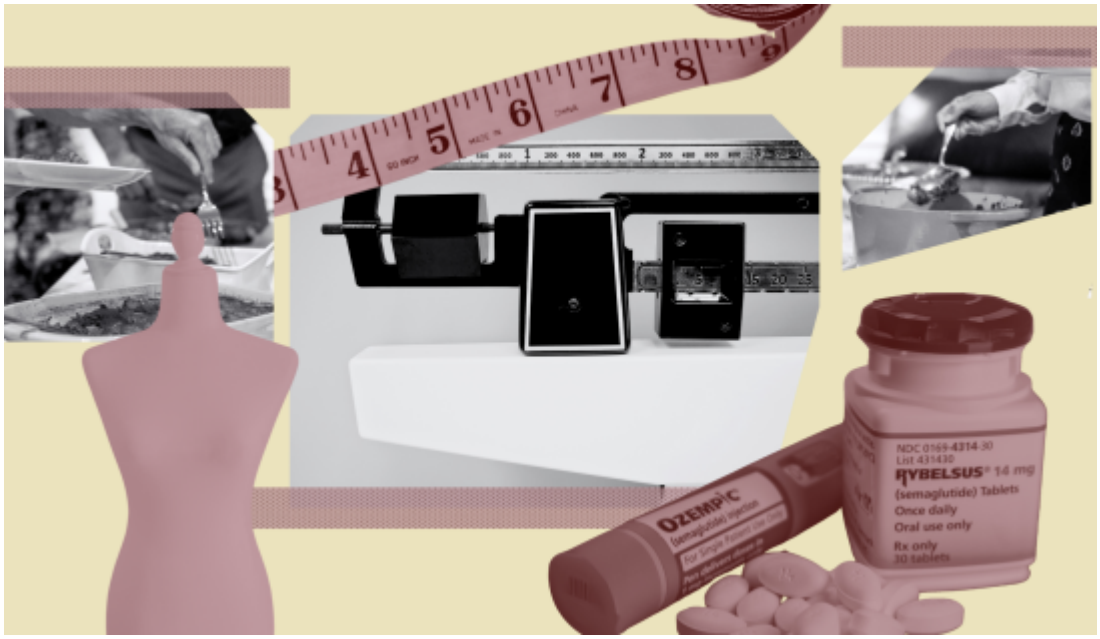
Why Developing a Healthy Body Image is Part of Teshuva



“Ugh, I feel so disgusting that I ate so much over yontif.”

“I’m going to have to go on a serious diet after Tishrei ends.”

“Thank God we have a fast coming up—I could use the break from eating.”

Sound familiar to anyone? I’m sure we have all spoken similarly to ourselves at one point or another. And now, while we are working in Elul to prepare for the holiest days of the year, we are also entering a month of shopping, cooking, preparing, serving, and eating. When eating and food take center stage—as Jewish holidays demand—self-deprecation over our bodies can be particularly acute. This time of year is centered around teshuva, return, repentance, and I believe that developing a healthy body image is no less a part of that spiritual obligation.

As the owner of a women’s and girls’ clothing store for over 15 years, I heard a lot of derogatory self-talk. I noticed that almost everyone had strong feelings over their appearance, body shape, or size at one time or another. They struggled to feel comfortable in and with their bodies. For me personally, as someone who struggled with my own eating disorder as a teen, this hit me hard. It affected me deeply and guided my professional and personal goals of helping others feel at home in their bodies.

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I battled anorexia nervosa for several years as a teen. It was a terribly difficult and isolating time for me. I withdrew from my family and my friends. All my energy was focused on what I wasn't going to eat, how many calories were in everything I did eat, and how much I was going to exercise and keep moving. It was all I could think about, all day, every day. My eating disorder was all-consuming, intense, and took over my life. I thought I was in control, but the reality was that my eating disorder held all the cards.

I received so many compliments on my appearance; everyone wanted the secret to what I was doing. The fact that I was tired, had constant headaches and stomachaches, was unable to focus, was constantly cold and shivering, withdrawing from my friends and family, no longer menstruating, constantly worried about my exercise and eating habits, feeling dizzy and weak, and getting sick all the time didn't matter to me. I was the skinniest person in my class and in my family, and I had the most self-control and willpower. At least, that is how my eating disorder brain saw it.

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Fast forward to 2020 when I completed my doctorate in Educational Leadership in Behavioral Health. I studied the unique risk factor considerations of Jewish Orthodox girls for eating disorders. I discovered that, in contrast with the non-Jewish world, we have unique considerations and higher risk overall. That led to the creation of Atzmi, a nonprofit providing empirically created and Torah-based curriculum for young Jewish girls, as well as programs for mothers and teachers to help with body image and head off eating disorders. At the same time, the need applies to everyone.

