



Revealing the inner beauty of the Torah in a way that touches and inspires the Jewish soul

THE USE OF PHYSICAL PLEASURE

B.S.D.

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Did you ever begin a stimulating physical activity and then discover you somehow can't extricate yourself? You pick up a bag of potato chips, and start eating two, three, four, five. Before you know it you're at the bottom of the bag. You didn't really want any more, but you couldn't stop. You passed the point of diminishing returns and now you feel sick.

While physical pleasure is an essential part of enjoying life, at the same time, we have to know how to control it and harness it. Way #18 is *b'miut ta'anug* - "minimize physical pleasure." You cannot just eat chocolate bars the whole day long. That is not living.

Human beings are pleasure-seekers. The more pleasure, the more power. Figure out how to transform raw physical sensation into the deeper pleasures of love, meaning, creativity. Don't worry - you won't lose the physical pleasure. You'll actually enhance and appreciate it more.

GOURMET LIVING

Imagine you're dining on steak and French fries. The first bite, you focus intently on the pleasure, knowing just what part of the mouth tingles and how it lifts your spirits.

But what happens next? Before you know it, you're gulping it down.

When a connoisseur takes a glass of wine, the "drink" itself is just one aspect of the enjoyment. He sniffs it first, then puts a little in his mouth and swishes it around, checking the fruitiness and bouquet. Only if it passes approval will he swallow.

Next time you take a Coke, ask yourself: "How does this affect me? What does it do for me?" For most of us, 90 percent of the Coke goes straight to the stomach without ever passing the taste buds. We don't even have a chance to enjoy it.

To get back on track, "identify and intensify" your pleasures. Articulate exactly what is this specific pleasure: What makes it taste good, look good, smell good, feel good? For example:

Be a gourmet of life. Focus and make sure you're getting the full pleasure. Swish it around in your mind and prolong its taste. The deeper appreciation will motivate and energize you.

THE BEAUTY OF PHYSICAL PLEASURE

Growing up in Western society, many have the idea that "physical pleasure is evil." This may stem from the Roman Catholic view, where intimacy, even within the context of marriage, is considered a concession to base instincts, while



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sacred priests and nuns are celibate.

Secular society, on the other hand, takes the opposite view: Life is the hedonistic pursuit of physical pleasure without restraint.

Judaism takes the middle road: God made a physical world not to frustrate us, but for us to enjoy. Life should be beautiful and engaging. Jewish spirituality is not achieved by meditating for years on a mountaintop, or by fasting in a reclusive monastery. Jewish spirituality comes through grappling with the mundane world in a way that uplifts and elevates. On Friday night, we raise the cup of wine and use it - not to get drunk - but to make Kiddush and sanctify the Sabbath day. Spirituality, says Judaism, is to be found in the kitchen, the office, and yes, even the bedroom.

The Almighty created this world for our pleasure. The Talmud says that if a person has the opportunity to taste a new fruit and refuses to do so, he will have to account for that in the World to Come. What is so special about fruits? God could have created bland oatmeal with all the vitamins and minerals necessary for our survival. But fruits are the dessert the Almighty made. It's a labor of love, solely for our pleasure. Refusing to taste it shows a lack of appreciation.

The Sages also teach that an elderly person should sit in the sun. No matter how much you appreciate wisdom and learning, you still have to treat the body well. And even when physical strength has dwindled, one can still derive delight from the warmth of the sun.

The Torah also instructs us to recite a blessing of thanks before partaking of any food or drink, or even when encountering phenomenon like thunder or a rainbow. Saying a blessing gives us time to pause and reflect, to remember that everything is a grand gift.

Take note of how many opportunities you have to take pleasure each day. The sunrise, a splash of cold water, a refreshing breeze. Are you paying attention, or are you riding over them like a bag of potato chips?

A MEANS, NOT AN END

Imagine inviting someone over for a fancy, four-course dinner. After serving the melon, they thank you and get up to leave.

"Where are you going? We're just getting started. The best is yet to come!"

That's Judaism's view of physical pleasure. If you make melon the staple of your diet, it will never provide all the nutrients you need to be healthy and satisfied. Similarly, materialism is just the appetizer of existence. Don't make the mistake of getting lost in the appetizer. You will never be fulfilled.

When used wisely, physical pleasure is a steppingstone to higher pleasures. When enjoying beautiful things, our bodies feel relaxed, and we are more ready to tackle deeper life issues. Dealing with problems - crime, unemployment, warfare - requires emotional strength, and the purpose of physical pleasure is to generate that strength.

Get in touch with the longing for eternity that everyone has. We are running after materialism - dong, dong, dong, dong! But true satisfaction is not found in your taste buds. It is a longing of the soul. We want infinity. We want meaning.

When you get energy from the body, it can help open up the soul. This is the pleasure of Shabbat. It's a beautiful day. Delicious food. You are at peace. The physical pleasure is an incentive. You are taking the body along with you. Then you can open up the soul and get close to the Almighty.

Distinguish one type of pleasure from the next. It's a sure-fire way to know whether you're experiencing raw physical pleasure, or a deeper spiritual pleasure.



