



## ***Guarding Health to Guard The Soul***

***"But you shall greatly beware ("v'Nishmartem") for your souls, for you did not see any likeness on the day Hashem spoke to you at Chorev, from the midst of the fire." (Devarim 4:15)***

Several Pesukim earlier the Torah states:

*"Only beware for yourself ("Rak Hishamer Lecha") and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life, and make them known to your children and your children's children." (4:9 ibid.)*

To what do these two Pesukim ("v'Nishmartem" and "Rak Hishamer Lecha") refer?

The Gemara (*Brachos 32b*) tells the following anecdote:

*There was a certain pious man (Chasid) who was Davening on the side of the road. A government officer came and greeted him but he did not reply. The officer waited until the man had finished Davening and said to him, "Empty one – surely it says in your Torah 'Only beware for yourself...and beware for your soul' ("Rak Hishamer Lecha") and it also says 'But you shall greatly beware for your souls' ("v'Nishmartem"). If so, when I greeted you, why did you not return my greeting? If I would have beheaded you with this sword, who would have held me accountable?"*

*The Chasid replied – "Allow me to appease you. If you were standing in front of a human king, and your friend had greeted you – would you have replied to him?" "No", said the officer. "And if you would have replied what would they have done to you?" "They would have beheaded me with a sword", he said.*

*"If so", said the Chasid, "there is a Kal va'Chomer: If that is the mode of behavior when one stands in front of a human king, who is here today but may be in the grave tomorrow, then I who was standing in front of the King of Kings, Ha'Kadosh Baruch Hu, who endures for all eternity, all the more so!"*



*Immediately the officer was appeased and the pious man was able to return to his house in peace.*

The officer who accosted the pious man, cited the two Pesukim of “v’Nishmartem” and “Rak Hishamer Lecha” as proof that a person must guard his life. However, he appears to have taken both out of context. The Pasuk of “Rak Hishamer Lecha” is explained by the Ramban (*Devarim ad. loc.*) to be an admonition not to forget one’s Torah learning. He proves this from the Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* (3:8): “Rebbi Dostai b’Rebbi Yanai says in the name of Rebbi Meir: The Torah considers anybody who forgets anything of his learning as though he was liable to the death penalty, as it says **“Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld”**.”

The Pasuk of v’Nishmartem that was also cited by the officer (and countless others over time) as a source for the Mitzva of guarding one’s life, also seems to have been taken out of context. Rather than exhorting a person to guard his life, it appears to command him to take care not to believe in *Avodah Zarah!*

The Mitzva to guard one’s life can, in fact, be derived from the *Mitzva* of erecting a *Ma’akeh* – a fence surrounding a parapet, balcony or roof. Ostensibly, the purpose of the Mitzva, is to ensure the safety of those who frequent the area – a clear source for the obligation to guard one’s life in general. The Rambam (*Sefer ha’Mitzvos, Mitzvas Aseh 184 & Mitzvas Lo Sa’aseh 298*) and *Sefer ha’Chinuch* (546 & 547) both write that this is indeed the source for this Mitzva.

If so, why are the Pesukim quoted above commonly assumed to be the source of this Mitzva? We cannot attribute this to the officer’s erroneous citation that subsequently became entrenched on the basis of this famous story as it was not only the officer that did so – the Gemara in *Shavuos* (36a) also cites the Pasuk of “Rak Hishamer Lecha” as proof that one may not curse oneself! This Pasuk is quoted by the Rambam (*Rotzeach 11:4-5*) and *Shulchan Aruch* (*C.M. 427:8*) as well, as the source for the obligation to remove obstacles that could cause harm. How can the Gemara, Rambam, and *Shulchan Aruch* all cite a Pasuk seemingly out of its context?

The *Minchas Chinuch* discusses this and writes that while it is very possible that the officer in the Gemara in *Brachos* was deliberately quoting the Pesukim of “Rak Hishamer Lecha” and “v’Nishmartem” out of context (for this was common



among the heretical nations of the time), the *Rambam's* usage of the Pasuk is very puzzling. He concludes that the *Rambam* must have had some source in *Chaza"l* that we are not aware of.

