

The Cure Before the Illness

Jewish Law, Medicine, and Disease Prevention



Sharon Galper Grossman

MD, MPH

The Cure Before the Illness

Jewish Law, Medicine, and Disease Prevention

Matan
Maggid Books

The Cure Before the Illness
Jewish Law, Medicine, and Disease Prevention

First Edition, 2027

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.korenpub.com

© MATAN – The Sadie Rennert Women's
Institute for Torah Studies, 2027

Page 49, Prayer Before Exercise © 2021, Yisroel Golding;
page 547: By Permission, Chochmat Nashim
Photographer: Ruth Colian

The information presented in this book is intended for educational purposes only. This book is not intended to provide medical advice or to substitute for professional clinical judgment. Readers with health-related questions or concerns should seek the care of a licensed physician or other qualified healthcare professional.

The medical content reflects knowledge available at the time of publication and may change as medical research and understanding continue to develop. This book also discusses complex and nuanced halakhic matters on a general level; for application to specific cases, readers are encouraged to consult a qualified halakhic authority.

The publication of this book was made possible through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-719-4, *hardcover*

Printed and bound in the United States

Dedicated in memory and honour of

Louis and Gabi Weisfeld z"l

*who had a vision of advanced Jewish learning,
guided by love of Torah, Israel, Zionism and the Jewish people,
supporting Torah learning for men and women equally.*

The Weisfeld Family Charitable Foundation

Netanya, Highland Beach, FL, and Toronto



Dedicated in memory and honor of

Isi Leibler z"l

A lifelong lover of books and passionate supporter of Jewish learning, who devoted his life to the strengthening of the Jewish people and the defense of Israel. Through his leadership, writings, and unwavering commitment, he inspired generations and left an enduring legacy of courage, wisdom, and dedication to Am Yisrael.

By his wife, Naomi, and family

*This volume is part of Ematai's
Robert M. Beren Book Series in Bioethics and Halacha
dedicated in memory of the
esteemed communal leader*

Robert M. Beren ז"ל

*We gratefully acknowledge the generosity of
Robert M. Beren Family Foundation
Nancy T. Beren, Amy A. B. Bressman,
Julie Beren Platt and Adam E. Beren, Directors*

In Loving Memory of
Dr. Charles H. Feldman z"l

*Devoted husband and father, cherished grandfather,
compassionate doctor, and dedicated communal leader.*

*He lived by Jewish values and a deep commitment
to healing and service. May this book, exploring the
connection between Jewish values and medical practice,
carry forward the principles by which he lived.*

*May his memory be a blessing and his
legacy continue to heal and inspire.*

Rella Feldman and family

BS"D, 25 Nisan 5785

**LETTER OF ENDORSEMENT FOR
DR. SHARON GROSSMAN'S BOOK**

I reviewed sections of your book *The Cure Before the Disease: Preventive Medicine in Jewish Law* and found it to be of great value. As a member of Israel's National Health Committee, I am intimately familiar with the many complex deliberations surrounding the need to invest in preventive care, and not only in curative treatments.

Within the committee, we witness the steady rise in chronic illness and the high costs of treating conditions that have already developed. The imbalance between investments in treatment and investments in prevention is a concern shared by all who work in the field of public health. We recognize the urgent need to allocate more resources toward preventing obesity, encouraging physical activity, combating smoking, and other preventative efforts.

Your book contributes significantly to teaching the importance of prevention within halakhic discourse, integrating the guidance of *Hazal* (the Sages) with insights from modern medicine.

Allow me to share a personal story: My late father suffered a severe heart attack and was given a grim prognosis – just three months to live. At the time, conventional medical advice discouraged any physical activity for heart patients. But Professor Gottheiner, a pioneer in his field, advised my father to begin exercising. He started with short walks, which eventually became runs. In the end, my father was running 10 kilometers three times a week, and lifting weights three times a week – maintaining this routine for over thirty years! His story vividly illustrates the healing and preventative power of physical activity, and the enormous potential inherent in preventive approaches.

We must understand that even if we cannot prevent every illness entirely, every small step in the right direction matters. As the Mishna teaches: "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it" (*Avot* 2:16).

Your book is a vital contribution to the public conversation about the importance of prevention. I hope it will increase awareness of this issue among the broader public – and especially within the religious community. May many people take to heart the insights in your book and adopt healthier lifestyles, fulfilling the Torah's command, "You shall greatly guard your lives."

With blessings,
Yosef Zvi Rimon



יוסף צבי רימון

רב אזורי - גוש עציון
ראש הישיבה ורב המרכז האקדמי לב
נשיא סולמות ולאופק

רחוב קבוצת אברהם 10
אלון שבות 9043300

משרד: 02-9933644
נייד: 052-5456060
פיקס: 153-2-9933644

rimonim613@gmail.com



בס"ד, ר"ח אדר, תשפ"ה

Words of Appreciation and Blessing

The book *"The Cure Before the Illness: Disease Prevention in Jewish Law"* written by Dr. Sharon Galper-Grossman is unique and special.

Our generation has been blessed with G-d fearing doctors and scholars who combine medicine and *halakhah* both in their daily professional lives and in their research and writing.

Numerous books and articles have been written on various topics in *halakhah* and medicine. Some deal with the full range of clinical and research issues, while others focus on specific clinical matters such as fertility, pregnancy termination, end-of-life issues, malignant diseases, Sabbath and holiday observance, and the like.

The book before us does not deal with diseases but rather with their prevention.