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Physical pleasure is:

- transitory
- leaves you depressed
- an end unto itself
- unsatisfying

Spiritual pleasure is:

- permanent
- energizing
- a means, not an end
- awakening

CAR & DRIVER

Anyone who owns a car knows that you have to maintain the car mechanically, and fuel it with quality gasoline. If you abuse the car, it won't take you where you want to go. And to keep it looking good, you may occasionally take it the car wash and vacuum the interior, too.

But of course the car is not more important than the driver himself. Someone who neglects his family and instead spends endless hours waxing and coddling the car has lost a sense of priority.

So too, with body and soul. The body is a vehicle to do the soul's bidding. You have to be in control. On the other hand, you don't want to be a tyrant. In mastering the body, the name of the game is self-discipline, not oppression. The key is a controlled amount, and using it for the right reasons at the right times.

Sometimes you should indulge the body so your soul can accomplish more. After you've completed a difficult project, for example, you might reward yourself with a meal at a fancy restaurant. But keep it in perspective. There has to be a balance between enjoying yourself, and over-indulging. Don't get confused into thinking that the meal is the goal of it all.

"Enjoy" the pleasure, but don't "need" it. Otherwise you're addicted, you're enslaved.

Beware of the body's tricks. Whenever you try to rein in physical pleasures, a little voice inside yells, "This is oppressive, boring, unnatural. I'm gonna have a nervous breakdown!"

Be assured. You won't faint because you don't have another jelly bean. People change their habits and live happily ever after. Try it out. Stay focused. Be tough.

Just as you learn to drive a car, you have to learn how to drive this machine. You know it has tremendous potential. You have 48 gears, 48 tools to maximize life. Are you getting enough pleasure?

MINIMIZE IN ORDER TO MAXIMIZE

To avoid abuse, decide beforehand: How much of this pleasure will I partake?

Usually, people eat until they can't touch another bite. But the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, instructs us to eat only two-thirds of capacity. When we stop before the meter reads "full," it's healthier from all standpoints: digestion,



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waistline, self-esteem.

Decide "this is it and I am going to stick to it." There's no changing your mind in the middle of the bag. Even if you underestimated and "just one more potato chip would really do the job" - too bad. Next time you will take a handful of potato chips with one more! But at this point, there's no going back, because your judgment is clouded. We get lost in how we feel during the activity; at the expense of the more important feeling after. So set a firm limit in advance and stick to it. Otherwise, you may cross the line and regret it.

GET YOUR MONEY'S WORTH

Before enjoying any pleasure, ask yourself: "What do I expect to get out of it?" Then during the activity, ask yourself: "Am I getting the intended pleasure?" Don't assume that you're having pleasure. Pay attention. Are you getting it? If not, don't indulge. Make a conscious decision.

Sip your drink. Get your money's worth. If it is no good, you are not getting more out of it because you drank it, are you? You don't like it. "But I paid for it so I have got to eat it." It will give you a stomachache. "But I paid for it." No! You paid for pleasure. Don't get depressed over it. Don't be a zombie. At the beginning you were interested. Now you're stuck in it, glued to it, obsessed. "Look, I paid good money." Don't talk yourself into it. It is a bad investment. If it's not your pleasure, then pour it down the sink!

This applies not just to eating, but to any form of sensory stimulation, such as going to a movie or a baseball game. You have to know when enough is enough, and not waste precious time on it.

Be energy conscious. Don't waste time. If you are not translating that ice cream sundae into energy for living, it's a waste. "What is this pleasure really doing for me? Am I using it to dull reality, or energize me to move forward and accomplish?" If it gives you renewed energy, fine. If not, don't.

Monitor yourself: What do I want out of these potato chips? A feeling of having tasted something good. Is one enough? I tasted it. No, I want to take the edge off my hunger, something that is filling and tasty. So how many do you need?

Do you see this is an exercise in self-awareness?

BREAK THE HABIT

Material indulgence can be used as an escape. "I got on the scale and I weigh too much. So I'll go to the refrigerator and take a big chunk of chocolate cake to make myself feel better."

Don't use pleasure as an escape from your troubles. What are you doing it for: To get back into living or to run away from life? Escape is seductive. He who runs away today will have to run another day. If a person solaces himself for being fat by eating more, he's going to eat more to solace himself for the extra weight. It's a vicious cycle.

Realize that any habit - no matter how disgusting it is, no matter how determined you are - is tough to change.

The best way to overcome a bad habit is to be happy and engrossed in life. People who lack direction in life are more likely to develop poor self-image, and look for ways of "stroking" themselves. But if you have something important to accomplish, you'll find it easier to mow down bad habits. When your energy and vitality function at full power, your "will-power" does, too.

Make a game plan. Strategize a growth schedule according to what you expect to accomplish, and then shoot for a bit more.



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One way to break a bad habit is to hire a friendly "nudnik." For example, if you're trying to stick to a diet, ask a friend to point out every time you take too much cake or nibble in-between meals.

You can even set up a penalty system. Tell the nudnik: "If you catch me eating sweets, I'll pay you \$50." At \$50 a bite, you'll break your habit long before you break the bank.