

# Too Much Weight



As from women, we know it's our essence that counts, and that this essence is beautiful. But what happens when our appearance dictates our sense of self-worth? How can we feel good at every size?

A candid look at obsession with body image, its repercussions, and approaches to liberation

Shiffy Friedman



**Fascinating  
Wellspring  
survey**

Are You Happy  
With Your Size?

“Coronavirus is a plague and every time I hear of another fellow Yid who's suffering from it, I'm in pain. For me, it means making Pesach all on my own in my basement apartment in Lakewood, as opposed to moving in to my parents' home and spending time with family.



But honestly, I've never looked forward to Pesach so much like I am this year,” admits Baila, an accomplished young mother of three. What, you may wonder, possesses her to issue such a statement? She's not a great fan of the kitchen, nor an ardent introvert. But she does care about how she looks. Very, very much so. “I'm so obsessed with my size, so ashamed of my appearance, that I'd rather languish through a boring, quiet Yom Tov free of social engagements than having to show up in a more public setting.”

If your mind's eye pictured Baila as a morbidly obese individual, you have it all wrong. She's willing to disclose her size under anonymity, of course, but it's entirely irrelevant. That's because, as painful as it may be for Baila and women like her, body image issues have little to do with appearance. In essence, it's a feeling of repulsion toward oneself that is projected toward one's appearance. In other words, I don't feel good about myself and I need to make some logic of it. I need to answer the question of “Why do I feel this way?” Therefore, my size becomes the perfect object to fixate upon.

## This Dress For My Daughter

How has it happened that size has become such a central component to self-image? By and large, the roots are societal — stemming from messages we perceive both globally and individually.

In the world at large, thinness is still very much associated with beauty, to the extent that those who are not especially slender may find it difficult to purchase clothing that suits their shape and size. Elisheva Shapiro, a Cedarhurst native now living in the Ramat Eshkol neighborhood in Yerushalayim, is one trailblazing woman who experienced frustration in her quest for a dress — and did something about it. “When my sister was getting married a couple of years ago, I was looking for a gown to wear at the wedding. I'd lost a lot of weight and I liked the way I looked,” says Elisheva, whose confidence and candor I find endearing. “I went to every single store, but nothing off the rack fit me. I remember saying to one saleslady, ‘I'm not fat. Why am I made to feel like I'm huge? This is ridiculous!’”

Since Elisheva had been fashion-oriented prior to this frustrating experience, even designing gowns for family and friends, she decided to be the change she wanted to see in the world. And so, she opened her own gown boutique, featuring exquisite pieces that she designed and had sewn by an expert seamstress, as well as some that she bought off from others. “It was extremely important to me that every single dress that I designed and made from scratch would have enough material to fit anyone up until size 16,” she says. She also has a selection of beautiful plus-size gowns. “A lot of people call me and say, ‘I'm like a 12. Do you have anything that would fit me?’ That they ask the question, often in shame, tells me that they haven't found something elsewhere. Every time I say to people, ‘Of course, almost all of the gowns will fit you,’ they say, ‘That's awesome! I'm coming!’ It's such a nice feeling to help people this way.”

Elisheva doesn't only understand fashion, she understands these women, who feel so comfortable in her studio. “I will never be a size six,” she acknowledges. “But you don't have to be a size six to be healthy. I've had women tell me, ‘I'm little bit of a bigger size,’ and then they tell me, ‘Like a ten.’ That's not big! Women can look chic and fashionable even if they're not a size two, yet they're being made to feel that their body size doesn't allow for that. In the



fashion industry, the sizes have all gotten smaller. What's an eight now is what used to be a four. The message the industry is giving, as is obvious in the models they choose, is that only those who are tiny can look good.

"Many of today's clothes are not made with all women in mind. They may look great on the models, but they don't cater to average-sized women who want to look good too. Sometimes, I try something on and think, 'This shouldn't be made in an extra large.' At my boutique, I focus on showing every woman the gowns that looks most beautiful for them. Just because a woman is a size 14 doesn't mean she has to look like she's wearing a Shabbos robe to a wedding. I tell her, 'You can look awesome, so why not?' Even if someone gets a gown custom-made by me and is a very small size, I have my seamstress tuck in extra material. She does impeccable work so no one notices. Then, if someone who's a size 14 likes the dress, I tell her, 'This *can* fit you.' It's important to me that there are gowns for every size. Even if we're not thin, we're not defective."

In addition to society's perspective on body size, women who are raised in a home environment where weight is a central focus, where thinness is a value above all else, where appearances are the object of derogatory speech, or even of awe, often come into adulthood with a sense of self that is dictated by their weight. Subconsciously, they may feel that they are only deserving of love if they look a certain way.

"When mothers speak about size in a certain way, their daughters pick up on this," Elisheva notes. "A mother who was visiting from overseas once came to me with her daughter who was in seminary here to look at gowns for an upcoming wedding in the family. She showed me a bunch of pictures that she had pinned from the social media page of a sophisticated place in New York. Her daughter was probably around a size 10. She looked great, but she was not a size 0 or 2 — which was the average size of the women wearing those gowns she was showing us. Those styles were not made for her figure, but it didn't seem like the mother wanted to hear that.

"I didn't know how to say it straight out, but what I wanted to say is, 'Your daughter is gorgeous, but she doesn't look like that. Can we work with one that is best for her figure? It's not to say that people who are a size 10 can't wear beautiful clothes, but there are definitely styles that look better. Why can't you do something that will showcase her beauty?' I said to her, 'I can make you whatever you want. That's not the issue. But maybe you want to do something like this,' showing her a style that is more appropriate.

"It pained me to watch the daughter, who kept looking at her mother every time I asked a question. It was unpleasant to see that dynamic. It's not surprising for a girl like that to grow up thinking, 'I really need to be a size 0,' which she can't ever be. Through what they perceive as beautiful, mothers perpetuate the definition of beauty for their children."

## I Want to Look Good

While Hashem created us women with a desire to "look good," and being engaged in its pursuit by taking care of our body and looking presentable and pretty is a reflection of emotional health, when an individual becomes obsessed with their appearance, the opposite is usually true. Of course, it is also antithetical to Torah values.

"The weather is turning nice again and I'm dreading it," confesses Yael, an occupational therapist and mother of six in her high thirties. "I need my coat for comfort. I simply don't feel comfortable having my size 'exposed.' I already know that my size does not determine my value and I know the verse "*sheker hachein v'hevel hayofi*." I know that I'm a good person, a good mother, a good wife. I know all of this in my head. But now what? To me, skinny is beautiful. It's so ingrained in me, in my psyche, in my everything. And even if I know that I won't be magically happy when I'm thin, that all my troubles won't disappear, I want to be thin *anyway*."