Preventive medicine—keeping the healthy from becoming ill—is considered in Jewish law and thought to be of greater importance than therapeutic medicine for the sick. The Torah already states: *"Take utmost care and guard yourself diligently"* [Deuteronomy 4:9], and likewise, *"Be exceedingly careful about your lives"* [Deuteronomy 4:15]. From these verses, we learn the obligation to protect one's body from danger [Berakhot 32b; Shevuot 36a; Shulchan Arukh Choshen Mishpat 427:8], and in no other commandment is the word "exceedingly" used as it is in this commandment.

The foremost authority on preventive medicine in its broadest sense was Maimonides, who composed an entire book on this subject titled *"Regimen of Health."* In his *halakhic* work *"Mishneh Torah,"* Maimonides dedicated two chapters—chapters 3–4 in the Laws of *De'ot*—discussing personal preventive medicine, and two chapters—chapters 11–12 in the Laws of Murder and Preservation of Life—discussing the prevention of dangers. Maimonides established three main principles for the medical profession, the first and most honorable being the management of health, which is "maintaining the existing health so that it is not lost" [Regimen of Health, Second Gate, Section 1], meaning that preventive medicine is the most important component of the medical profession. Maimonides also determined that "since maintaining a healthy and sound body is among the ways of G-d—for one cannot understand or know anything about the Creator when ill—therefore, one must distance oneself from things that harm the body and accustom oneself to things that promote health and well-being" [Mishneh Torah, Laws of *De'ot*, Chapter 4, Law 1]. Other Jewish authors in the Middle Ages also emphasized the need for preventive medicine; for example, in *Sefer Hasidim* it is written: "And who is a wise physician? One who knows how to take precautions so that a person does not become ill, and if the person becomes ill, even though he may cure him, since he did not know how to take precautions, he is not a wise physician" [Sefer Hasidim (Margalit edition) #17].



Dr. Sharon Galper-Grossman has been engaged for many years in research, writing, and guidance for disease prevention. The results of her years of work are concentrated in the comprehensive book before us.

The topics included in the book are vital for disease prevention, and the author has skillfully complied extensive, updated, and reliable research and medical material, and faithfully reflecting the position of *halakhic* authorities in relation to them.

Dr. Sharon Galper-Grossman has invested great effort in distilling the many clinical studies in the fields of disease prevention, examining the *halakhic* sources addressing these issues, and especially in consulting with rabbis and physicians who have extensive experience in the relevant fields.

The book before us is an exceptional product of the extensive work that Dr. Sharon Galper-Grossman has invested in research, in compiling the vast material, and in the fluent formulation of topics of great importance for disease prevention.

The benefit of this book is not only for professionals but for anyone who will gain wisdom and understand their duty to maintain their health and prevent disease. The up-to-date and detailed scientific information on the one hand, and the *halakhic* information on the other, can convince everyone to follow the rules of preventive medicine that are reliably detailed in this book.

Rabbi Professor Avraham Steinberg

In the 1980s, Rabbanit Malke Bina began teaching a groundbreaking Talmud *shiur* for women, held around the dining room table of Lili Weil z"l. Inspired by this pioneering learning, Rabbanit Bina and her students envisioned an advanced Beit Midrash for women. This became a reality in 1988 with the establishment of Matan: The Sadie Rennert Women's Institute for Torah Studies. From its inception, Matan has been dedicated to cultivating high-level scholars, educators, and leaders, revolutionizing opportunities for women to engage deeply with Torah study.

Today, Matan has eleven branches, serving tens of thousands of students in Israel and worldwide. It offers intensive Beit Midrash programs in Bible, Talmud, Halakha and Jewish thought, continually raising the bar for women's Torah study. Additionally, there is a broad choice of weekly classes and series, Yemei Iyun in Israel and beyond, a summer learn-and-tour program, pre-holiday programming, an international mother-daughter bat mitzva program, and weekly *parasha* podcasts in Hebrew and English. Matan remains at the forefront of Torah study, inspiring and empowering the next generation through transformative Torah learning.

Kitvuni – Fellowship Program for Writing Torah Literature

In 2022 the Kitvuni Fellowship was launched, led by Dr. Yael Ziegler, a distinguished Matan graduate, senior lecturer and renowned author. The initiative nurtures exceptional *talmidot hakhamim*, supporting them in writing and publishing books of Torah scholarship across diverse fields. Kitvuni provides a structured framework, financial support, and professional mentorship for every cohort, ensuring that each scholar's work reaches its highest potential, in collaboration with Koren Publishers. The program is generously supported by Ann and Jeremy Pava, the Weisfeld Family Charitable Foundation, and additional donors.

The fourth Matan Kitvuni publication in English is *The Cure Before the Illness: Jewish Law, Medicine and Disease Prevention* by Dr. Sharon Galper Grossman. It explores Jewish law's approach to disease prevention and cutting-edge advances in preventing disease. Drawing on classical sources and contemporary rabbinic authorities, it examines topics from exercise and efforts to combat obesity, such as curbing overeating, weight-loss medicine, and bariatric surgery, to the health implications of alcohol and recreational marijuana, vaccination, cancer screening, BRCA testing, and other risk-reducing interventions.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>xvii</i>
1. Isn't It All from God? An Introduction to Disease Prevention in Halakha	1
2. Torah on the Treadmill: Exercise in Jewish Law	29
3. Halakha's Approach to Combustible Cigarettes	89
4. Smoking Versus E-Cigarettes: Is There a Difference?	110
5. Schnitzel, Fries, and Coke: Perspectives on Overeating and Obesity	155
6. Trans Fats and High Sugar Foods: An Initial Analysis	203
7. When Diet and Exercise Are Not Enough: Weight-Loss Surgery and Medication	235
8. Is It Time to Reassess Halakha's Approach to Alcohol?	293
9. Halakha's Approach to Recreational Marijuana Now That It Is Becoming Legal	348
10. The Evolution of Vaccines in Halakha	409
11. Screening Tests for the Prevention and Early Detection of Cancer	495
12. The BRCA Mutation: Hereditary Breast, Ovarian, and Related Cancers	552
<i>Afterword</i>	<i>649</i>

Preface

פִּתְחוּ־לִי שַׁעֲרֵי־צֶדֶק, אֲבֹאֲבֶם אוֹדָה יְיָ.

