

*NCSY Torah* —————  
————— *On One Foot Series*

# PROTECT YOUR LIFE

ונשמרתם מאד  
לנפשותיכם



EATING DISORDERS • DRUGS  
CUTTING • SUICIDE  
AND OTHER BODY ISSUES

compiled by Rabbi Jack Abramowitz  
designed by Renée Rosenfeld

THE TORAH TELLS US IN A NUMBER OF PLACES THAT WE ARE RESPONSIBLE TO PROTECT OUR BODIES, OUR LIVES AND OUR HEALTH. IT SAYS QUITE CLEARLY, "YOU MUST ZEALOUSLY PROTECT YOURSELVES..."

(DEUT. 4:15)

## SUICIDE

We all know that the Torah prohibits murder (*Exodus 20:13*), but the Torah also prohibits suicide. G-d says, "Also, I will hold you responsible for your own blood and your own lives..." (*Genesis 9:5*).

Not only may we not kill others to save ourselves (*Sanhedrin 74a*), we may not needlessly sacrifice our own lives to save others (*Baba Metzia 62a*). The logic is simple: we cannot kill others, because who says our lives are more important than theirs? But we cannot throw our own lives away, because who says their lives are more important than ours?

The scholar Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon was martyred by the Romans, who wrapped him in a Torah scroll and set him on fire. His students pleaded with him to open his mouth so that the fire might enter and put an end to his suffering more quickly. He replied: "It is better to let the One Who gave me my soul take it away."

(*Avodah Zarah 18a*)



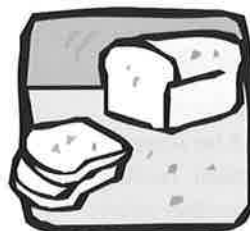
G-d revealed through the prophet *Amos (1:11)* that killing a brother is worse than killing a stranger. The *Chovos HaLevovos (4:4)* derives from this that, since no one is closer than one's

own self, suicide is the worst murder of all.

G-d says, "Behold, all souls belong to Me" (*Ezekiel 18:4*). It's His place to decide when to take them back, not ours.

## EATING DISORDERS

Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, had a disturbing dream. In it, he saw fourteen cows. Seven are described as "good-looking, healthy cows." The other seven are described as "ugly, emaciated cows" (*Genesis 41:2-3*). We see that the Torah does not consider being too thin to be beautiful!



What else can we learn about eating disorders from the Torah?

- Serve Hashem and He will bless your bread and your water and remove sickness from among you.

(*Exodus 23:25*)

- You shall eat, be satisfied, and thank Hashem your G-d... (*Deut. 8:10*)
- Go, eat your bread with happiness... (*Ecclesiastes 9:7*)
- The Talmud says that one who fasts unnecessarily is considered a sinner for depriving himself. (*Baba Kama 91b*)
- People who develop eating disorders typically go to great lengths to conceal it and to make it appear as if everything's okay. The Torah tells us, "Keep far away from a false matter..." (*Exodus 23:7*)
- It's important to be supportive of people with eating disorders. The Talmud tells us that a person who smiles at a friend is even better than one who gives him food. (*Kesubos 111b*)

## CUTTING AND PIERCING

How do we know that we are not allowed to wound ourselves? We actually see this in a wide variety of places:

- A person being whipped by the court as a punishment is sentenced to a certain number of lashes. The Torah warns us (*Deut. 25:3*) that we may not strike him more than the designated amount. The reason? "So that your brother should not be degraded in your eyes." Before he receives his proper punishment, the Torah calls him "wicked." After he receives it, he is once again "your brother" and it is forbidden to strike him. How much more so should we not hit someone who never deserved to be whipped at all!

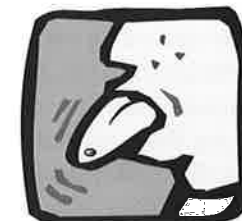


- When Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses) saw two Jews fighting, the Torah says, "He said to the evil one, 'Why are you hitting your friend?'" (*Exodus 2:13*). Rashi there explains that the man was considered evil just for raising his hand, even before striking the other person.
- The Torah tells us not to make gashes in our skin as a consequence of mourning (*Leviticus 19:28*). This doesn't necessarily mean that that's the only circumstance in which it would be forbidden; that's just an example of a circumstance in which people used to do it. *The Sefer HaChinuch* says that to cut

oneself for no reason at all is even worse than doing it out of grief.

- The Talmud tells us that it is prohibited to cut oneself, either by hand or with an instrument (*Makkos 21a*).
- Cutting is an idolatrous practice. We see that the prophets of the idol Baal cut themselves as part of their service (*1 Kings 18:28*).
- The Talmud (*Baba Kama 91a*) suggests a number of sources for the prohibition against wounding ourselves. These include Biblical verses prohibiting spilling one's own blood, wanton destruction and sinning against oneself.
- The Torah tells us, "You are children to Hashem, your G-d, therefore do not cut yourselves..." (*Deut. 14:1*) What could be more meaningful than that?