When is having a need to look good and presentable an indicator of emotional health, and at which point does it become

an unhealthy obsession? “Not a minute of my waking hours goes by without me thinking about my weight,” says Baila. “In fact, I should add sleeping hours too. Not infrequently do I wake up from a dream in which I see myself at my dream size, stick thin and gorgeous. I hate buying clothes that fit my current body size, but that doesn’t mean I don’t spend on clothes. That’s because at the start of every season, I purchase two or three new items at the size I hope to be one day. So while my closet is stocked with beautiful clothes, most of them have never been worn.”

Defining an obsession is futile; at its core, it boils down to a feeling that negatively impacts life, whether physically, emotionally, socially, technically, or financially. A physical impact may be taking extreme measures that are detrimental to physical health, such as following a severely restrictive diet, in pursuit of the “perfect” appearance. An emotional impact may be excessive self-criticism in regards to the focus of the obsession (“Look how *horrible* you look!”). Socially, the obsession may result in withdrawal, where the individual forgoes social engagements that she would have loved to attend, or feels extremely uncomfortable in public settings to the extent that she wishes she wouldn’t be there. Technically, the obsessed individual may turn down promising job offers or arrange her schedule, such as not engaging in in-person shopping even if the alternative is more pricey or does not allow for as many options, as a result of her shame. And financially, an individual obsessed with appearance may spend on a wardrobe that is either not within her means or, as Baila shares, not sensible. Obsession may also result in an overall lack of ambition, which leads to decreased income or profits.

## Have Your Cake

One of the greatest fallouts of the “slim equals all good things” mindset is its negative repercussions on eating habits. How can one not be obsessed with the source of weight loss and gain when that very property dictates their core self-esteem? For some, this results in following severely restrictive diets. “Ever since I know myself, I’ve been on a diet,” says Miriam, a newly married woman in her early twenties. “I’ve also always felt self-conscious so I drew a line between the two. I thought to myself, ‘One minute — I’m talented, I’m smart, and I have friends. So why don’t I feel good about myself? Oh, it’s because I’m fat.’ Before every one of my siblings’ weddings especially, I was obsessed with my weight. I couldn’t imagine myself enjoying the wedding if I wasn’t at my ideal size. And so, I went through every diet in the book, feeling excited when I first started losing weight, but then, once the weight loss plateaued or I saw a food that I really liked, or I was in a crummy mood, I just wanted to eat. It got so bad that I was always either thinking about the next time I would step on the scale or what my next meal

would consist of. Those were the only two thought categories that occupied my brain.”

It all came to a halt after Miriam got engaged, and the thought of herself in a white gown left her feeling panicked and anxious. “I dreaded getting married,” Miriam confesses. “I couldn’t imagine showcasing myself like that. I was so ashamed by how I looked even if I wasn’t severely overweight, that I went from feeling totally numb about my upcoming wedding to making frantic phone calls to liposuction clinics — which had exorbitant fees, and besides, a few minutes after those phone calls, the concept left me feeling queasy. Unbelievably, at the same time, I kept putting on weight. Every time I came to a gown fitting, I needed a little more room. It was crazy — I was obsessed about my weight, but also obsessed about my food. I felt like I was losing my mind.”

Today, after reaching out to an intuitive eating counselor to help salvage her sanity four weeks pre-wedding, Miriam understands more clearly what had happened. “Think about what happened soon after the coronavirus made its official arrival to the States. Suddenly, people were raiding the stores, buying out every last roll of tissue paper. That happened because people were afraid that soon, when they would need it, the supplies would no longer be available. With dieting, it’s no different. Because food had become off-limits to me, I felt a desperation to consume it. Ironically, the more my self-esteem was dictated by my size, the more ‘forbidden’ food became and thus, the more I wanted it.”

While disordered eating is particularly prevalent in adolescents, it is exceedingly common among adults too. When one’s sense of self is dictated by what they eat, age is a minor factor in the equation. “Because I felt that I can’t be loved or happy at any size, I was desperate to be thin,” says Chaya, a mother and grandmother in her forties. “At the core of all my ‘dieting’ was a deep desire to feel okay with myself. And because this need is so deep for me — and all human beings — I engaged in some pretty extreme stuff in my effort to fill it. There was a time when I was off all flour and sugar, to the extent that even if I mistakenly licked my son’s lollipop while opening the wrapper with my teeth, I would run to the sink to rinse my mouth. I told myself it’s because I care about my health, but I knew better. Ironically, while I was paranoid not to let an iota of sugar pass my lips, I cared less about my kids. I didn’t care if they had candy and chocolate because I did not believe that anything was bad about these foods, only that they were hindering me from reaching my goal weight.

“Even when I did lose weight,” Chaya admits, “I never felt thin. While everyone complimented me for abstaining from so many foods ‘because I was disciplined and taking care of myself,’ inside there was this voice that cried, ‘I wish I can have some too!’ I just felt that I was sick, that something was wrong with me, that if I

have a bit I won't be able to stop, and that wasn't worth it for me."

Obsession with healthy eating, also known as orthorexia, does not stem from an individual's desire to take better care of their body. Similar to anorexia, it is rather a result of anxiety that is hinged upon an erroneous perception of self-esteem ("When I will be thin/eat healthy, I will feel loved/good about myself"), as Tehilla describes, or a desperate need for control.

At one point, when Chaya felt exasperated after another 'slip' in her diet, she realized that things weren't adding up. "I thought, 'If my weight is so important to me, why can't I just stick to a diet? What is *wrong* with me?' After years and years of being under the influence of the diet mentality, I was stuck. On the one hand, I had convinced myself that sugar and so many delicious-tasting foods are bad for me, that they're 'off the plan.' On the other hand, I wanted them so badly! Even when I was 'on the plan,' patting myself on the back for being 'good,' I felt bad for wanting foods that were not allowed. Even when I was thin, and people would com-

pliment me, I thought, 'You don't know that really, I'm fat. Really, I would eat this whole cake if I'd be able to.'

"When I spoke to my nutritionist about it, she encouraged me to keep sticking to my plan, albeit a bit forcefully. 'Your body is not a garbage can,' she cautioned. Then, every time I would have a piece of cake, I felt even worse. Not only was I poisoning my body, but I was turning it into a garbage can too. Every day that I was 'on a diet,' I was manifesting this voice in me that said, 'You are not *allowed* to have this,' as if I was a little child, or worse, a glutton. The idea that I can't make my own decisions, that I can't be trusted with a piece of cake in my hand, became more and more ingrained."

Desperate to understand herself and what was wrong with her, Chaya turned elsewhere for guidance. "My friend encouraged me to see a nutritionist who coaches her clients with the intuitive eating principles," Chaya shares. "I was very skeptical about the whole thing. I told my friend, 'But you see that diets work. Look how thin I can be!' And she said to me, 'That depends what you call

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"Your daughter is gorgeous, but she doesn't look like that. Can we work with a dress that is best for her figure?"