Open for me the gates of righteousness; I shall enter them and
thank God. (Psalms 118:19)

With these words, R. Yaakov Grossman *zt"l* opened his introduction to his *Darkhei Yaakov*. He then asked: “What new ideas have [I] advanced? Who called [me] to write this book? Aren’t all of [my] ideas discussed elsewhere?”¹ Inspired and humbled by generations of humility, I feel compelled to subject this book to similar scrutiny and explain why I have written it.

Do we really need another book on Jewish medical ethics? Why write a book about halakha’s approach to disease prevention?

In the last fifty years, an explosion of interest in Jewish medical ethics has given rise to an entire body of halakhic literature. Contemporary halakhic authorities have written extensively about halakha’s approach to the treatment of already present disease. They have discussed medical

1. R. Yaakov Grossman, the grandfather of my husband R. Dr. Shamai Grossman, published *Darkhei Yaakov* in Elul 5701 (August 1941). His sons R. Avraham Moshe Grossman and R. Rafael Grossman, my father-in-law *zt"l*, republished it in 5766 (2006).

dilemmas spanning the life cycle from conception to the end of life, and even preconception and post-mortem.

Advances in medicine have given us the ability to delay or even prevent disease, yet in halakha, disease prevention, as opposed to disease treatment, has received less attention. Many factors contribute to the relative dearth of contemporary halakhic discussion on this topic. First, it mirrors the disproportionate focus of the medical community and medical literature on the treatment of active disease and its more limited focus on disease prevention. Second, some preventive measures are so new that many physicians and the general public are not aware of their lifesaving potential. As a result, observant Jews might be less likely to turn to halakhic authorities with questions about them. In fact, some of these interventions are so cutting-edge that the halakhic authorities themselves might not be familiar with them or have not yet had reason to address them. This lack of information on disease prevention allows deep-seated prejudices and misconceptions about disease to fester. Now is the time for people to educate themselves and their communities about important steps that they can take to save their own lives.

I have written this book with the hope of filling this void by presenting halakha's approach to disease prevention in general, and its current approach to specific contemporary interventions that prevent disease and promote health. These include exercise; measures to prevent or mitigate obesity, including weight-loss medicine and weight-loss surgery; limiting alcohol consumption; avoiding recreational marijuana; getting vaccinated; staying up-to-date on screening tests for the prevention and early detection of cancer; testing for the BRCA mutation, whose presence indicates an elevated risk of developing cancer; and seeking out interventions to reduce the risk of disease.

I have tried to present these topics from their sources in the Talmud to the perspectives of *Rishonim*, the interpretations of *Aḥaronim*, and the opinions of contemporary halakhic authorities. In many cases, earlier *posekim* addressed these topics only indirectly while more recent ones tackle them head-on. For those topics on which halakhic authorities have not issued formal or in-depth rulings, I had the tremendous honor of reaching out to contemporary rabbis to ask them to weigh in with their position. I had the privilege to speak with R. Moshe Tendler zt"l

on multiple occasions on a range of topics, and will forever cherish my interactions with him. R. Professor Avraham Steinberg has contributed his perspective on virtually every topic in this book. I am grateful for his insight, his responsiveness, his willingness to read parts of the manuscript, and his unfailing willingness to help. R. Eliezer Melamed replied to my inquiry into halakha's approach to trans fats with a series of medical questions to help him better understand the dangers that these products pose. To answer his questions, I turned to the leader of the field of public health, Professor Walt Willett of the Harvard School of Public Health. I relayed Professor Willett's responses to R. Melamed, who asked even more questions. I was moved by the seriousness with which R. Melamed approached this issue, and with his thoroughness in formulating a response reflecting the most current medical and public health information. This process went through several iterations before R. Melamed issued a final ruling on trans fats. I marvel at having had the privilege of facilitating a dialogue between *kodesh* and *hol*. I am grateful to R. Shlomo Aviner, R. Yuval Cherlow, R. Yosef Zvi Rimon, R. Shabtai Rappaport, and R. Yitzchok Zilberstein for their willingness to answer my questions, review the medical information that I sent to them, and issue opinions on the topics that I raised. These exchanges and their positions have enriched this book by combining state-of-the-art medicine with the most current thinking of our great Torah leaders. I thank R. Shlomo Brody for his encouragement from the very beginning of this undertaking.

I humbly acknowledge that medicine is constantly evolving and some of the scientific data presented in this book is likely to change over time. This, and changing social realities, might also influence the *posekim*'s specific approaches to many of these preventive measures. However, the halakhic principles that this book presents are timeless.

Who am I to write *The Cure Before the Illness: Disease Prevention in Jewish Law*? The seeds of this book were planted in the Maimonides School in Brookline, Massachusetts, where the teachings and presence of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who greatly valued women's Torah learning, deeply inspired me. There, R. Dovid Shapiro took a special interest in my education and nurtured my love for Torah and mitzva observance. More than forty years later, he and his wife Miriam make a point of reading my

articles and attending my *shiurim*. Medical school at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine; residency in radiation oncology at the Harvard Joint Center for Radiation Therapy, under the mentorship of Drs. Jay Harris, Jane Weeks, and Abram Recht, leaders in the field of oncology; a Master of Public Health from the Harvard School of Public Health; and several years as an attending physician at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute at Harvard Medical School gave me the necessary background in medicine and public health to write this book.

