

Rena Reiser

### **Self-care is Anti-Jewish. Or is it?**

We are taught in Iyov that “Man is born to toil.” Life is meant to be hard. We know that our great Rabbanim achieved their dizzying heights with supernatural determination and we’ve been taught our whole lives that nothing is as Jewish as pushing with all you’ve got.

So how does all of that fit in with self-care? With the many times we’ve discussed slowing down and taking time you need for yourself? With knowing how to say “no” to things that tax you?

From the many sessions I’ve had with women in our community, growth minded women who are interested in self-compassion, but are nervous that it will hinder their personal growth, I see that there is a large number of women out there who believe it doesn’t fit in.

I, on the other hand, am convinced that there is nothing more Jewish in the world.

It has never been my goal in building this community to become your Rebbetzin. Many of the practices I studied and apply in my work don’t come straight out of chazal, based on the notion that “Chochma bagoyim taamin”. A lot of it falls under the concept of “Derech Eretz”, which creates the vessel for Torah. What I teach is not antithetical to Yiddishkeit, and that has been the opinion of my Rabbonim as well. I am not here to teach you Torah. That is not my role. I am here to help you reach your personal potential. If you have any hashkafic questions, please ask your personal Rav or Rebbetzin.

That being said, we need to have a tough discussion. I am going to ask you a lot of hard questions, and I want you to take the time to answer honestly.

If you are a believer that the Jewish way of life is to push, push, push at all costs...where has this brought you to in life? Do you find that your life is more fulfilling because you pushed yourself?

How has this affected your relationships? Is your marriage better when you push yourself? How about your relationship with your kids? Are you a better mom when you push non-stop?

Did you find that not sleeping enough, or not eating properly, or not taking down time has improved your middos?

Have you found that you feel closer to Hashem and His Torah when you strain beyond your limits?

If you answered all of those questions in the positive, then keep up the good work. I am assuming we share the goals of having healthy relationships, good middos, and closeness to Hashem at the center of a life of success and fulfillment. If you answered in the negative, then that should be a wake-up call for you.

How are we supposed to emulate a lifestyle that pushes us away from our most basic goals?

I am concerned that many of us have heard these ideas in our youth and have confused quantity for quality. We believe that we have to accomplish “x” amount of chesed or say “y” amount of tefillos in order for our avodas Hashem to count for something.

But we know intellectually that **quality** is more important than **quantity**. Mitzvos are meant to be done with joy. Chesed is meant to be done with a smile. Tefillos are meant to be said with kavanah and with all of our heart. A half hour of happy mommy time is better than two hours of cranky mommy time. A smiling wife is better than a begrudging, exhausted one. Even if that is at the cost of doing more. By taking care of ourselves we ironically do more by doing less because what we do we do well, and with a peaceful heart.

It is a real challenge. We tend to accept only as rhetoric that being a great wife and mother is a very important accomplishment. In the meantime we quietly believe that it lacks meaning in the grand scheme of things. But if our obligation for chesed starts at home, then what counts most is what happens at home. Really. If an act of chesed you have agreed to do has a negative impact on your family, how will that be viewed in Shamayim? How will Hashem view a mother who has done so much for the klal, but whose children feel neglected, or whose husband feels alone and unsupported?

Since our concentric circles of chesed circles start at home, that means the first person who needs to be the target of your chesed is yourself. And then your spouse. And then your kids. And then your extended family. And then your shul. And then your Kehilla. And then the rest of klal yisrael.

That’s because chesed has to be genuine. Hashem wants us to do it with a whole heart. And so it starts with those closest to us and then it goes on to those further away.

And if you don’t know how to love yourself, how can you love your close ones?

If you are harsh and critical about your own failures, are you sure that doesn’t come into the way you deal with those around you? If you ignore your own needs, might you come to believe that others are too needy? If you push too hard, may you be pushing others too hard?

If you want to understand what I mean with your own eyes, you can go find someone who exemplifies chesed and see the way they behave while they are in the midst of it. Are they

sobbing behind closed doors because they are overwhelmed, or are they moving from one thing to the next with a smile? Are they snapping and barking orders at their kids, or are they calmly delegating responsibilities? Do they finish the night feeling spent and oddly regretful, or do they go to bed with an inner calm reflecting their accomplishments?

A person who truly exemplifies chessed in all situations starts by knowing what and how much they need for themselves. That means sleep, alone time, reflection, etc. Anything they need to face their avodas Hashem with a calm and reflective soul.

That's why I have come to the conclusion that self-compassion isn't secondary to avodas Hashem. It's step one. Only if you know how to take care of you, can you learn how to take care of others. Our gedolim weren't just great in their steadfast determination to accomplish, they were gedolim in knowing what they could accomplish while coming from a good place. They weren't just masters of compassion, they were masters of self-compassion.

But now that we've addressed the frumkite concerns, I need to get even more honest.

I find myself disturbed by the objections I've heard countless times over the last several years against slowing down. Against meditation. Against working on sleep habits. Against using guided imagery or journaling. Objections that imply that these tools take too much time that nobody realistically has.

My concern is that parallel to all of those objections, I have seen so many women plunge headfirst, spending countless hours and money, on healthy eating and workout trends. Women seem to have endless time and money to spend on finding rare superfoods and complicated recipes. They can find the time to go to the gym, even if it is at eleven o'clock at night. Yet they don't have 5 minutes for a meditation.

I have mulled over this paradox for years.

If you ask these women why healthy eating and exercise get unlimited resources, but finding internal equilibrium doesn't deserve a few focused minutes a day, they will tell you it is because they have to make time for their health.

And they're right. It's crucial to eat well, with a variety of healthy foods, and to exercise by moving our bodies enough throughout the day. But the truth is stress plays a huge factor in our health. Sleep is also one of the top factors in maintaining good health. So is a strong sense of family and community. These are factors that cannot be ignored. And yet too often they are.

My deep, painful concern is that women are willing to dedicate themselves at all costs to self-improvement...if the results are visible to others.

Here are two difficult questions I want you to sit with. Really ponder them carefully.

- 1) If your doctor told you that for you to be at optimal health you have to eat a certain way, would you be ready to do it?
- 2) If your Rav told you that for you to be at your “Ruchani” best you had to take more time for yourself, would you be ready to do so?

Like I said, this was meant to be a tough conversation. Sometimes we have to face difficult truths in order to move forward.

If after reading this e-mail (hearing this podcast), you feel like you would like to work on your self-compassion and self-care, or if you agreed with the concepts but need help putting them into action, please join me this Wednesday at 1:30pm eastern 8:30pm Israel for a free live webinar all about self-compassion: [www.renareiser.com/compassion-webinar](http://www.renareiser.com/compassion-webinar)

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