Smoking: A Jewish View

REUVEN P. BULKA

ABSTRACT: The issue of smoking and Jewish law is explored. After the dangers from smoking are cited, various precedents in Jewish law are presented as the basis for confronting the matter of smoking. Arguments are suggested for strictly prohibiting smoking. The matter of the effects of smoking on the non-smoker is the subject of much research, and the dangers posed to the innocent bystanders are an added dimension pointing to the hazards of smoking and therefore indicating that it should be prohibited.

We live in a unique era in history. Technological knowledge has brought us to the point where one mistake can bring a nuclear devastation that turns the world into a pillar of smoke. At the same time, we meet to discuss the effects of cigarette smoking on health. It is a tribute to the human spirit that though confronted with global extinction, concern for quality of life proceeds undeterred. Potential cataclysm indeed should not alter our perspective on the fundamental values of life. And cigarette smoking is unquestionably not only one of the great medical issues of the day; it is also an ethical issue par excellence.

Research into cigarette smoking has confirmed that it is the main cause of lung cancer, the most important cause of chronic obstructive lung disease (emphysema), and a significant factor causing coronary heart disease, cancer of the larynx, and cancer of the bladder.

The Royal College of Physicians, in a 1971 report titled “Smoking and Health Now,” asserted that cigarette smoking has become as important a cause of death as the great epidemic diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, and typhoid.

More recently, a 1981 report of the United States Surgeon General, titled “The Health Consequences of Smoking: The Changing Cigarette,” asserted that there is no such thing as a safe cigarette.

The evidence leads to the inescapable conclusion that cigarette smoking is a unique form of self-destruction, suicide on the installment plan. Fifty-nine million Americans, and millions more around the world, continue to smoke, oblivious to the harm they are causing themselves. And things seem to be getting worse, what with the percentage of American adults, ostensibly aware of the risk, who now smoke, up to 38% from the 35% of two years ago.

In approaching the question of smoking from a Judaic vantage point, two primary issues need to be addressed: 1) smoking and the smoker; and 2) smoking and the non-smoker. The first issue relates to the self-preservation concept; the second relates to the social responsibility concept.

Rabbi Dr. Reuven P. Bulka is editor of the Journal of Psychology and Judaism, published by Human Sciences Press for the Center for the Study of Psychology and Judaism in Ottawa, Canada.
Many justify their smoking with the specious argument from fatalism. They will anyway live only as long as God wants, so what difference is there if they smoke? Aside from ignoring the pollutant effect of smoking on others, this argument suffers from superficial theology. Granted that the years of our lives may be predetermined; yet who would be so bold as to declare that this predetermination is etched in stone? Can one walk through fire or jump off a bridge with the rationalization that if one’s years are predetermined, any suicidal act will be survivable? May we eat ourselves into obesity with the assurance that God’s allotment of years will guarantee us longevity even as we squander our health?

A well-thought-out theology would impose upon us an obligation to sanctify life in quality in order to assure its quantity. The fitness buffs of this generation come closer to a balanced religiosity than do the smokers.

Suicide is clearly forbidden in Jewish law. It is an instance of non-prosecutable murder, since victimizer and victim are one and the same. But the same logic that prohibits the murder of others forbids the murder of the self. One is not permitted to destroy life, life being a gift of God entrusted to us rather than being ours. We are trustees, not referees. The biblical exhortation, “But for your own lifeblood I will require a reckoning,” (Genesis, 9:5) applies to any suicidal act. Cigarette smoking undoubtedly belongs in that category.

Because life is sacred, even intentionally placing one’s self in danger is also explicitly prohibited. “Take heed unto yourself and take care of your life,” (Deuteronomy 4:9) and “Be exceedingly careful with your life,” (Deuteronomy 4:15) are far-reaching imperatives to avoid endangering one’s existence.

Maimonides includes in the scope of this prohibition numerous actions, including 1) drinking from uncovered water lest a snake has dropped venom into the water; 2) putting money into one’s mouth lest it carry the germs of one who suffers from an infectious disease or even only human perspiration, which in itself is harmful; 3) walking near a leaning wall or over a shaky bridge.1 Maimonides expressly dismisses the right to say, “What concern is it to others if I want to put myself in danger?” This is a primary denial of the sanctity, the inviolability of life.

The permissibility of cigarette smoking according to Jewish law should be beyond debate, but in fact the matter has, lamentably, not yet been adequately resolved.

The matter of whether smoking is itself forbidden has been subjected to various Judeo-legal pronouncements, all of them unanimous in discouraging smoking but nowhere near unanimity on whether smoking is, in fact, legally prohibited.

Rabbi David Halevy, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, raised quite a furor in Israel when, in 1976, he declared that cigarette smoking was forbidden according to Jewish law. His pronouncement, widely covered in the Israeli press, was greeted with an incongruous reaction from one rabbi who should have known better. This rabbi claimed that life was difficult as it was for the Jewish people and that Rabbi Halevy was doing no one a favor by adding to the list of prohibitions.