In what can only be considered *hashgafa peratit*, our *aliya* to Ra'anana put me within a five-minute walk of the Morot L'Halakha program for advanced halakha learning at Matan HaSharon. I have been blessed to have spent the last nine years learning in the *beit midrash* of Matan HaSharon. I am tremendously grateful to Rabbanit Oshra Koren, founder and director of Matan HaSharon, for believing in me, giving me opportunities to teach and write, and mentoring and motivating me. My teachers Rabbanit Shani Taragin, R. Betzael Daniel, Rabbanit Batya Kraus, and R. Chen Sarig nurtured my love for halakha, inspired me, and directed me in my learning. R. Daniel gave me halakhic guidance regarding some of the topics in this book, presenting my halakhic questions to R. Zilberstein and connecting me with other halakhic authorities. I thank my nephew, R. Aminadav Grossman, for helping me find obscure sources, and R. Dov Popper, rabbinic advisor and genetic specialist at Machon Puah, for his availability and halakhic clarifications. My publications in halakhic periodicals, lectures, and podcasts at Matan, the Eden Center, and Machon Puah provided me with a forum in which to develop and explore the topics presented in this book.

"My mother told me to" might not be sufficient reason for writing this book. But it is not untrue. My mother read an article in the *Jerusalem Post* describing the Kitvuni Fellowship, a program Matan and Koren Publishers cosponsored with the goal of empowering female scholars to publish books of Torah scholarship. She sent me the article with the message, "You should apply for this." I listened, submitted the application, and was honored to be chosen as part of the first cohort of Kitvuni Fellows – the rest is history. I am grateful to Matan and Koren for believing in me, recognizing the merit of this topic, and giving me the opportunity to write this book.

To be part of Matan is to be part of a larger family dedicated to Torah, a family that embraces and supports its members with warmth. I cannot adequately express my gratitude to Rabbanit Malke Bina for her support and encouragement, and for her genuine interest in my writing; Chaya Bina-Katz for her ability to implement and execute; and to Dr. Yael Ziegler for her dedication to the Kitvuni Fellowship and the success of its fellows. As part of the program, I had the privilege to work with R. Dr. Edward Reichman, who guided me toward sources, discussed ideas with me, reviewed each chapter, and offered thoughtful feedback. His edits enhanced this book.

Given the subject matter's range and number of topics, the vastness of the relevant medical and halakhic literature, and the sheer number of sources I cite in each chapter, I enlisted the help of two individuals to edit this book. They helped ensure that it is academically and halakhically rigorous, clear and accessible to the reader, and meets the highest standards of halakhic and medical writing. First, I am grateful to R. Tzvi Sinensky for his careful and comprehensive edits. He read several drafts of this book, offered meticulous critiques and astute insights, and rigorously checked the extensive list of Torah sources one by one. Second, forty years ago, as a Harvard freshman, I met Ruth Leah Kahan, a fellow Bostonian, at Hillel. At the time, I never could have imagined that we would both end up in Ra'anana less than a block away from each other, and that she would play such an important role editing this book, patiently reading and rereading it thoroughly and scrupulously – and always with a kind word.

I thank Publisher Matthew Miller and Editorial Director R. Reuven Ziegler for their support, as well as the entire Koren staff. In particular, I am deeply grateful to Hanna Menashe for her professionalism, resourcefulness, and perseverance in securing copyright permissions for the images and references throughout this book. I thank Ita Olesker for her meticulous editing and insightful comments, which enhanced the manuscript and made it more readable, and thank Ruth Pepperman for proofreading the book. I am especially indebted to Managing Editor Caryn Meltz for her constant encouragement, for believing in me and in this book, and for her unwavering support. Her dedication, persistence, and willingness to go above and beyond ensured that the full breadth and richness of the book's content would reach publication.

Many people have taken the time to read specific chapters of this manuscript. Special thanks to Dr. Pnina Mor, Dr. Peggy Cottrel, Elana Silber, Dr. Naomi Marmon Grumet, Anna Olswanger, Dr. Jody Dushay, Dr. Amy Kesselman, and Dr. Merav Galper. I greatly appreciate their interest, the time they spent reviewing sections of this manuscript, and their thoughtful feedback and general support. Thanks to Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz for her insights into alcohol and substance abuse.

I am grateful to my parents, Dr. Jonas and Linda Galper, for their love and encouragement, for their unfailing commitment to Jewish education and academic excellence, and for standing up for what is right. My father, a doctor and scientist, a professor of medicine who runs an active lab, writes grants, and publishes articles, inspired me to become a doctor. He is a walking example of the life-saving benefits of living a healthy lifestyle. As much as my mother gave me the impetus to write this book and followed my progress each week, my father is the inspiration behind it. My in-laws, R. Rafael and Rabbanit Shirley Grossman *zt"l*, showered me with love and kindness. Each helped me reach this milestone. My mother-in-law was fascinated by my work. She read each of my articles and understood the science, the halakhic issues, and even the relevant sociological factors. On the last Yom Kippur before her death, my husband Shamai and I each gave a *shiur* to different audiences in our shul during the same time slot. She should have gone to hear her son speak. But she did not. Instead, she came to hear me, because she recognized the importance of women's learning. If she could see my book today, she would read it from cover to cover, not just the text but every footnote too. My father-in-law, inspired by the vast Torah knowledge of his mother, Chaya Sara, advocated strongly for women's Torah learning. This book is the realization of Chaya Sara's dreams and those of so many women like her who never could have conceived of the learning opportunities available to women today.