All of this applies not only to cutting, but also to body piercing. We are only permitted to pierce the soft cartilage, such as of the ear or nose, but not flesh, such as lips, tongues, nipples, navels or genitals. (There are other reasons not to permit piercing the nose or excessively piercing the ear, but they are not related to self-injury.)



## TATTOOS

The Torah prohibits tattoos pretty clearly: "Do not cut yourselves out of grief for the dead and do not tattoo yourselves; I am Hashem." (*Leviticus 19:28*)

The Talmud (*Makkos 21a*) tells us that tattooing consists of two parts, the scratching and the inking, each of which is separately prohibited.

The book of *Job (1:21)* gives us the popular expression "The L-rd giveth and the L-rd taketh away." Our bodies are on loan from G-d. It is our obligation to return them

turn over to continue

continued from other side

in good condition.

You wouldn't paint a

borrowed car or stud a borrowed jacket. Similarly, we don't have the right to tattoo or cut a body that we are expected to return.

The fact that the Torah forbids tattooing should be enough of a reason not to do it. But even without that, is it really such a good idea? Styles change. Just look at your parents' pictures from high school or college. Would you want their old clothing or hairstyles permanently bonded to you? Similarly, why indelibly etch a picture on yourself? It might not seem like such a good idea a year or five years from now. (If you are already tattooed, you might not be required to have it removed; consult your rabbi.)

## SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Rav advised his son Chiya not to take drugs (*Pesachim 113a*). Rashi explains that this is because they are addictive. Ultimately, one will crave them and come to spend all his money on them. (Rav died in the year 247; Rashi died in 1105. How little things have changed!)

G-d tells us, "The children of Israel are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, so they must not be sold as slaves" (*Lev. 25:42*). We must also not "sell ourselves" as slaves to addictions.

Just as the family of a literal slave has an obligation to try and redeem him from servitude (*Lev. 25:48*), we have an obligation to try and redeem others from the slavery of drug abuse and other addictions.



For Torah sources regarding alcohol, please refer to the *NCSY Torah on One Foot* pamphlet *Ad D'Lo Yada - Drinking on Purim*.

## low self-esteem

Many of the behaviors discussed in this pamphlet may be related to issues of low self-esteem. Sadly, this is nothing new.

The spies who investigated Israel were great leaders of their Tribes, but regarding the

*Nefilim*, whom they considered giants, they said, "We were like grasshoppers in our eyes and theirs!" (*Numbers 13:33*).

We have to remember that each of us is

made in the likeness and image of G-d! (*Genesis 1:27*)



## CHOOSE LIFE



Keep My decrees and My laws; the person who carries them out will live through them. (*Lev. 18:5*)

...and your fellow Jew will live along with you. (*Lev. 25:36*)

Do not stand idly by while another person is in danger. (*Leviticus 19:16*)

I set before you today the choice between life and goodness or death and evil. (*Deut. 30:15*)

One who saves a single life is as if he saved an entire world. (*Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 4:9*)

## TORAH THOUGHTS...

- If two people fight and one injures the other... he must pay for his healing. (*Exodus 21:18-19*)
- It is not permitted to live in a city without a doctor. (*Sanhedrin 17b*)
- Rav Huna asked his son Rabbah why he cut Rav Chisda's class. "Why should I go?" replied Rabbah, "He's not teaching Torah; all he talks about is how to protect our health!" Rav Huna answered his son, "He talks about health matters and you say it's not Torah? That's all the more reason you should attend!" (*Shabbos 82a*)
- A person may be able to diagnose others, but he can't diagnose himself. (*Negaim 2:5*)
- I, Hashem, am your Healer. (*Exodus 15:26*)

## WE KNOW, WE KNOW...

Sadly, just being told that the Torah does not permit something will not be enough to break someone of drug addiction, cutting, eating disorders or other destructive habits. But perhaps knowing this material can help someone not to fall into these dangerous practices, to seek help, or to help others.

**For more information and resources, visit the NCSY Drug and Alcohol Awareness Center at [www.ncsy.org/aware](http://www.ncsy.org/aware), and the "Safe Homes" link on [www.ou.org](http://www.ou.org).**

**SAFE HOMES. SAFE SHULS. SAFE SCHOOLS.**



NCSY is the youth movement of the Orthodox Union  
[www.ncsy.org](http://www.ncsy.org)

Distributed by NCSY and the OU Pepa and Rabbi Joseph Karasick Department of Synagogue Services

Eleven Broadway, New York, NY 10004