Gary Boehr from Ossining, NY wrote:

Rabbi, please tell me if it is appropriate to say a blessing before exercising, such as a workout in a swimming pool. I understand that it is a mitzva to take good care of the body.

Dear Gary,

You posed an excellent question. Exercise is certainly a mitzva when done for health reasons. The Torah says "...guard your life very carefully..." (Hishamer Lecha U’shmor Nafshecha Me’od).” This means a person should do the utmost to preserve his health and prolong his life.

Maimonides states “It is a positive mitzva to remove any impediment that might pose a danger to life, and to be extremely cautious in this regard.” In his Hilchot De’ot, Maimonides, who himself was a renowned physician, recommends exercise for preventing illness and for promoting good health.

Now to your question: Why don’t we make a bracha before exercising?

Since I’m Jewish, I’ll answer your question with another question: What about other mitzvot such as honoring parents, visiting the sick, giving charity etc. — why don’t we make a bracha before performing these mitzvot? For which mitzvot did our Sages institute brachot and for which did they not?

There are various explanations given by Rabbinical authorities:

The Rashba lists ten categories of mitzvot for which our Sages did not institute a bracha, one of which is as follows:

A mitzva that does not entail doing a particular deed.

Well, certainly maintaining good health does not entail any specific action, such as exercising. Eating, sleeping, and looking both ways before you cross the street also help. By quitting smoking and avoiding overeating, you improve your health by not acting. Since promoting health does not entail any particular act, it does not require a bracha.

The Ohr Zarua explains otherwise. He states that there are basically two categories of mitzvot:

- Mitzvot performed only at certain times, such as tzitzit, tefillin, and succah. These mitzvot, since they are not always available, bring a person to a special sense of joy. Therefore, they require a bracha.
- Mitzvot which obligate a person at all times, such as believing in Hashem, honoring parents, and visiting the sick. These mitzvot, since they are always at hand and their performance thus naturally lacks the same sense of joy, don’t require a bracha.

Promoting good health would be included in this second category: It is an ongoing mitzva from which a person is never absolved, and would not require a bracha.

Keep exercising, then, realizing that you are doing a mitzva whose real “bracha” is in promoting good health that will help you accomplish as much as possible in this life.

Which reminds me of a joke: A guy complained to his friend, “My doctor put me on such an exercise schedule! Every day, 50 push-ups, 100 sit-ups, and then a 20 mile run! It’s so exhausting I can hardly stand it!”

“Wow!” said his friend, “W hen did you start?”

“I start tomorrow.”

Sources:
- Devarim - 4:9.
- Rashba - Responsa, Orach Chaim #18.
- Ohr Zarua - Part 1, 140.

This week’s riddle!

Where in the prayers do you find four different, consecutive words that all have the same root? (Hint: It’s not said every day.) Answer next week...

Submitted by Mike Turniansky