I thank my siblings and their spouses, Allan and Tamar Galper, David and Shira Galper, Ben and Merav Galper, Rachel and David Borden, Aviva Grossman and Lenny Teitz, Hillel Grossman and Debbie Braverman, and Shukie and Robyn Grossman for their unconditional love and constant interest in this book. My children, Naamah and Shlomo, Ezra and Tamar, Atira and Yaakov, Meira, Tehila, Elianna, Netanel, and

Akiva have watched with pride as I wrote this book, even when doing so meant that I could not spend time with them. They encouraged me to research and write, and to give *shiurim*, and they expressed interest in each topic as I explored it. They joked that by the time the book was done we would only be eating lettuce and carrots and would exercise around the clock with a *sefer* in our hands. Our lengthy discussions on these topics encouraged me to view these issues from fresh perspectives. To my husband, Shamaï, I am overwhelmed with emotion, grateful to Hashem for sending you to me, grateful that I have been blessed to share the last thirty-five years with you, and grateful for your unconditional love and support in everything that I do, but especially in writing this book. You have patiently and lovingly read multiple drafts of each chapter, listened to my ideas, shared my excitement with each accomplishment, and comforted me when I became discouraged. I wrote this book with you by my side, cheering me on every step of the way.

And finally, I have tremendous gratitude to Hashem for bringing me to this moment, giving me the strength, knowledge, and *zekhut* to write this book and to disseminate God's Torah.

Jews typically mark milestones and moments of joy with a blessing. Berakhot 59b teaches that when people experience personal joy, they recite *sheheḥeyanu*, and that when many will benefit, they recite *hatov vehametiv*. According to some halakhic authorities, people may recite *sheheḥeyanu* after purchasing a book, especially if they have waited a long time to read it and are joyous because they have acquired it.²

But how does one express gratitude upon the publication of a book? Some halakhic authorities rule that one should not recite *sheheḥeyanu* at all because they are concerned that even a single statement might be inaccurate.³ Others recite *sheheḥeyanu* without *shem umalkhut* (the name of God and reference to His kingship),⁴ while still others recite the blessing on a new fruit, having in mind that the blessing is also an expression of joy over having reached this milestone.⁵ More than a century ago,

2. *Mishna Berura* 223:13, citing Ḥayei Adam.

3. *Divrei Yatziv, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 92.

4. *Maḥazik Berakha* 223:7.

5. R. Chaim Kanievsky, cited in *HaKetav VehaMikhtav* 3:8, p. 304.

The Cure Before the Illness

R. Chaim Elazar Shapira of Munkatch pointed out that rabbinic figures recite *sheheḥeyanu* to mark the first time they read from a printed *sefer*, as not everyone merits this opportunity and printing was expensive. For this reason, he recited *sheheḥeyanu* upon publication of his own books.⁶ In this spirit and with immense gratitude, I thank Hashem for granting me life, sustaining me, and enabling me to reach this occasion, bringing me to this moment of seeing my work in print. May it bring joy, knowledge, and inspiration to all its readers.

Sharon Galper Grossman, MD, MPH
March 2026/Adar 5786
Ra'anana, Israel

6. *Minḥat Elazar* 4:65.

Chapter 1

Isn't It All from God? An Introduction to Disease Prevention in Halakha

“**Y**ou seem like an intelligent person, but you have made some very foolish choices regarding your health. You are playing with fire. Your current lifestyle puts you at a very high risk for developing diabetes which, as you know, can lead to severe health problems like a heart attack, stroke, amputation, kidney failure, blindness, nerve damage, and premature death. More pregnancies will only hasten this process. If you want a long, healthy life, consider this a wake-up call to make some major changes and adopt healthy behaviors. I wish you the best of luck.”

With these harsh words, my obstetrician concluded his postpartum visit with me. I was a twenty-four-year-old third-year medical student who had just given birth to her first child following a tumultuous pregnancy with insulin-dependent gestational diabetes, and I wanted to understand the long-term implications of the diagnosis. The doctor's brutal assessment and stark projection for my future shocked me. But he was not wrong. I had gained an inordinate amount of weight during

The Cure Before the Illness

the pregnancy, never exercised, and ate large quantities of pretty much whatever I wanted, including lots of unhealthy foods.

His warning jolted me into action, setting me on a thirty-year journey that has taught me to recognize the power of disease prevention. A few months after that visit, I allowed my sister-in-law to drag me to an exercise class. Ten minutes in, I was panting, red in the face, and felt like I was going to collapse. The other women kept going up and down on their steps without breaking a sweat, but I could not go on. I left the class early, feeling humiliated.

I could have given up then and there, but I was determined to halt or at least slow the natural progression from gestational diabetes to diabetes. So I tried again, this time taking a different approach. I bought an exercise video. In the privacy of my living room, I could follow the instructions, move at my own pace, and press pause if I needed. To my surprise, the thirty minutes passed quickly. Before I knew it, the instructor was looking into the camera and congratulating me on having completed the workout. I vividly recall the sheer joy and overwhelming sense of accomplishment. I did it. I made it to the end of the workout and had taken an important step toward improving my health. A few days later, I used the video again, and soon it became part of my routine. My new exercise regimen increased my energy, improved my mood, helped me control my appetite, and inspired me to make healthier food choices. The pounds started to melt away and I felt better. Over the next nineteen years, I gave birth to seven more children. During some of the pregnancies I had gestational diabetes, but I never again required insulin, and all my babies were born healthy and at normal weights.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), roughly 50 percent of women with gestational diabetes develop Type 2 diabetes.¹ For this reason, I do an annual blood test to make sure I have not developed diabetes. The very thought of the blood test makes me anxious. I worry: “What if the diabetes catches up with me? What if this time I have it?” But I go ahead every time, and so far, I have been able to dodge that bullet. I celebrate each negative test result and thank

1. tinyurl.com/3xjfkfku

Hashem for granting me another diabetes-free year. Each negative test result reminds me of the power of prevention.

