

Q&A (0002)

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November 4, 2010

Question:

I keep getting opinions from some Orthodox Jews that weight training for a Jew is considered goyish, and that it is stupid for Jews to train in this way. I know that ancient Greeks trained this way at times and their ways were certainly not ours. However in the context of today, is it improper for a Jew to go to a gym and train with weights?

Answer:

Shalom!

Bodybuilding is certainly not your typical Jewish activity. The Orthodox Jewish knee-jerk reaction to bodybuilding is, "You're not learning Torah. You're not making money. It's not practical. Our grandparents didn't do it. It's not part of our tradition." Stereotypically, non-Jews, and we ourselves, think of Jews as brainy, not brawny. As the joke goes, by the time a Jewish boy is 14 he realizes that he is more likely to own a professional sports team rather than play for one! □

Interestingly, Rebbe Nachman zal talks about bodybuilding in his story The Master of Prayer (in his work Sippurei Maasios/Rabbi Nachman's Stories). Even though he depicts the negative side, of being overly involved and improperly motivated, the implication is that there is a positive side to taking care of the body.

Like any activity/hobby one might choose, e.g., stamp-collecting, one has to weigh if that's the best use of his

time and talents. There's no reason why bodybuilding might not be the answer for an individual.

There is a story from the Baal Shem Tov. It may be apropos.

One of his chassidim once asked him about how he (the chassid) might learn to "eat in holiness." The Baal Shem Tov told him to go to a certain village and spend Shabbos with the blacksmith. The chassid assumed that the blacksmith was one of the 36 hidden-tzadikim and anticipated learning Kabbalistic secrets of eating.

What he got instead was a mountain of a man who ate super-jumbo-sized portions and quantities of each course at each meal. There was zero Torah-talk at the Shabbos table. The blacksmith was too busy eating.

After Shabbos, the chassid thanked his host and mentioned that he had one question. "No disrespect intended, but why do you eat so much?!" The blacksmith answered, "My father was a skinny, nearly emaciated, person. Once he and I were walking and goyim attacked us. I was able to run away As I watched from my hiding place, I saw them set him on fire. Since he was so skinny he burnt only for a very short time and they made fun of Jews for being such runts that they don't even make a decent fire.

"I decided then and there that I would show them. If they ever capture me, they'll see how a Jew can burn!"

Hope this helped.