The *Chafetz Chaim* (*Shem Olam* 2:10) writes as follows:

*A man should accustom himself during all of his days to the following thought: He has been sent to this world by the Blessed Almighty to do His will and to direct all of his actions to this goal. For the reality is that there is no moment in all of a person's life in which he can consider himself to be acting only for himself. Not only while he learns Torah or performs Mitzvos where he is clearly acting as G-d's agent, but even when he takes care of his physical wellbeing (such as eating, drinking or conducting business) he should know that that is also a part of his mission. For it is God's will that man should sustain his body as it says "But you shall greatly beware for your souls" ("v'Nishmartem"), and it also says "beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul" ("Rak Hishamer Lecha").*

*In both of these verses, the Torah commands us to guard our "Nefesh" (literally "soul") when issuing the command to guard our bodies (or health). This teaches us that when a person is occupied with guarding his health, he should see to it that he is not damaging his soul in the process. For it is common that the very acts of guarding one's health can often bring harm to the soul. For this reason, the verse concludes with the words "and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld".*

These seminal words of the *Chafetz Chaim* give us a new perspective on the Mitzva of guarding one's health. The terms coined by *Chaza"l* to describe this Mitzva and the terms used by the Torah itself, all make use of the word "Nefesh" (soul) such as "v'Nishmartem M'od l'Nafshoseichem", "Pikuach Nefesh" and "Hatzolas Nefashos". We commonly ascribe these terms to the notion of guarding one's body or health, and indeed, simply speaking, they do refer to the precautions we take to ensure the health of the physical body. However, in real terms, our concern is for the health of our *Nefesh* and we guard our bodies, not because of the intrinsic value of the physical self but because they serve as a home for our souls. One important step to ensuring a healthy soul is to ensure the health of the body in which it is housed.



With this perspective we can well understand how the Pesukim of “v’Nishmartem” and “Hishamer Lecha” can serve as the sources for the Mitzva to guard one’s health. In context, as we noted above, they refer to the obligation to remember one’s Torah learning, to reject idolatry, and to never curse oneself. These obligations are crucial to the health of the soul. A person must believe in his own spiritual potential and not place a curse on himself, remember never to veer towards the path of idol-worship, and ensure to provide his soul with its coveted nourishment through constant study of Torah and ensuring that he does not forget its holy words.

However, in *Chaza”l*’s eyes, it was obvious that these obligations include a mandate to guard our health as well, for without a body the soul has no place to reside. These two Pesukim comprise all of the ingredients needed to ensure a healthy soul, including a healthy body.

This also lends us a new perspective on the law of “*Yehareg v’Al Ya’avor*” (sacrificing one’s life to avoid violating one of the three cardinal sins). Typically, we would consider the circumstances in which a Jew is compelled to choose between committing a sin and losing his life as a battle between his obligation to guard his body and guard his soul<sup>1</sup>. However, in light of the above, we can say, that the importance of a person’s body is only to the degree that it aids and abets his soul in completing its mission in the world. Where heinous spiritual damage would ensue if he would commit a sin, he is obligated to sacrifice his life to avoid it, for there would be no value in guarding his physical body in those circumstances.

We conclude with the beautiful words of the *B’eir ha’Golah* (C.M. 427:90):

*I believe that the reason the Torah exhorted a person to guard his health is because Hashem created the world out of kindness, with the purpose of doing good to the beings whom He created. He wanted them to be able to recognize His greatness and perform His service by fulfilling His Mitzvos and His Torah, as the verse states “Everyone who is called by my name and whom I have created for my glory” (Yeshaya 43:7), and He could then reward them greatly for their efforts. Somebody who places himself in danger is as though he is disgusted by the desire of his Creator and neither wants to perform His service nor does he*

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<sup>1</sup> And in most cases the obligation to guard one’s body trumps the obligation to guard one’s soul yet in the setting of the three cardinal sins, the opposite is true.



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פרשת ואתחנן תשע"ט

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*desire the reward for doing so. This greatly degrades the service of Hashem and there is no greater act of heresy than that.*