But the reality is that a negative test result and *not getting a disease* are not particularly dramatic or inspirational. We tend to rejoice over interventions that reverse or mitigate the effects of an *already present disease*. Striking medical triumphs such as the successful resuscitation of someone who arrives pulseless in the emergency room or the cure of a patient with a life-threatening illness capture our imaginations and inspire admiration for the power of medicine. A negative test result is almost a non-event. We easily fail to appreciate the full impact of disease prevention, whose success is measured by the *absence* of disease. Yet, lack of excitement notwithstanding, its benefits are enormous.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

The saying, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,”² has become a fundamental principle of health care. Disease prevention involves measures that aim to avert disease (including injury), arrest its progress, and reduce its consequences. Classically, there are three categories of prevention,³ which differ in their starting times and effects. Primary prevention attempts to avoid illness before it occurs and includes getting regular exercise; eating a balanced diet; avoiding cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol; and getting immunizations to prevent infectious diseases. Secondary prevention aims to reduce the impact of a disease that has already occurred by detecting and treating it as quickly as possible, often before symptoms develop, in order to halt or slow its progression. It involves screening tests such as mammograms, PAP smears, and colonoscopies for early diagnosis of cancer, and routine health checkups for conditions like hypertension and diabetes. Tertiary prevention manages an existing, usually chronic disease to prevent complications or further damage, and to maintain quality of life. For example, for people with

2. *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (2nd ed.) notes that as early as the seventeenth century, we find the similar phrase, “Prevention is better than cure.” The dictionary adds, “The saying might have originated as early as the thirteenth century with the Latin expression, ‘It is better and more useful to meet a problem in time than to seek a remedy after the damage is done’”; tinyurl.com/22k4he6u.
3. www.researchgate.net/publication/310453018_Disease_Prevention_An_Overview

diabetes, tertiary prevention would include management of blood sugar, skin care, frequent examination of the feet, and regular exercise to ward off heart and blood vessel disorders.⁴ Each level of prevention plays a distinct role in promoting overall health and well-being.

Prevention is better than cure because stopping an illness from occurring is more effective and less expensive than treating people once they get sick.⁵ This is particularly true for chronic diseases, which impose a tremendous burden on patients and a strain on the health-care system.⁶ Over the last two decades, the prevalence of chronic disease in the US has risen steadily, and it continues to rise. Six of ten adults have a chronic ailment such as heart disease, respiratory illness, diabetes, cancer, or arthritis, and four in ten have two such conditions or more. Chronic diseases are the leading driver of healthcare costs⁷ and the principal cause of poor health, long-term disability, and death in the United States. Seven out of ten deaths are due to chronic disease.⁸ Heart disease and stroke alone contribute to one-third of all deaths. Of the top ten leading causes of death, five are due to or strongly associated with preventable and treatable chronic diseases.⁹ The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that if current trends continue, by 2050, chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and respiratory illnesses will account for 86 percent of deaths worldwide, a 90 percent increase from 2019.¹⁰ Chronic diseases can significantly compromise quality of life for patients and their families. We can attribute many of them to a short list of risky behaviors that includes smoking, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, substance abuse, and lack of compliance with screening recommendations.¹¹ Healthy living – which involves modifying these behaviors, screening for disease, and getting physical exams, counseling, and immunizations – helps ward off these diseases.

4. www.msmanuals.com/home/multimedia/table/three-levels-of-prevention

5. health.gov/news/202401/prevention-still-best-medicine

6. www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2019/18_o625.htm

7. www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/about/index.htm

8. www.cdc.gov/prevention

9. tinyurl.com/6wxv35rt

10. news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136832

11. www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2019/18_o625.htm

To what extent can these interventions improve health and prevent illness? Globally, one in five men and one in six women will develop cancer; one in eight men and one in eleven women will die of the disease. Based on current knowledge of risk factors, interventions could prevent 40 percent of all cancers worldwide.¹² Similarly, addressing behavioral risk factors such as tobacco use, unhealthy diet and obesity, physical inactivity, and harmful use of alcohol could prevent most heart disease.¹³ If 90 percent of the population were to adopt just these five preventive measures – daily aspirin use to prevent heart disease, an annual flu vaccine, colorectal and breast cancer screening, and interventions to support smoking cessation – it could save more than 100,000 lives each year in the US.¹⁴ Simple choices that we make throughout our day such as walking instead of driving to the store, or substituting fruit for French fries, can profoundly affect our health and our chances of developing chronic disease.¹⁵

Despite these benefits, few people take enough steps to prevent disease. In 2014, nearly three-quarters of uninsured adults over fifty did not have colorectal cancer screening, a service that can prevent and detect cancer early.¹⁶ In 2015, only 8 percent of American adults received every recommended clinical preventive service.¹⁷ In 2020, this number dropped to 5 percent, due at least in part to COVID-19. In 2023, fewer than half of US adults received a flu vaccine.¹⁸

In Israel, the overall picture is even more bleak. While the rate of childhood immunizations exceeds that of America, American children receive more types of vaccines than their Israeli counterparts. Americans appear to do better than Israelis regarding most other benchmarks of health promotion and disease prevention.¹⁹ Compared to the rest of the Jewish population, the Israeli *haredi* community receives less preventive

12. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7251356

13. [www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cardiovascular-diseases-\(cvds\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cardiovascular-diseases-(cvds))

14. tinyurl.com/3wawhacr

15. tinyurl.com/2chrshj5

16. www.tfah.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/The-Value-of-Prevention.pdf