"works." If "works" means you're at your smallest size, you're right. But if "works" means you feel good about yourself, you feel alive, you feel free, is that true for dieting?"

The first thing Chaya said to the nutritionist when she came into her office was, "I want to lose weight," because I had heard that intuitive eating is not a weight loss program and I wanted to ensure the nutritionist was clear with where I was at. To my pleasant surprise, she did not disparage my desire. Instead, she let me know that I was capable of attaining anything I really wanted. It was I who realized, over the course of that first conversation and the many others we've had, that behind the need to lose weight was a need to feel good about myself. Incredibly, the better I feel about myself by engaging in positive self-talk, and ironically, the more I give myself permission to eat, the more I want to take care of my body and eat properly, which is something I'd never done before."

After years of following the diet mentality, Chaya reports, she felt at a loss when she received no explicit guidance from the nutritionist. "I was used to being told what to eat for breakfast, lunch, and supper, and in between. Suddenly, I was my own boss; it was very frightening. The first time I actually ate a piece of chocolate, I literally felt as if I was being watched. I needed to coach myself that I wasn't doing something wrong, that I wasn't damaging my body for life, that I was just being a human being who enjoys a sweet treat.

"In the beginning, when a friend once invited me out for lunch, and the timing was between breakfast and lunch, I was literally discombobulated. Wait! What now? What will I eat there? When we got to the cafe, I looked at the beautiful salad bar and I was suddenly filled with a sense of relief. 'Yes, dear,' I remember thinking. 'You can eat whatever you want, wherever you want.' A salad had never tasted so good, neither did a piece of chocolate. When everything is allowed, there are times when I eat more healthfully,

and times when I eat less, but being my own boss is exhilarating. Ironically, when I treat myself with my decisions, I find that more often than not, I want to take good care of my health. I thank Hashem for this freedom every day.”

Not having clear guidance was only one frightening hump Chaya encountered along the way. The other was letting go of her obsession to be thin. “At the beginning, there were moments when I was desperate for a ‘diet,’ moments when all I wanted was to be thin at all costs.”

It was a process for Chaya to appreciate that food-related decisions were in her hand. “For me, it was all about learning to accept myself where I’m at,” Chaya shares. “Even when I have an urge to be really thin above all else, fighting that this is where I’m at won’t do me much good, just as fighting the desire to eat isn’t helpful either. Only when we validate ourselves for being where we’re at can we start to enjoy life. It took a long, long time for me to give myself permission to make my own choices, to trust myself with food. It’s still taking time, but I’m more forgiving and less obsessed, and less obsessed means more alive.”

## And Eat It Too

How does it happen that a woman who for years, possibly decades, was afraid to make her own choices in regards to her food intake finally lets go and learns to trust herself? Enter Intuitive Eating (IE), an approach that is gaining explosive traction in the world at large, and in the frum community in particular.

“I was drawn to the name before I even understood the concepts,” says intuitive eating coach Rena Reiser, who is credited with helping spread this awareness to the community over the past several years. “To me, as a Jewish woman, our intuition is a cornerstone. I always intuitively understood what I needed to be eating, and yet I was stuck in some areas. Once I explored the intuitive eating program, it helped me fill in the gaps. The biggest takeaways for me were learning how to cope with our emotions without using food, and simultaneously, intellectually and emotionally allowing all foods — which doesn’t mean eating everything, a huge misconception about IE.”

What does listening to our intuition mean? “Many of us have experienced the feeling of being choked up when we hear something really sad. Or, our pulse quickens when we hear exciting news. Our bodies are in constant communication with us as to what resources we need in which situations. Often, we call this our ‘gut instinct’ or ‘intuition.’ Our intuition is a deep part of ourselves that speaks to us in a really quiet tone. In order to tune into it, our minds have to be quiet enough so we can hear it. The reality is

that we live in a very masculine, fast-paced world, and so most of us have been habituated from early on to ignore the voice of our intuition. And so, we lose our sense of interoceptive awareness (an awareness of the internal state of the body). It can be as extreme as experiencing big traumas in life that cause us to dissociate from our bodies, or as subtle as well-meaning caregivers who said things like, ‘Oh, don’t cry.’ If we have a reason to cry and we don’t, we slowly end up disconnecting ourselves bit by bit from feeling what our bodies are saying to us. In order to heal ourselves and hear the voice of our intuition once again, we have to learn how to reconnect to and hear our bodies. Depending on the level of severity of disconnection, and the source of it, an individual may need to work with a professional who uses somatic methods of healing. The more the individual works on these skills, the more they are able to connect to and listen to their intuition.”

Rena was first fascinated by Intuitive Eating because she found that it goes much deeper than typical food programs. “It’s not really about the food,” she asserts. “Over time, I’ve learned that there’s room to go even deeper. Overeating, undereating, overspending, smartphone overuse, relationship challenges, and more are all manifestations of deeper wounds, calling out to be healed.” The more she’s done this work, the more she’s expanded her skillset to not just focus on the food, but on the roots of the challenges, so that the women she works with don’t just put bandaids on the symptoms. In a typical session with a client, she may use inner-child work, guided imagery, EFT, Focusing, or intuitive journaling. “Food can be an incredible gateway if we’re open to understanding what it’s coming to teach us,” she says.

When Rena first starts working with a woman who hasn’t been tapping into her intuition for a while, it’s very common for the woman to first feel afraid. “Telling her that she can eat whatever she wants is speaking right to her intellect, anxieties, and fears. I don’t believe that this is a statement that honors intuition. I believe it encourages impulsivity and black-and-white thinking. It’s similar to bringing a child into a toy store and telling her she can buy anything and everything she wants. You’ll usually have one of two reactions: either she’ll freeze up and not buy anything, or they’ll go crazy and buy more things than she’ll ever have time to play with, including things she’s doesn’t even really want. An individual first needs to go through the steps to relearn how to connect to themselves and understand what feels right for them, straight from their body. After those steps, the statement is moot. They already know that they can eat whatever they’d like, because they’re attuned with their intuition. Most of the time, that will be healthy, nourishing foods. Some of the time, it will be chips or chocolate.”

For those not yet familiar with intuitive eating, the thought that they can be trusted with their food choices may seem absurd.

“What? If I listen to my intuition,” they argue, “I’ll be eating chocolate all day. I don’t want chicken, and certainly not salad.”

But, the truth, Rena notes, is that when an individual feels that urge—such as to eat chocolate all day, it is usually coming from impulse and not intuition. “The journey I take my clients on is about relearning how to hear their intuition and distinguish it from impulses. Impulses come from a place of fear and disconnect. Intuition comes from a place of calm and connection, the ability to quiet the chatter of their thoughts and tap into something far more integrated.”

