

CHAPTER 1, LAW 6(A) - DO WE REALLY WANT G-D? PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Law 5 (end -- see last week for entire text): *Nevertheless, we are commanded to follow the middle path in life. This is the best and most upright way, as the verse states, 'You shall follow in His ways' (Deut., 28:9).*

Law 6: *The following is how [the Sages] understood the explanation of this commandment (i.e., the above verse -- 'You shall follow in His ways'): Just as He is considered gracious, so too should you be gracious. Just as He is merciful, so too should you be merciful. Just as He is holy, so too should you be holy.*

Along these lines did the Prophets refer to G-d with such titles -- 'slow to anger,' 'great in kindness,' 'righteous,' 'upright,' 'pure,' 'mighty,' 'powerful' and the like. These convey to us that these are proper paths, and one must accustom himself in such behavior and [by so doing] resemble his Creator to the extent he is able.

Up until now, the Rambam had been discussing the importance of following the middle path in life. In this week's installment, he states further that such is the way of G-d, and that more generally, we are obligated to emulate our Creator. Thus, by adhering to the middle path we are not only living healthy and balanced lives ourselves. We are resembling our G-d.

What is this notion of "resembling" G-d? What is the importance and significance of it? And further, is it truly possible to resemble an infinite G-d?

The idea behind this is a very fundamental one in Jewish thought. One could easily view the Torah as a fulfilling and spiritually uplifting way to live in this world. The world is a very confusing and potentially dangerous place. One may easily be tempted to pursue all sorts of goals and lifestyles which seem alluring at first, but which in the long run offer nothing but emptiness and frustration. And so, comes the Torah and offers us a wholesome and truly rewarding recipe for life. And, incidentally, while we're at it, such a lifestyle also grants us a share in the World to Come.

The above approach, however, while containing some validity, sells the Torah hopelessly short. We cannot view the Torah as merely a guide for living comfortably in this world. The Torah is not just a book of sound advice for living -- not really qualitatively different from Ben Franklin, Dale Carnegie or John Gray. It is rather a guidebook for forging a relationship with G-d and earning a share in the World to Come. It tells us how to live for the next world, not simply (or only) how to live well in this one. While we're at it, however, our souls, recognizing that they're in the process of fulfilling their

ultimate mission, will feel a sense of fulfillment even down here. We'll in fact experience just a taste of that exhilarating relationship with G-d in this world. We will feel fulfilled and sated, knowing we are properly using this world as the entranceway to the Ultimate One.

Here as well the Rambam almost cuts himself short. After espousing the beauty of pursuing the Golden Mean, the Rambam interjects that this is not only a good path for us. It is much more: it is the way of G-d. Our goal in improving our characters is not so that we can lower our blood pressure and foster rewarding relationships. It is ultimately so we can become more godlike individuals. Self-improvement does not end with ourselves. It is the first step towards knowing G-d.

To understand this more fully, it is worthwhile to establish a basic principle of Judaism. We are all familiar with Judaism's basic equation -- that by fulfilling the mitzvos (commandments) of the Torah, both positive and negative, we earn ourselves a share in the World to Come. This picture, however, is far from complete. Reward is not merely some mystical Divine promise that G-d will "pay us off" for our deeds and sacrifices in this world -- almost as if the world were some great cosmic carnival in which we win tickets to be traded in for reward after it's all over. Nor are mitzvos arbitrary acts which G-d promises to reward us if we perform.

Rather, as many Jewish philosophers explain, the World to Come is the **outcome** of our good deeds. Our very good deeds (as well as our refraining from evil) create for us our portion in the hereafter. How does this work?

Let us back up one step further and begin to explain. We actually know very little about the World to Come. (We're still waiting for someone to come back and tell us.) This to a great extent is true because it is simply beyond our comprehension. It is rapturous beyond what finite man can conceive; it can in no way be cut down to human terms. The Talmud likewise states, "The prophets prophesied regarding the Days of the Messiah alone; regarding the World to Come, however, 'An eye has not seen it...' (Isaiah 64:3)" (Brachos 34b). It is good quite literally beyond our wildest dreams.

The Talmud, however, does leave us with one very vague image which perhaps provides us with an important starting point: "The World to Come has no eating, drinking, reproduction, commerce, jealousy, hatred, or rivalry. Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns on their head enjoying the shine of the Divine Presence, as it says 'And they saw the L-rd, and they ate and drank' (Exodus 24:11)" (Brachos 17a).

Thus, we will be sitting with "crowns on our heads," enjoying the shine of G-d's Presence. This of course means precious little to us, and although it is what our inner souls truly crave -- to be reconnected to their Source -- consciously we hardly realize we even want this. Yet, this does convey one thing to us -- that the World to Come is closeness to G-d. We will be pure souls standing eternally before our Creator. "Reward" is not some self-contained pleasure to enjoy within ourselves -- an infinitely large pack of M&M's to snack on. (Sorry, all you M&M's fans.) Rather, the World to Come is the ultimate pleasure. G-d grants us the ultimate good in existence: Himself. Now,

what kind of experience will this be?

Beginning to get a little lengthy for a single installment. G-d willing next week!

(Part of an idea above based on the writings of R. Aryeh Kaplan.)

Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and **Torah.org**