17. www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2019/18_0625.htm

18. tinyurl.com/f3pbkytz

19. tinyurl.com/33es4bz6

care, gets fewer screening tests and immunizations, and tends to be less physically active. And the gap only continues to grow.²⁰

The public's disregard for disease prevention reflects the broader failure of the medical community and society-at-large to emphasize its potentially life- and cost-saving benefits. While nearly all medical students believe that chronic disease prevention is important, most report receiving little to no formal training in the topic.²¹ In the medical literature, the vast majority of studies focus on the cure of diseases; far fewer have examined data-driven preventive measures. Only fifteen of the fifty US states perform above average on preventive healthcare metrics.²² Less than 3 percent of the \$3.6 trillion the US spends annually on health goes to public health and prevention. Yet the US invests more in disease prevention than other countries with comparable levels of wealth.²³

Is this the Torah way? How does Jewish law approach disease prevention? In sharp contrast to the practice in secular society and even numerous Jewish communities, Jewish law places a high value on disease prevention.

20. Only 50 percent of *haredi* women aged forty or older have ever had a mammogram, compared to 80 percent of other Jewish women in this age group. Between 2010 and 2017, screenings for cancer (mammography, colonoscopy, and cervical screenings) dropped 22 percent in the *haredi* population. This group is also less likely than the broader Israeli population to engage in physical activity (en.idi.org.il/haredi/2018/?chapter=26185), and more likely to smoke. While 20 percent of Israeli adults smoke, the rate is 50 percent in the *haredi* population; www.jpost.com/health-and-wellness/article-806765. For a discussion of why observant Jews still smoke and the unique factors that might contribute to this phenomenon in the *haredi* population, please see chapter 3. For a detailed analysis of why rates of mammography are substantially lower in the *haredi* community compared to the non-*haredi* population in Israel, please see chapter 11. The absolute rates of mammography in the *haredi* and non-*haredi* populations there differ slightly from those that appear here because they are based on different studies. Despite these differences, both sets of data demonstrate that *haredi* women have lower rates of mammography than do non-*haredi* women. For a more detailed discussion of exercise for the *haredi* population, please see chapter 2.

21. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9872306

22. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7309216

23. tinyurl.com/653brkxd

Sources for the Obligation to Prevent Disease

The two most widely quoted sources for the obligation to prevent disease are *rak hishamer lekha* – “but watch yourselves scrupulously” (Deut. 4:9), and *venishmartem me’od lenafshoteikhem* – “guard yourselves carefully” (Deut. 4:15).²⁴ While the former verse warns us not to forget what we witnessed at Mount Sinai and the latter not to engage in idolatry, *Hazal* interpret these verses as also referring to the preservation of health.²⁵ Indeed, the Torah does not use the word *me’od* to describe any other mitzva.²⁶ The mitzva to build a *maakeh*, a parapet, also serves as a source for the obligation to prevent disease.²⁷ *Posekim* (halakhic authorities) apply the positive commandment to construct a *maakeh* broadly to establish a duty to remove any danger from our midst. One who does not eliminate this danger fails to fulfill this positive commandment and violates the negative commandment of “do not place bloodguilt on your house” (Deut. 22:8).²⁸ *Posekim* also derive the obligation to prevent disease from the commandment *vahashevoto lo*, the duty to restore lost property (Deut. 22:2).²⁹ R. Eliezer Waldenberg³⁰ extends the scope of this mitzva to encompass all members of society in the obligation,

24. Berakhot 32b and Shevuot 36a derive the obligation to prevent disease from these verses. Rambam, *Hilkhot Rotze’ah UShmirat HaNefesh* 11:4 and *Shulhan Arukh Hoshen Mishpat* 427:8 codify this law.

25. See R. Dr. Avraham Steinberg, *HaRefua KeHalakha* (Jerusalem, 2017), v. 3, p. 13, for an extensive list of *posekim* who believe that these verses address the obligation to protect one’s health.

26. *Pele Yoetz*, *Erekh Shemira*.

27. Deuteronomy 22:8.

28. Laws of Murder 11:4.

29. Bava Metzia 31a cites this verse as the source for the obligation to build a wall to prevent flooding that will destroy other people’s property. In the laws of *Gezela VeAveda* 11:20, Rambam codifies this requirement, as does *Shulhan Arukh Hoshen Mishpat* 259:9. Based on this, *Nishmat Avraham*, *Yoreh De’ah* 336:4, reasons that if a person must take steps to prevent a neighbor from suffering a financial loss, he must certainly act to prevent a loss of health. In *Peirush HaMishna Nedarim* 4:4, Rambam points to *vahashevoto lo* as the source for a physician’s obligation to heal the sick when he has the ability to save someone with his money, body, or knowledge. Citing Rambam’s interpretation of *vahashevoto lo*, *Nishmat Avraham* concludes that the same verse also obligates the physician to prevent disease.

30. *Tzitz Eliezer* 15:40.

meaning that even people who are not specially trained must do whatever they can to help others prevent disease.³¹

DISEASE PREVENTION IN THE TORAH, TALMUD, AND MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

The Torah, Talmud, and *Rishonim* (medieval scholars) are replete with instructions about disease prevention. What follows is just a brief sampling.³² The Torah includes many mitzvot that facilitate disease