For Rena, watching the process is awe-inspiring. Her archetypal client, she says, “is a high achiever, usually a perfectionist — who hasn’t realized it until we start working together — and a self-help junkie. These are women who tend to over-intellectualize, understand that their overeating is covering up something bigger, and are ready to work hard. They tend to be successful professionals, rebbetzins of communities, and expert stay-at-home-moms. I help them quiet the noise in their heads so they can hear the voice of their intuition, heal the roots of their struggles, and live their truth.”

But what if a woman is so obsessed with being thin that she’s afraid to make her own choices in regards to her eating? “We start where the problem lies: her obsession with being thin. Where did it come from? What is it protecting her from? What is it stopping her from accomplishing in her life? When she heals from her obsession with being thin, she’ll feel lighter than she has her whole life. She can finally be herself,” says Rena, “That’s the ultimate goal — not whether or not she’s eating chocolate.”

## The Disassociation Process

At the core of obsession with how one looks, as Rena points out, is not the actual appearance. Rather, it is a wounded self-esteem that is eager to pinpoint something, anything that may be the reason for the uncomfortable emotion — as opposed to acknowledging that the emotion is not dependent on external factors. One proof? The many individuals whose appearance is starkly imperfect, who are nevertheless content and confident. Associating appearance with happiness is a flawed perception of the two independent variables. “For me,” says Chaya, “the proof is that there are moments that I feel so content that nothing outside of this happiness matters. During those moments, I’m not concerned about how much money we have in the bank, what I’m making for supper, nor about my size. That tells me that an emotion is totally not dependent on external factors.”

“For years, I thought that every woman who’s overweight feels miserable,” says Tehilla, who has gone through the very lengthy disassociation process of seeing happiness as an emotion indepen-

dent of other factors, as well as her appearance with few emotional strings attached. “That was because I was feeling miserable — and I thought it was about my weight. I came into adulthood with the perception that thin is beautiful, being thin is a reflection of all good things, and vice versa. I often asked myself, subconsciously, ‘Can someone really appreciate me in this size?’ This affected my life in so many ways, especially in marriage. When I would see larger sized individuals who appeared to be self-confident, I would think, ‘How can she be happy with all that flab?’ To me, the two simply didn’t go together.

“I convinced myself that all of my troubles, every negative emotion, was a result of my size. ‘When I’ll be thin, I’ll be happy.’ I envied everyone who was thinner than me. Until that was me.”

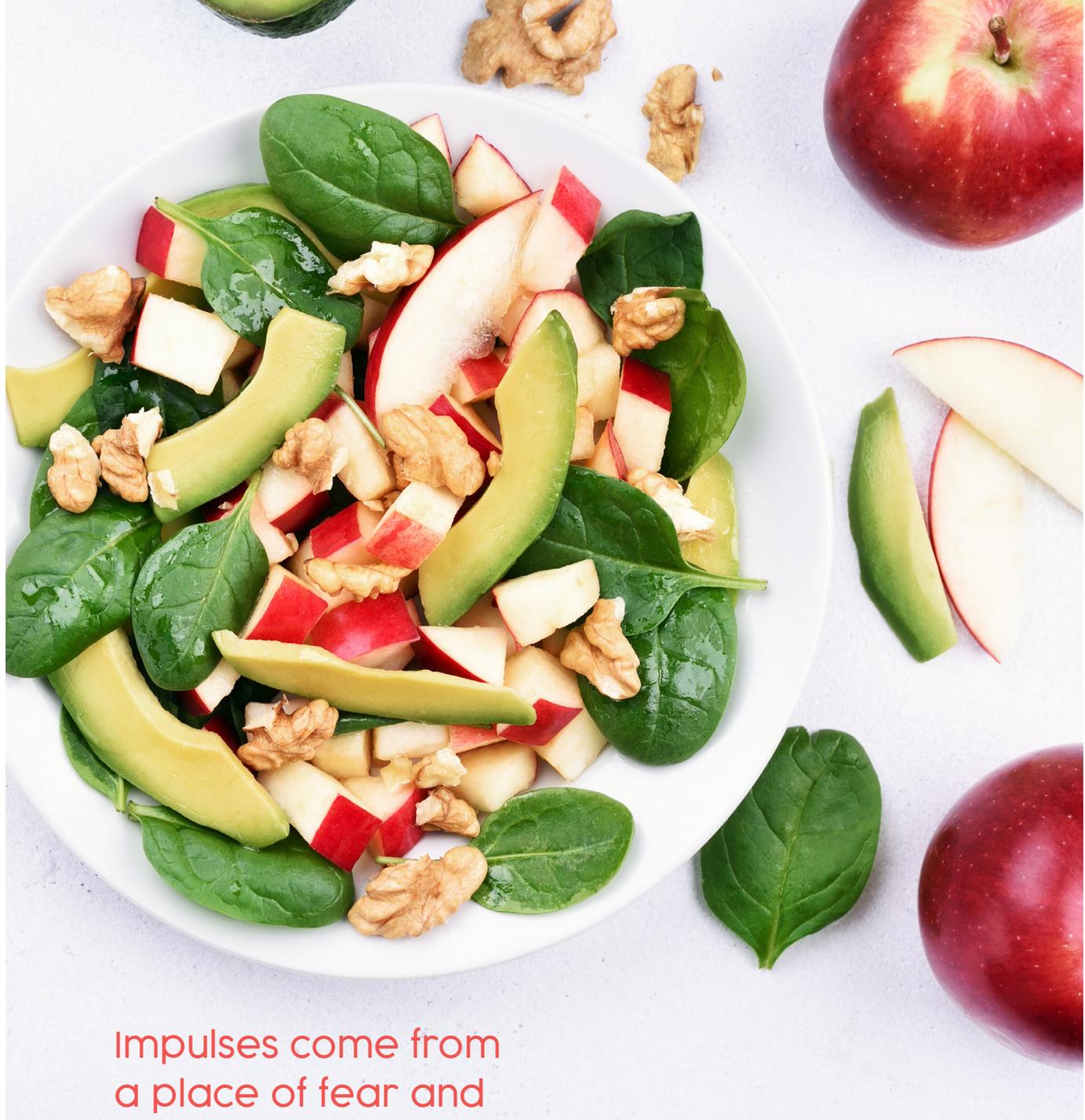
When Tehilla was nursing her fourth child, her baby’s sensitive digestive system required that she subsist on a very meager diet. Before long, she was down five sizes, weighing in a range she hadn’t been since elementary school. “I went to buy clothes and I saw how the small sizes zipped right up, so I knew I had ‘made it,’” admits Tehilla. “But I was more anxious than ever. Suddenly, I realized that I finally could not complain about my weight anymore. But why was I still not happy? So it hadn’t been about the weight all along... I realized how I’d been channeling all of my unpleasant feelings about myself into my appearance.”