Statistically, over 75% of adolescent girls do not like their bodies. Those numbers only grow as we age, with over 85% of women over 21 feeling uncomfortable with or in their bodies. Girls as young as three already perceive thin as good and fat as bad. Research has also found that 81% of 10-year-olds are afraid of being fat, 80% of 13-year-olds have attempted to lose weight, and between 35-57% of adolescent girls have engaged in some form of crash dieting, fasting, self-induced vomiting, use of diet pills, excessive exercise, diuretics, or use of laxatives. These dangerous behaviors can lead to a host of negative physical outcomes including eating disorders, malnourishment, reduced ability to cope with stress, long-term weight gain, reduced drive to care for yourself, and poorer health overall. But we understand that this can be hard to change due to the messages we are often bombarded with.

Between 9-12% of people in the United States will indeed be diagnosed with an eating disorder in their lifetime. This is equivalent to almost 30 million Americans and an estimated 70 million worldwide. These numbers refer only to those with a diagnosed disorder and do not reflect how many people are struggling with food, their body, and eating in general. That number is assumed to be much, much higher. For Jewish women and girls, there are studies that show we are up to two times more likely to struggle with an eating disorder compared with the general population.

The Religious Value of a Healthy Self-Image

A healthy self-image extends into every aspect of a person's life and is integral to our overall health. Health, of course, does not only refer to our physical well-being but also comprises our emotional, mental, and spiritual health. Self-image and body image are intimately connected and are a large part of our emotional and mental health. Self-image and body image directly influence one another as well as a person's overall feelings, thoughts, and actions. When someone struggles with poor body image or has negative feelings about their appearance or overall worth, it becomes a struggle for them to feel good about and recognize the value of their true and unique self.

But why is that so? Logically we know that our physical appearance is not as important or as valuable as our connection to Hashem, our character, our talents, skills, abilities. And yet, we emotionally feel as though it is. Part of this is due to the mixed messaging we both hear and give. We might be surprised to think about what we say to people when we meet them in shul, on the street, or in the store. We spend a lot of time and energy complimenting people on how they look. "You look great, have you lost weight?" "I love that dress/skirt/ top you're wearing." "Your sheitel looks fabulous, is it new?" We tend to focus on external things primarily creating confusion about what it is that is of real and authentic value.

We say every day in Ashrei—*L'hodiya livnei haodom g'vurosav u'chvod hadar malchuso*. The literal translation is that Hashem wants to tell people about His own strength and His own royalty. The great Chassidic master, Maggid of Lechovich, gave an alternate interpretation: "we talk so much about Hashem's greatness because He wants that every one of us should notify and tell (*l'hodiya*) every person their own strength (*g'vurosav*). The idea is to teach everyone we know or meet about their own majesty, beauty, glory, and holiness. Hashem's infinite greatness reinforces our own innate worth as a part of Him and a part of Creation.

Logically, we know that our physical body, our *guf*, has tremendous value and importance, but sometimes our emotions, thoughts, and feelings sometimes cause us to stumble. And so, the value of our *guf* and how to relate to and care for it properly, is not always the message that is communicated, modeled, or understood by our children or even ourselves.

For someone who receives encouraging messages about their weight loss or small size, this can become a primary motivator over other things in their life. It can lead to an obsession with their bodies or their desire to have that type of attention pair to them. It becomes a reinforcement for any and all behaviors that will earn them more praise, admiration and compliments.

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A member of my local community confided in me that she went on a medical weight loss program and lost a significant amount of weight, over 100 pounds. She said that as soon as she lost weight, people began to pay more attention to her because she was thinner. They wanted to know what she had done to lose the weight, what is her secret? There were many who had never spoken to her before who were all of a sudden befriending her, talking to her, and treating her quite differently. This actually made her feel worse for losing the weight and as if she was only worthy if she was thin. She said now that she has gained back some of the weight, those same people are no longer paying attention to her.

This does not mean we should denigrate our bodies. On the contrary, we need to love and accept our bodies because they are a divine gift from Hashem to carry us through life. The Torah highlights the beauty of many women—such as Sarah, Rivka, and Rochel—and even some men. This demonstrates that the Torah ascribes value to all beauty—even the physical variety when done correctly. The real problem arises when our calorie intake, weight, and body size overtakes our lives and threatens our wellbeing.

Ultimately, though, we get to choose what we spend our time, energy, and resources on. We can make changes in our thoughts and behaviors. We can stop comparing ourselves to other people, we can focus on taking care of ourselves in a healthy, balanced way without being forced to achieve a certain shape or size or weight, and we can most definitely learn to speak to ourselves in more positive and affirming ways.

As we continue the inner work teshuva entails, we ought to consider the outer work, as well. Learning how to talk and think about our bodies is a good place to start.

Dr. Marcy Forta is the founder and director of Atzmi, a nonprofit supporting the mental health of adolescent girls, providing workshops for girls, their parents and educators; she also provides support and guidance for loved ones of adolescents struggling with eating disorders, and consults with schools, mental health professionals, and parents. She is also the author of the recently published How Can I Help My Daughter? A Mother's Guide to Nurturing Her Daughter's Best Self *(*Mosaica Press*), as well as the accompanying Mother/Daughter companion curriculum to facilitate open communication with one's daughter.*