31. Other verses that speak to the obligation to prevent disease include:

- “Do not destroy” (Deut. 20:19, the prohibition against wastefulness);
- “Do not render yourself disgusting” (Lev. 20:25, withholding relieving oneself);
- “Do not leave the house until morning” (Ex. 12:22), which the Talmud (Bava Kama 80b) interprets as requiring people to take precautionary measures during a plague;
- “Do not stand idly by” (Lev. 19:16);
- “The human became a living being” (Gen. 2:7), from which Rabbi Yose derives the obligation to preserve the body and soul (Ta’anit 22b);
- “Only the blood of your soul will I demand” (Gen. 9:5), from which *Sefer Ḥasidim* derives the obligation to save one’s body and money;
- “God will ward off from you all sickness” (Deut. 7:15), which the midrash (Leviticus Rabba 16:8) explicates to mean that we must act to avoid becoming ill;
- “And its owner failed to guard it” (Ex. 21:29), which, according to some (such as *Birkat Shmuel Bava Kama* 2), teaches that man is obligated to watch over his property and ensure that it does not cause damage or harm to others;
- “And you shall live by them” (Lev. 18:5). Yoma 85b derives from this verse the principle that *pikuah nefesh* overrides Shabbat. *Sefer Ḥasidim* (769) adds that one should walk four cubits after eating even if one is learning Torah, which suggests that the verse applies not only to the treatment of an existing disease but also to the active prevention of disease;
- “Do not test Hashem” (Deut. 6:16), which teaches us not to rely on miracles (*Shut Rashba* 1:413); and
- “Thorns and snares are in the path of the crooked; he who values his life will keep far from them” (Prov. 22:5), from which *posekim* (such as *Shut haRashbash* 195; see *HaRefua KeHalakha*, vol. 3, p. 14) conclude that a God-fearing Jew must not endanger himself and must protect himself as best as he can.

32. For a more complete treatment of this topic, please see R. Professor Avraham Steinberg’s *HaRefua KeHalakha*, v. 3, pp. 6–7.

prevention, illustrating its importance.³³ For example, the Torah promotes hygiene and limits our exposure to infectious and harmful substances. Deuteronomy 23:13–15 thus prescribes the establishment of a latrine outside of the military camp and requires soldiers to dig holes to cover their feces.³⁴ Although *tzaraat* is a spiritual disease, the Torah requires the afflicted person to leave the camp so that the affliction does not spread to others.³⁵

The Mishna and Talmud encourage disease prevention by instituting measures to protect public health. Mishna Bava Batra 2:9 teaches that one may not place animal carcasses, graves, or a tannery that processes hides within fifty cubits of a city. Sanhedrin 17b forbids a scholar to live in a city with no bathhouse. Bava Kama 60b rules that when there is a plague, one should minimize any time spent outside the house. Similarly, one who must venture outside should avoid the middle of the road, where the Angel of Death roams freely, and should rather remain on the shoulder.

The Talmud also offers detailed prescriptions for activities that promote health. Taanit 11a–b describes the human body (specifically the intestines) as a holy sanctuary and teaches that one should not fast when doing so will cause harm. Berakhot 40a recommends healthful foods, and Shabbat 140b teaches that it is worth spending money to purchase foods that promote health.

A story of Hillel the Elder, who left the study hall to visit the bathhouse, illustrates the importance that *Hazal* place on maintaining health. Explaining to his students that he was performing a pious deed, Hillel reasons:

33. I emphasize that this is not the primary point of mitzvot. Mitzvot have a spiritual function. In many cases, we do not know their purpose, nor does the Torah explain them. Nonetheless, their role in preventing disease speaks to the importance of disease prevention in Judaism. *HaRefua KeHalakha*, v. 3, p. 7.

34. *HaRefua KeHalakha*, v. 3, p. 7. Citing Rambam *Hilkhos Melakhim* 6:14–15 and *Sefer HaHinnukh* 566, R. Steinberg describes the proscription against defecating inside the camp as a positive commandment intended to preserve the camp's cleanliness. He lists additional mitzvot with the same goal – promoting hygiene – including washing one's hands before and after eating (see below).

35. Numbers 5:1–4.

If, in the theaters and circuses, the images of the king must be kept clean by the man to whom they have been entrusted, how much more is it the duty of man to care for the body, since he has been created in the image of the Divine. (Leviticus Rabba 34:3)

The *Rishonim* too discussed and highly valued disease prevention. Rambam dedicated a full book, *Hanhagat HaBeriyot*, and the third and fourth chapters of *Hilkhot De'ot* to the subject. In the second chapter of *Hanhagat HaBeriyot*, he suggests that disease prevention is the most essential component of medicine. In his medical writings, Rambam reiterates the importance of disease prevention, and he explicitly states that one must follow a physician's instructions regarding not only the treatment of already present diseases but also regarding disease prevention. As he puts it, "Know that medicine is an indispensable wisdom in every time and place, not only during illness, but also during times of health."³⁶ In *Yalkut Lekah Tov*, a compilation of essays which present moral and educational lessons from the *parasha*, R. Yaakov Yisroel Beifus presents an exchange between Rambam and the Sultan of Egypt in which Rambam describes disease prevention as an essential component of the physician's responsibility to his patients, one requiring even greater expertise than treating already existing disease. In support of this point, R. Beifus notes that during Rambam's tenure as physician to the Sultan, the Sultan himself never became ill. Since Rambam had never treated him for illness, the ruler asked Rambam how he could possibly assess the latter's medical expertise. Rambam replied that God is the healer of illness, and that "the ability of a physician to prevent illness is [therefore] greater proof of his skill than his ability to cure someone who is already ill."³⁷

R. Yehuda HeHasid similarly extols the virtues of a physician who practices disease prevention. "Who is the wise physician?" he asks. "The one who knows to warn people against illness and prevent illness. But

36. Rambam, *Ketavim Refuiyim*, v. 4, *Sefer HaKatzoret* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook), 1965, pp. 110–11. Translation by R. Yigal Shafran, traditiononline.org/halakhic-attitudes-towards-immunization.

37. Y. Ben Shlomo HaKohen and R. H. Schwartz, "Prevention: Torah Perspective on Preserving Health," www.jewishveg.org/schwartz/health.html.