While many of us are well aware that happiness is an independent variable, and that while our appearance may affect how we feel about ourselves, obsessing over it only makes us miserable, disassociating one from the other is no simple feat.

“I think I have to be reborn again to disassociate beauty and happiness from size,” says Baila. “It’s so ingrained in me. It’s ingrained in everyone I know. It’s absurd that in a community that is so focused on spirituality and connection to Hashem, so many of us place such extreme emphasis on looking a certain way. I know there are some people who lead a healthy lifestyle because they truly care about their health, and I wish I would be like them, but most of the people I know who do so do it because they can’t fathom not being thin. I understand them very well. For me, not being thin is a curse.”

For Baila, as well many other women I’ve spoken to in preparation for this article, it’s difficult to fathom that disassociation of the two is possible. Indeed, in one of the questions in the Wellspring body image survey, I asked, “Do you believe that you could be twenty pounds more than you are now *and* happy?” The response? While many respondents noted that they believed it in theory, only 11% felt that this would be true for them.

As from women, we are not only taught that “Charm is false, beauty is futile; a woman who fears Hashem is to be praised”



Impulses come from a place of fear and disconnect. Intuition comes from a place of calm and connection.

(Mishlei 31:3), but we are also aware that regardless of our size, we were created in the image of Hashem, worthy of self-love and cherished as we are. Still, knowing it and feeling it are not one and the same. So how can we feel what we know? As a start, it's to actually feel what we feel. Resisting that we don't feel good about ourselves does not help the emotion disappear. Whether we resist it by engaging in obsessive pursuits to achieve what we believe will provide us with the opposite of what we're feeling, by seeking culprits for the emotion, or by numbing ourselves to it, the result is the

same: the emotion remains.

Of course, living within boundaries and leading a structured lifestyle naturally provides us with a good feeling, as does looking good and presentable, but for us to be happy at our core, we must first face what we're feeling deep inside. When we acknowledge that "this is how I feel even if it doesn't sound good," and we validate ourselves for feeling this way, we open ourselves up to the positive emotions that are buried within. It is then that we begin to understand that we can be happy at every size.



with

# Gila Glassberg

*Gila Glassberg is a master's level registered dietitian and a certified intuitive eating counselor. She uses a non-diet, weight-neutral approach called Intuitive Eating. She helps growth-oriented women break out of chronic dieting patterns, and regain clarity into what is really important to them.*

## How did you get into intuitive eating?

I grew up in a large family, the fourth of nine children, in Scranton, Pennsylvania. My mother wasn't too concerned about what we ate — she just made sure that we ate. There were zero, yes *zero*, kosher restaurants in Scranton, so when I got to Teaneck, New Jersey, where I boarded for high school, and found that I was a walk away from a kosher pizza store, let's just say I ate a lot of pizza. I didn't think too much about it until I realized that all my friends talked about dieting, weight loss, and the hate of their bodies. That's a common teenage girl thing to do, but it can go very bad very quickly.

When I decided to diet, I would lose weight and then binge on whatever I was restricting. It was so disappointing and frustrating. I finally decided to just try my hardest not to eat, and when I lost weight, the compliments abounded. "You look amazing!", "How did you do it?" It was *amazing*, except for the fact that although I lost weight, I gained a lot of other things: obsessive thoughts around food and my body, frequent trips to the scale to weigh myself over and over again, and even fear of certain social outings because of foods I was afraid to eat — to feel out of control and, G-d forbid, gain weight.

Thankfully, this was addressed by my close friends who came with me on a trip for mid-winter break. They saw the way I was eating and commented. I knew then that they were right. Weight loss does not mean health and very often, weight loss can mean very unhealthy.

At that point, I knew I wanted to be a "nutritionist," not knowing the actual credential is a registered dietitian and certainly not knowing the pathway of getting to that degree. I wasn't a serious student in high school and who knew what I

would do as an adult. I figured working as a nutritionist, telling people what to eat, was probably a pretty easy thing to do.

And so, I sought to obtain a degree as an RD. It was a very grueling process, working for a year in my internship. I passed my exam and started working in a nursing home. I'd been so excited to earn this degree. I had high hopes of healing the *frum* world of all of their food traumas and troubles. Working in a nursing home, ensuring that the senior residents were getting their proper nutrition, had no resemblance to that.

A few months into the job, I felt depressed. I did all that schoolwork for *this*? I looked for other jobs, but basically, the only jobs available were those in nursing homes.

Feeling stuck, I did something bold. I made an appointment to consult with Perl Abramowitz, a parenting teacher who also does private counseling. (I learned that she does this when I once had the privilege of driving her home from a parenting class I'd attended.) I hoped she would help me figure out why I was so upset and how to proceed.

During our session, Perl told me about intuitive eating coach Rena Reiser. After six years of schooling, with a masters in nutrition, I had never heard of this. I corresponded with Rena and she introduced me to the concept of intuitive eating. Intrigued, I ordered a book on the topic and, wow, my eyes were opened. The author was basically describing my entire experience in high school — the restrict-binge-restrict cycle — hate yourself, starve, hate yourself some more. What a harmful cycle and yet, so many of us subscribe to it. Once I read the book, I knew this was what I wanted to learn about, implement in my own life and ultimately teach to other women, so they could heal their relationship with food and themselves. I trained with the authors of the book, and I was certified.

**Do you believe that every individual has the ability to listen to their intuition in regards to eating? What about someone who is under the impression that they're addicted to food?**

Most people, excluding those who have a disorder that would affect their eating and/or appetite, are born with natural hunger cues. We eat when we are hungry and stop when we are full. We do learn at a young age to associate eating with all different types of emotions. This is not necessarily a bad thing. When a baby is born, the first thing he does is drink sweet milk that contains lactose from his mother. He may now associate eating with the warmth and comfort of his mother. At a wedding, we eat. On Yom Tov, we eat. This is normal. Diet culture has demonized emotional eating. Dieting has also turned off our intuitive signals by telling us what to eat, when to eat, and how much to eat. Once we start to practice listening to these cues, our body will learn to trust us again and ultimately we can hear and listen to these cues.

**If someone has been told what and how to eat for a long time, such as by following a diet for many years, how can they learn to tap into their intuition again?**

This is where the ten principles of intuitive eating come in. The two principles I teach to such individuals are to honor your hunger and respect your fullness. I use a hunger/fullness scale, which rates hunger/fullness on a scale from 0–10; 0 being ravenously starving, such as on a fast day, and 10 being overly stuffed, think Yom Tov, when you need to unbutton your belt. Each number has a quality — either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. I explain that when you start to eat when you're at a 2 or a 3 on the scale, this is when the food actually tastes its best — as a way for your body to reinforce your eating when you're comfortably hungry. You'll notice that when you are at a 0 or 1 on the scale, you may not even taste the food. This is primal hunger, when your body is just trying to survive. Taste isn't important to survival; calories are.

