

## Exercise, Torah Learning and the Chofetz Chaim

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We are all aware today, at least to some extent, of the health benefits of regular exercise. Indeed, studies show that exercising regularly improves one's mood, helps combat chronic diseases, helps one manage his or her weight, strengthens one's heart and lungs, promotes better sleep, etc. Keeping physically active can prevent major illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and colon cancer. Despite this, about two in three men and three in four women do less than 30 minutes of moderately intensive activity on at least five days a week.

It is clearly important that all of us engage in aerobic exercise often, since it is a method of fostering good health, something that the Torah requires us to do. However, Hamodia readers may be surprised to learn that there is apparently a connection between regular exercise and success in Torah learning.

In his article **Physical Culture in Rabbinical Literature in Modern Times** [Korot, vol. 15, 2001, pages 56 – 95] Aaron Ahrend writes on pages 62 to 63:

“Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hachohen, the Hafetz Haim, surprisingly enough, adopted this approach, in an extreme manner at the beginning of the century. In a lecture on ethics which he gave at the yeshiva of Radin in 5653, he did not address the issue of engaging in physical activity at the expense of Torah study, but rather the obligation and the imperative of doing so. In his view, avoiding physical activity because of *bittul torah* is advice of the evil inclination, since by doing so, man is weakened and consequently is completely devoid of Torah, as he says:

Do not study overmuch. Man must preserve the body so that it is not weakened, so that it does not fall ill, and for that it is crucial to rest and relax, to breathe fresh air. A walk should be taken toward evening, or sit at home and rest. When possible, a swim in the river is good for strengthening the body. Overindulgence in study is the advice of the evil inclination, which counsels working too hard in order to weaken the body, after which the person will be obliged to refrain entirely from Torah study, so that in the end his reward is his loss.

The Hafetz Haim himself explains the background to his approach later in the discussion: he related that during his youth he studied more than his strength would allow and weakened his eyes, subsequently the doctors ordered him not to read for two years, so that his reward was his loss. (See testimony of R. P. Mankin in *Shaarei Tziyon*, Tammuz-Elul, 5694 [1934], p.45)”

In light of the above, shouldn't our yeshivas encourage boys and girls to get regular exercise? Shouldn't they provide facilities for physical activity and build time for this into the yeshiva/Bais Yaakov day? After all, good habits acquired when one is young are often the foundation for actions later in life. On the other hand, it is most difficult to convince a person who has been brought up living a sedentary life to change their way of life when they get older.