

# SWITCHH Newsletter (Soveya Wellness Initiative To Create Healthy Habits)

## “WE HAVE TO CONTROL OURSELVES”

### **Torah thought on health and nutrition:**

Soveya had the great privilege this week to sit down with one of the leaders of our generation, HaRav Shmuel Kamenetsky, shilta, Rosh HaYeshiva of the Yeshiva of Philadelphia.

The conversation focused on what should be the proper changes we need to make as individuals and as a community in light of the obesity epidemic in America and the prevalence of junk food and sweets to which our children have access.

Q [Soveya]: “The obesity epidemic is the #1 health issue in the United States today. The National Institutes of Health report that 70% of Americans are either overweight or obese. Excess weight gain is a primary cause of many chronic and fatal medical conditions including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and several forms of cancer. What should be our response as Jews to this epidemic?”

A [HaRav Kamenetsky]: “We have to work on it, no *shaila* (question) about it. We have to control ourselves. Everything should be with a norm. The sweets today are very bad.”

Q [Soveya]: “What about using sweets, soda and candies as rewards in yeshivas and schools?”

A [HaRav Kamenetsky]: “It’s too much - they need to cut it out. They should give healthier bribes. Fruit is much healthier than candy.”

Q [Soveya]: “What if they say that a child won’t respond to a fruit the same way as a candy?”

A [HaRav Kamenetsky]: “They have to work it out. They have to convince a child that it’s healthier for him and he should go for it.”

Q [Soveya]: “How would a *rebbe*, *menahel*, or parent convince a child of that?”

A [HaRav Kamenetsky]: “Tell him that his entire life will be different. He will live like a *mentsch*, not like a *chaiya* (animal). “To control himself – that itself should be an incentive for a child. A child also knows when he has no *shlita* (control) over himself. He sees a candy, he jumps for it.”

Q [Soveya]: “The *Rambam* writes (in his Commentary on the Mishna, introduction to *Perek Chelek - Sanhedrin*) about using incentives for children who are not old enough to learn *Torah l’shma* (just for the sake of learning). He says to begin with using food (nuts, figs, or a little honey) and then as the child gets older, new clothing will motivate him to learn; and then the next stage is money.

The *Rambam* seems to suggest that changing the incentives is based on trying to develop the maturity of the child. At first, he only values food, which is an immediate and temporary gratification. Then clothes, which have an immediate enjoyment but are not as intense a physical pleasure as food, and also last a longer time. And then money which has no immediate gratification (the child can’t eat it or do anything with it right away), but has to delay his enjoyment until he can find something on which to spend. Is the *Rambam* saying that when we need to use rewards we should do it in a way that helps develop the maturity of the child from moving away from immediate gratifications toward delayed gratifications?”

A [HaRav Kamenetsky]: “Yes, that’s the *pshat* (explanation).”

Q [Soveya]: “Should we try to use that as an example (when using rewards for our children) - the *pshat* of *Rambam*?”

A [HaRav Kamenetsky]: “Yes.”

Q [Soveya]: “Does this issue affect us spiritually as well, or is it only a physical problem?”

A [HaRav Kamenetsky]: “*Taavas haguf* (strengthening and indulging the desires of the body) is itself enough. When we lose control of course it hurts our *ruchniyus* (spirituality). There’s no *shaila* it affects our *ruchniyus*. We are letting the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) take over. Losing control of yourself is very bad.”

Q: “When we gain a lot of weight, we are harming our health and putting ourselves at great risk (G-d forbid) for many health problems.”

A [HaRav Kamenetsky]: Being overweight is a *machala* (an illness). Your heart has to work harder. Overeating is hurting yourself – it’s an *aveirah* (transgression). Plus, you’re strengthening your *yetzer hara*. You’re putting yourself in a *makom sakana* (a dangerous situation).”

- The accuracy of this transcript was approved by  
 HaRav Kamenetsky -