When fullness starts to emerge, at about 7 or 8 on the scale, food begins to lose some of its pleasurable qualities. Again, your body is reinforcing that you should stop when you're full. If the individual has been on a diet and they were restricted, say, from cake, now that they're not on the diet anymore, they may binge or just eat way past fullness for fear of ever being restricted from cake again. It doesn't feel good to be overstuffed, but they just feel so restricted. Or, they may engage in what's called last

supper eating, “the diet starts tomorrow” — leading them to eat until the point of sickness.

**What is the reaction you usually get when you tell women that they have permission to eat whatever they'd like? What if the woman says, “But I'll never stop.”**

Most women have an intense fear of permission to eat. I like to wait to incorporate these principles as one of the last things we do. I don't blame them for being fearful when the voice of diet culture is so strong and we are constantly being bombarded with diet messages.

Making peace with food takes time, and often a lot of support is needed to get over this hump. But with time, these women do get over it, and often they find out they don't even like half the foods they binge on — they were just eating them because of the fear of restriction.

**Tell us about your typical client.**

This is a great question, one I often I discuss with my business coach and mentors. You want to cater to your ideal client, so you really have to get to know them. It's called your avatar and often business coaches will have you give your avatar a name — figure out where they live, where they hang out, how many kids they have, and so on.

Most of my clients are between 20–40 years old. They've been at war with their bodies for many years. There was often diet talk in the house as a child, and they picked up by osmosis that they were not good enough in this body so they'd better “fix it.” Intuitive eating is so healing for them on so many levels because they are finally learning to see what their body can and has done for them besides for just how it looks. They can treat it well even in a larger body. They learn self-care, self-parenting and boundary skills from this work.

**What if a woman is so obsessed with being thin that she's afraid to allow herself that piece of cake or chocolate? What do you tell her? How do you guide her?**

Usually these women choose not to work with me when I state on the phone very clearly that I don't ever focus on weight loss. If they still want to work with me, I'll wait until they are

ready to eat the foods that scare them. There are so many other things we can work on before then. Listening to their fears and validating them are therapeutic in and of itself. Having someone totally understand them is very healing, as my clients often tell me.

### Has the intuitive eating mindset impacted other areas of your life?

I've become obsessed with self-growth through this entire process of learning about intuitive eating and teaching it to others. Yes, 90 percent of people just want weight loss, but for those 10 percent of people who are willing to do this work, I've seen their entire lives change.

Oftentimes, I realize that they had big problems in their lives, but instead of addressing them, they would actually look to dieting to give them some stability and control. Take that away, and now they have to look face to face with the problem at hand. It's uncomfortable; it's painful. No one likes painful emotions, but I always say, emotions can create motion. Now that you can actually feel that painful emotion, what can we change about your life to make it a more meaningful life? We do deep work of inner child work, tapping (EFT), and plenty of gratitude and victory journaling. It's truly my honor and privilege to do this work.

### What is your take on emotional eating? Do you see it as a coping mechanism that should not be taken lightly?

Emotional eating is a totally fine coping mechanism as one of the tools in your tool kit. When it is your only tool, you may have a problem. If you don't have other coping skills, it's most likely not your fault. I have learned that unless we are taught coping skills, we don't just pick them up.

Here's one practice I give my clients to do once they have practiced the hunger/fullness scale for a while. I tell them, "When you have an urge to eat and you know you're not physically hungry, set a five-minute timer, and see what emotion comes up." Once we are aware of it, we can remedy it.

### What do you consider your success stories?

Success stories! Yes! I have had women tell me "Today, I walked into a bakery, bought a coffee and left. I'd never done that without buying pastries and eating them in the car." Other

women have told me, "I can't believe it, I don't even like Doritos now that I've made peace with them." Other women have put up such strong boundaries, and people know not to make comments about their bodies. To other women, establishing meal plans is a form of self-care, because they know if they don't, they don't eat the whole day and wind up bingeing late at night, feeling sick.

I want everyone to know that this is very deep work. Working on your relationship with food is usually a way to work on your relationship with yourself. It can heal very deep wounds of rejection from childhood. It can help you understand that weight is not a behavior, and sometimes, because of our black and white thinking and because diet culture is reinforcing it, unless we lost weight, we wouldn't eat healthy or exercise. Now, women engage in healthy behaviors, not for weight loss, but for the sake of health. It's amazing to witness.

### What would you like to tell women who are bothered that they're eating more than they're used to during this crisis?

That we are going through a crisis. Right now our focus is to practice self-compassion and self-care. We are in survival mode. We have to meet our most basic needs. Eating shouldn't be our only coping mechanism. But, during a crisis, it's very hard to implement a new coping tool.

Of course, I recommend, using other coping tools, like journaling, exercising, and meditating, but for many people, these are things they need help implementing, and right now may not be the time.

Remember that you're a hero for getting through each day. We were all thrown into this against our will, and each day that we put one foot in front of the other and move on is a victory of itself. Please don't allow this crisis to become a crisis about your weight or body.

If there are tools you have learned to implement, now is a great time to practice using them. Exercise is a great way to cope with stress as well. Yoga and meditation can relax the mind. And yes, sometimes, food can be the most soothing, appropriate thing.

Many people reading this may think I'm saying, "Eat whatever you want and be okay with your size." I think people hear this because they are so desperate for permission. That's not what I'm saying. You do have permission to eat whatever you want, whenever you want. However, with this in mind, eating in a way that feels out of control or only eating to meet some other unmet need may result in something even more painful than overeating. I urge you to look into this either by reading the Intuitive Eating Book/Workbook, or working with a coach.

*Elisbeva, Rena, and Gila can be reached via Wellspring.*

# Taking It Forward

With their children home all day, how can mothers transmit healthy behaviors around food?

My method is called "the division of responsibility," a feeding model created by Ellyn Satter, a registered dietitian and social worker. The guidelines of this model are that the parent decides the "what" and "when" and "where" to eat, and the child decides "how much" and "if any." So, we feed our children regularly, every 2-3 hours, with foods that we deem good for them. We always must make sure there is a "safe food," which is a food we know that they will eat, on the table. This way, we take the stress off the parent, we do our part, and let go. But, during this crisis, this may not be a time to fully implement a new system. Cut yourself some slack and give yourself a break. Also, the more our kids sense our tension and stress around food, the more problems we create.

The best way to transmit health behaviors in all areas of life is modeling. Do as I say and not as I do will never, ever work. If we are binging on ice cream late at night, we do transmit that guilt, shame, and binge attitude to our kids. This starts with us.

Practice good self care for yourself, by eating every 2-3 hours, incorporating protein, carbohydrates, fats and fibers at meals. Consume adequate fruits, vegetables and water. Keep it basic.

