried. It makes them more vulnerable, and also does much more damage if they actually catch it. Although the *Torah* teaches us to be cautious, there is no justification for being nervous or scared. These are not *Torah* values. And taking extra unnecessary precautions are detrimental, and not recommended by the *Torah*.

Let us ensure that we adhere to the *mitzvah* of caring for our health, and fervently pray that *Hashem* remove this plague speedily from amongst us.

Shabbat shalom

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