



# נפלאות הבריאה

Spacewalks and beyond

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# Spacewalks and beyond: The Torah's stance on risky adventures

By MARK FISH

- The Torah verses convey profound messages that we can insightfully extract for our daily lives. Rabbi Shay Tahan, the Rosh Kollel of Shaarei Ezra in Brooklyn, NY, graciously opens the gates to understand them. Jewish billionaire Jared Isaacman and SpaceX engineer Sarah Gillis achieved a major milestone as the first non-professional astronauts to conduct a spacewalk on a commercial mission. On Thursday, the pair left the SpaceX Dragon capsule, orbiting 435 miles (700 km) above the Earth. Isaacman, who financed the Polaris Dawn mission, was the first to exit. "From up here, Earth looks like a perfect world," he said, reflecting on the view.

Spacewalks pose serious risks, including exposure to the vacuum of space, extreme temperature changes, and dangerous levels of radiation. Space debris moving at high speeds can also damage spacesuits. Additionally, astronauts face the threat of decompression sickness and life support system failures, all while working in a physically demanding environment. Many who read about this journey may feel a sense of envy, knowing they will never be able to afford such a thrilling experience. Since this challenge was undertaken by a Jewish individual, some might even feel an added reason to admire such a

figure. In response, they may look for more affordable yet risky alternatives, seeking similar excitement in dangerous but accessible activities. We would like to explore how the Torah views engaging in such adventures. This article will not focus solely on space travel but will also consider other high-risk activities like skydiving, mountain climbing, big wave surfing, cave diving, hang gliding, and even less dangerous pursuits such as helicopter tours or skiing in risky areas. This also extends to activities like riding motorcycles and electric scooters, which carry inherent dangers. Much of our youth are seeking greater thrills, finding that traditional activities like roller coasters at amusement parks or ice skating no longer satisfy their desire for excitement. The growing urge to visit risky places is a real concern, one that the Torah itself warns against.

The Torah is a set of mitzvot (commandments) and averot (prohibitions). It doesn't typically comment on matters outside these categories, yet interestingly, it strongly emphasizes the importance of avoiding danger. In fact, the Torah uses even stricter language regarding safety than it does for sins, stating: (דברים ד, טו) "You shall guard your soul very much." Chazal explain (חולין י, א חמירא סכנתא מאיסורא) that the obligation to avoid danger is treated more seriously than the obligation to avoid sin. The halacha clearly states (שולחן ערוך סימן קטז ס"ה) : "One should be careful of all things that cause danger, because danger is stricter than transgressions, and one should be more careful with an uncertain danger than with an uncertain issue. They also prohibited going to a dangerous place, such as under a leaning wall, or alone at night... All of these things are because of the danger, and a person who guards his soul will distance himself from them and it is prohibited to rely on a miracle in all of these matters." But one may ask: how do we evaluate danger? Is there a way to measure it? On one hand, almost anything can be considered risky—even stepping outside involves some level of danger from accidents, crime, or terrorism. On the other hand, the Torah clearly doesn't expect people to stay sheltered their entire lives.

The Gemara quotes the pasuk "Hashem protects the simple" to illustrate that when a person lives their life simply, without excessively calculating what is permissible based on safety or risk, Hashem will protect them. Poskim of the previous generation addressed this dilemma, offering similar perspectives with slight variations (ראה הרב אלהנן ואסרמן הי"ד קובץ שיעורים, כתובות קלו ושם )

(אריה סימן כו). They mainly explained that a person is permitted to engage in routine activities, as one is expected to live life normally, provided there is no obvious danger. However, they advised against participating in activities considered risky if they are not part of one's regular schedule. According to this view, one may go about their day normally but should avoid adventures, trips, or activities that are not considered very safe.

The definition of "safe" is shaped by what society considers dangerous or acceptable (שלמה זלמן אורבעך (מנחת שלמה תנינא סי' ל"ז ד"ה)). Take smoking, for example. In the past, it may have been socially acceptable, but today, with a clear understanding of its risks, it is widely regarded as unsafe. According to this view, a person can't rely on the notion that "Hashem protects the simple" to justify smoking, as the dangers are well-known. Therefore, one is obligated to avoid it. On the other hand, something like eating fatty foods or consuming sugar, though potentially harmful in large amounts, is not generally perceived as dangerous. People tend to consume these without a second thought. As a result, someone who is otherwise healthy and chooses to eat such foods wouldn't be seen as violating the Torah's command to avoid danger, since society doesn't commonly label these actions as inherently unsafe. It's interesting to note that, a generation ago, smoking was not considered unsafe and was extremely common. As a result, Rav Moshe Feinstein (אג"מ יו"ד ב' סימן מט) and Chacham Ovadia Yosef (יחזקאל דעת ח"ה סימן ) applied the same logic we discussed, but in reverse, to permit smoking at that time. Accordingly, engaging in the activities mentioned above, especially spacewalking, is prohibited as they are widely recognized as risky. Moreover, people often pursue such activities precisely because of the risk involved, seeking the thrill that comes from engaging in dangerous endeavors. For example, the current trend of taking selfies at high altitudes or on the edge of buildings is driven by the allure of danger, as individuals aim to garner likes and followers on social media by showcasing their risky behavior.