Make a feeding schedule, stick to it as much as you can. If your kids are happy at the end of the day, pat yourself on the back. This is hard. Really hard. We need to be there for ourselves in order to be there for our kids.



# Are You Happy With Your Size?

## From women and their appearance: A *Wellspring* survey

To find out just how central appearance is to women in our community, *Wellspring* conducted the following survey, which was administered to 150 female respondents from across the United States, Canada, Europe, and Eretz Yisrael. These are the real stats, credited to the raw vulnerability exhibited by the respondents.

*Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest integer. Sentences in italics are comments from individual respondents.*

Age:	Does your life revolve around your size/weight?	Are you happy with your size/weight?
56%	63%	60%
20s-40s	Yes	No, not at all
44%	30%	25%
40s +	No	Yes, very
	7%	15%
	Unknown	Pretty okay
	<i>I only think about it when I have to buy new clothes, or see myself in a mirror/photo.</i>	<i>The only time I was totally happy with my body was when I was about 4 months pregnant with my first child and had spent most of my pregnancy vomiting. I thought I looked great. My husband later admitted that he thought I looked skeletal (but was smart enough not to mention this to his nauseated wife).</i>
		<b>Only when I'm pregnant do I despise my size.</b>

### If not, why?

*I used to be very thin and it's hard for me to get used to the new me. I want to go back to how I looked.*

**Wouldn't everyone want to be a drop smaller?**

*I don't need to be super thin, but I would love to fit into the beautiful clothes in my closet.*

**So I can have a flatter middle.**

*I want to fit into the outfits I have been saving for years from when I was that weight. And health considerations (blood pressure, reflux, leg veins, etc.) will be eased.*

**To be able to buy clothes in most shops, to look and feel better and hopefully have more energy and good health. Maybe I'd consider remarriage.**

*I would just like my body to be the way it once was. It wasn't incredibly thin. I am shorter, and I had muscle. I'd be thrilled to get back to that.*

**Everyone in my family is really thin so being the overweight one has always been a burden for me, both physically and very much emotionally.**

*I feel better when I'm thinner. And that's reason enough.*

### If not, what would you like it to be?

35%  
Up to 20 lbs/2 sizes less

60%  
20-40 lbs less

5%  
Unknown

### Would you do a one-week crash (read: starvation) diet that guarantees a 20-pound loss?

62% No      26% Yes

10%  
It depends.

2%  
It would be scary if I would.

### In what range is it?

28%  
110-130 pounds

36%  
130-160 pounds

34%  
160+ pounds

*I may be fat but I'm not stupid.*

**I like my food too much.**

*Post-birth, yes.*

**My mother used to do these crazy starvation diets. I would see how she "tortured" herself, and I was very very turned off, so no.**

At what age did you start having an opinion on your appearance?

11%

under 10

25%

10-14

63%

14-16

1%

I still don't have one.

*I was overweight as a girl and continued to be that way through high school. I had a lot of confidence and a great self-image because I was a great student, talented and had many friends. I never really cared about my dress size, but my mother—who was always thin—was constantly after me to put me on a diet and stop me from eating fattening foods.*

**Looking back, I see that my feelings were ridiculous. I looked great—not toothpick thin but slim.**

*When I saw a picture of how I looked at age 12, I couldn't believe it. I wasn't fat at all! Nevertheless, I always considered myself fat (not even chubby).*

**I think everyone begins to care how they look as a child, don't they? Unfortunately, I had a hard life -- the type you read about in suspense novels -- and that led me to a lot of self-doubt and anxiety. I used to pick at non-existent pimples until I was covered in scabs. And then, as a 13-year-old, I stopped eating, thinking I was fat, when I was actually beautiful. It wasn't until I reached my 20s that I began to develop healthy confidence, and now, even though I'm overweight, I'm okay with myself. Now I recognize it as a just a vehicle for my mission on this earth -- a broken vehicle, but one with potential.**

When you see a photo of yourself, do you usually like the way you look?

44%

Yes

52%

No

4%

I never look at photos of myself.

*When I look at past pictures, I think: Why did you ever think you were fat?!*

**When I look at pictures of myself now I think: Does the camera add 50 pounds?! I don't feel that overweight!**

*I think I look decently pretty :).*

**I think I look cute!**

*My reaction: I look better than I have in a while. My face is thinner. (I also like my current glasses.)*

**I can't bear to see pictures of myself. They are worse than a mirror somehow. All I can see in a picture are the extra chins, big cheeks... not a pretty sight. (Even though people consider me pretty...)**

*Childhood photos: I notice that I'm not smiling. I was a sad kid, emotionally neglected, and it shows.*

**Current photos: "That's not me. I don't look like that!"**

*Delighted with some, but lately, I think, "Wow! I am old!"*

**I care more about my teeth/makeup/wig so I check that first. I also make sure that what I'm wearing fits.**

Do you believe that you could be twenty pounds more than you are now and happy?

11%

Yes

84%

No

5%

Unknown

*I could be forty pounds lighter and even happier!*

**Never. I have a certain belt I try on every once in a while, just to make sure it fits on the same hole. If it doesn't, I know I've gone overboard and need to get back on track.**

*I don't think self-love is contingent upon weight. I think it's a fallacy that we've bought into as a society. I base self-love on how nice of a person I am to other people and how well I fulfill the mitzvot. That doesn't mean that I don't have a tinge of unhappiness about my weight. And yes, I feel intimidated standing next to gorgeous people. There are some things that so deeply embedded within the human psyche that don't disappear despite working on a healthy mindset.*

If weight takes up a lot of your mindspace, are you upset at yourself for it?

77%

Yes

23%

No

*I would like to eat cake and other fattening food with less guilt. I don't eat that much, but guilt always accompanies it.*

**I understand that I'm a human being and if I care so much about it, this is important to me.**

*Aren't all women obsessed with their weight? The story of our lives. If it wouldn't take headspace, it wouldn't be an issue. So while it shouldn't occupy space, it does, because it's normal.*

Does your appearance have an impact on your relationships? (Marriage, socializing, etc.)

- 52% Yes
- 43% No
- 5% Unknown

*Unfortunately, my friends are all in the same boat as me. We are all currently doing a healthy weight loss plan together.*

**What's important for marriage is that I try to be presentable, whatever my weight.**

*When I'm fat, I don't enjoy getting dressed and going out.*

**Surprisingly, some people are intimidated from me and I think it's my figure that plays a big part. I'm pretty tall and quite thin.**

*Except for answering frequently-asked questions from well-intended people about my pregnancy (even at my age of nearly 60) and my trying to hold in my stomach when meeting new people, it is not such a big deal.*

**My husband is both shorter and much thinner than me. Although I have good looks and am self-confident about my figure, it took time for me to adjust to that after we got married. Now, it's a non-issue. I feel great everywhere except at my in-laws, who are a family of petite size 0 people. I'm also tall, so I feel like a sailboat near the pretzel rods.**

Do you wish you could be happy at your current size as opposed to wishing not to look the way you do?

