

Smoking, Tobacco

Would it be actually unkosher, and not just unhealthy, to smoke tobacco?

The tobacco plant was unknown to the authors of Holy Scripture, given the fact that it grew in the Western Hemisphere. Tobacco was thusly also unknown to the Christian world until the discovery of the Americas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries. It is obvious throughout history since, though, that not only have Christians (including many Christian leaders and theologians of note), but Jews (including many Jewish rabbis and thinkers) the world over, have been avid smokers of pipes, cigars, and cigarettes. Many Christians in more recent history have been firmly opposed to usage of any form of tobacco, claiming the thrust of 1 Corinthians 6:19 to support their view: “do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?”

It is obvious because of all of the tobacco-related cancers diagnosed over the past century, that smoking tobacco is a serious risk to human health. Many people know of someone, and likely have close family, who have either had a tobacco-related illness or have died from either emphysema or lung cancer. Yet when one examines some of the contemporary Jewish positions surrounding tobacco usage—while smoking is not at all upheld as ideal or healthy for people—it has not been quantitatively declared an “unkosher” habit. Alfred J. Kolatch explains the following in *The Second Jewish Book of Why*, for the question “**Why is the smoking of tobacco not prohibited in Jewish law?**”:

“The smoking of tobacco is not mentioned in the Bible, in the Talmud, or in early post-talmudic literature. And when smoking was first introduced to Europe in the fifteenth century, no one so much as suspected that smoking might be harmful to health, so we find no condemnation of the practice.

“The modern rabbinate, aware of the hazards to health posed by smoking, has addressed the issue. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, while acknowledging the ill effects of smoking, writes that ‘there is no Jewish law that forbids smoking and no law that forbids offering a smoker a match.’ He adds, ‘Many past and present Tora scholars have smoked.’ However, the Lubavitcher Rebbe has aggressively condemned smoking, declaring it hazardous to human health and therefore a violation of Jewish law.

“At its 1982 convention of the Rabbinical Assembly (the association of Conservative rabbis) took up the issue of smoking for the first time. Noting the biblical injunction, ‘I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse, therefore choose life that you may live’ (Deuteronomy 30:19), and also noting the proven dangers to health posed by smoking, the organization passed a resolution banning smoking ‘at public sessions and in dining areas at future Rabbinical Assembly conventions.’ The resolution was based on the talmudic view that pollution of the public domain constitutes a breach of law [b.*Bava Kama* 30a].”¹

More to the point, Ron Isaacs, a Conservative rabbi, answers the question “**Is cigarette smoking kosher?**” in his book *Kosher Living*:

“The rabbis in Talmudic times were unaware of tobacco—its use for smoking developed much later. There are no classical Jewish statements on this matter. Modern scholars concerned about the issue are somewhat divided. Some have unequivocally indicated that smoking is not consistent with Jewish law, on the grounds that it is injurious to health. Some authorities who accept this view even prohibit offering a friend a cigarette, because we are not permitted to ‘put a stumbling block in front of the blind’ (Leviticus 19:14).

“Others do not feel that Jewish law forbids smoking. They cite two principles that they feel exclude smoking from the prohibition of harming oneself. The first is that human beings may rely on God to preserve them from dangers that are normally part of life and that ‘many people have tread upon’ (Talmud, Shabbat 129b), that is, that are part of many people’s practice. The second principle regards the immediacy of the

¹ Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Second Jewish Book of Why* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1988), 285.

danger. Even some who agree that ‘one must not place himself in danger’ (Talmud, Shabbat 32a) draw a distinction between immediate danger—which must be avoided—and a potential or future danger—which is not necessarily prohibited. They apply cigarette smoking to the ‘potential’ category and thus do not prohibit smoking, but they do not recommend it either.

“Being created in God’s image, we are commanded to care for our bodies and respect them. Therefore, to the extent that they contribute to harming the body, any external substances, such as tobacco, alcohol, or drugs, other than those that physicians prescribe for specific symptoms, must be avoided.

“With all the statistics relative to cigarette smoking, one can no longer argue that the hazard involved in the practice is unsubstantiated. On the contrary, peril involved has been totally exposed.”²

People should not be encouraged to regularly smoke tobacco, as there are significant health risks associated with it. However, there is no specific reference to smoking tobacco at all in the Scriptures, so technically the Word of God does not directly condemn it as “sin.”

Because a majority of tobacco-related cancers have been widely associated with cigarette smoking—something which has often tended to occur with addicted smokers smoking multiple packs of cigarettes every day, and which does involve actually inhaling the smoke—it has been thought by some that somehow cigar or pipe smoking, which only involves puffing the smoke, is healthier. The fact is that cigar or pipe smoking can be just as dangerous as smoking cigarettes, even with the smoke not inhaled directly into the lungs. Cancers of the mouth or throat can result from cigar or pipe smoking, as the juices of the tobacco will be swallowed.

Today’s Messianic community, just like today’s Jewish Synagogue or Christian Church, will have people who smoke tobacco. This may involve people who smoke cigarettes regularly, cigars or pipes regularly, or cigars and pipes seasonally. One definitely has to reckon with the great social popularity of cigars in North America since the late 1990s, as there are religiously-themed cigar clubs. It should not be surprising that there are some Messianic congregations, if not having unofficial get-togethers where cigars are smoked, may actually have official clubs or social gatherings where cigars are smoked. For many Messianic people, because smoking tobacco—even cigars and pipes—is not officially prohibited by Scripture, think there is nothing morally wrong with it. Yet for many of the same, while not at all a healthy habit, many would not fault someone for smoking an occasional cigar to celebrate something special, or to enjoy on a vacation or holiday.

² Ron Isaacs, *Kosher Living: It’s More Than Just the Food* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), pp 47-48.