- 42% Yes
- 49% No, size means too much to me
- 9% Undecided

*I wish I wouldn't aim to have that perfect look and just be okay with imperfection.*

Does another person's size make an immediate impression on you?

- 58% Yes, if the appearance is extreme
- 20% Yes
- 12% Not at all

**Only if they're extremely obese (more than me—poor things, a pity) or extremely thin (I'm a nurse, I'd worry about their health).**

*I notice it, but I don't make any judgments.*

**I think it's a gauge of mental health.**

*Unfortunately, yes, because I'm a very judgmental person. I would like not to be, though, so I consciously try to stop the thought process. I also find that once I get to know someone, I don't notice their weight anymore.*

**I analyze them, wishing I could be like them if they're thin and thanking Hashem I'm not so fat if they're hefty.**

*As an EMT, I notice if someone is too heavy and am concerned about their weight's impact on their health, in the present and long term. I also notice if people look much too thin, which can also have negative health implications.*

Would waking up weighing 20 pounds more be a nightmare for you?

- 59% Yes
- 18% No
- 23% Disappointing, but not a nightmare

*Complicated, because I think I gave away all my larger-sized clothing.*

**I could think of lots of far worse nightmares, r'l, but if, for some reason, this would happen to me, I would probably do that 20-lb quickie reduction week mentioned above and stay out of sight until that goal would be accomplished.**

If you've ever lost weight in the past, did you find that your self-esteem was higher then?

- 78% Yes
- 21% No
- 1% Same

*From the satisfaction at doing it, and from the attention it got me. I feel that it is a fault to not take off so much extra weight. Like, what's wrong with me?*

**When I originally lost 14 pounds, many years ago, at a time that my self-image was suffering, this loss of weight was like regaining my lost spirit.**

*It was higher than before I lost weight, but I'm not sure it's higher than now, when I've come to a healthier level of self acceptance.*

## What is the most extreme thing you've ever done or considered doing to lose weight?

*Passing thought: wishing I could be seriously ill and recover thin (chas veshalom). At this point, the most extreme thing is considering bariatric surgery.*

***I've drastically eliminated white flour and sugars from my diet.***

*Intermittent fasting*

***Weight loss pills***

*A diet that required drinking something really horrible twice a day. It didn't last very long.*

***I stopped eating and started exercising 4 hours a day.***

### Additional comments from respondents:

*I think all women know that weight is an artificial factor, and not something that determines the character of a person. With that, it is unbelievable how we are so programmed to make so many decisions with our weight in mind. I remember that there was a period that I felt extremely overweight and uncomfortable with myself. I went to a shiur, and there was an incredible selection of dessert foods. It was unbelievably hard, but I did not taste even one thing, and I remember not being able to concentrate on the shiur. It was so ridiculous!*

*I have a best friend who is noticeably very overweight. She dresses tastefully, is tzanuah, and is masterfully self-aware. I used to look at her pitifully, thinking that she must be so upset with her lot. After I got to know her, I saw right through her exterior, and I saw her beautiful, dazzling neshamah. I remember we were talking one time, and she flashed one of her sincere, chubby smiles. I laughed and said, "Sheva, you are so beautiful."*

***I was sick this past winter for a week and couldn't eat anything. I lost lots of weight and my brother got married right after that. My gown had to be taken in more than a full size only two days before the wedding and I looked very thin.***

***At the wedding, I got loads of such comments: "Aren't you happy you were sick? You got to lose so much weight!"***

***Seriously? Are we like that? I had been sick sick. I couldn't get myself a drink without feeling faint. I had to literally crawl to get to the kitchen because I had no strength, and all everybody was busy obsessing about with excitement and relish was that I had lost so much weight.***

***At 36 years old and weighing about 100 pounds, I have always been underweight. I guess I just have a quick metabolism. I eat quite well—three meals a day (although I am sometimes too busy to eat lunch properly). I nosh on chocolate and cake but it doesn't make me put on weight.***

***Most people consider me very lucky to be able to eat what I want and to stay so thin. I am happy about my weight and it's fun to never have to diet. After each baby, I go back to my normal weight and sometimes even lower because of the nursing. However, there is a disadvantage to being underweight and that is that clothes don't always look so great on me. Also, my face sometimes looks too thin. I think I actually look prettier when I'm expecting and my face is a little rounder. I remember meeting a colleague a few weeks after I had given birth and she said, "Now you look great. Stop now; don't lose any more weight." But, it's not in my control. I would prefer to stay looking like that rather than too thin, but nursing makes me lose it all.***

***The truth is, I don't like the way people think that they can comment freely about my weight. It's as though being fat is an embarrassment and they would never embarrass a fat person by commenting on their weight, but it's fine to comment on a skinny person's weight because that's the goal everyone's trying to achieve.***

***It's ironic to me say that weight matters so little to me, yet, in a way, it really does.***

*I wish parents would relate to their children's problems with weight. Heavy parents just think it's hereditary and don't even try to change their child's "fate." There are things to do, even if it's genetic, such as having healthy food available in the house and not allowing unhealthy munching. Also, if a child has an emotional problem that is leading to overeating, they can seek professional help before the child becomes obese (or at least, before it's beyond return). They can also rule out a medical condition, such as hypothyroidism, allergies, hormone imbalance, before criticizing an overweight kid. And perhaps, most important, they can love every child just as he or she is.*

*It really bothers me when skinny people or people that really carry weight well kvetch about weight. I also hate that I have a complex to eat in front of people—because I'm scared they'll judge me with the food choices I'm making.*

***I wish there would be more support for those who struggle with their weight, such as more healthy choices at simchos and restaurants, and less super-thin models in shop windows.***

### Observations:

***(Getting into researcher mode here.)***

Interestingly (or perhaps not so), the respondents' current size and their emotion toward it were not correlated. In other words, many of the respondents who reported not being happy with their size were on the lower range of the BMI chart and vice versa. This suggests that happiness with size is not dependent on the size per se, only on other variables.

Another interesting observation: happiness with size was not correlated with age, either. While some respondents in the older range (50+) wrote that being alive and healthy was more important to them than anything else, others wrote that their weight still bothers them very much.

### Findings:

Jewish women are smart. Very, very smart. The kinder we are to ourselves for wherever we're at—whether we are happy or are not happy with our size—the more content and joyous life becomes. No research is needed to ascertain that these two variables are certainly correlated.

Final note from a respondent: Responding to this survey, I've come to realize that, in my case, the underlying reason for my quest for thinness is my inability to accept myself for what I am. As soon as I will be able, *be'ezras Hashem*, to accept and value myself, the sooner I will stop looking for other reasons to validate my existence. So... thank you! ♥