

CHAPTER 2, LAW 3(A) - THE WORLD ISN'T BIG ENOUGH

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

"There are certain character traits which a person is forbidden to accustom himself in, even in moderation. Rather, he must distance himself to the opposite extreme. One such trait is haughtiness. For the ideal path is not that one be humble ('anav') alone; he must be lowly of spirit ('shefal ru'ach'), and exceedingly unassuming ('rucho nemucha'). Likewise it is said of Moses that he was 'very humble' (Numbers 12:3) -- not merely 'humble'. So too did the Sages command us: 'Be exceedingly lowly of spirit' (Pirkei Avos 4:4). The Sages likewise stated that one conceited of heart has denied G-d, as the verse states: 'Lest your heart grows haughty and you forget the L-rd your G-d' (Deut. 8:14; Talmud Sotah 4b). The Sages stated further, 'Damned if one has arrogance... even a little' (Talmud ibid. 5a)."

In past weeks we discussed the Rambam's maxim of pursuing the Golden Mean. We should always follow the middle path in life and in all our traits, not veering to either extreme. Here the Rambam presents the first of two exceptions to his principle: arrogance.

The Rambam quotes just a few statements of the Sages which condemn arrogance. One who is conceited "forgets" G-d. If you're the center of your own universe, you have left little room for G-d. You may be performing all sorts of great and wonderful deeds, but you are serving yourself, inflating your own ego rather than raising G-d's honor. The Talmud likewise states that the egotist, no matter how much he has accomplished for G-d, "will not be clear of the judgment of Gehenna" (Sotah 4b). As much as you've done, to some extent you're serving yourself. Whereas regarding other traits there's a time for everything -- a time to be easygoing and a time to be intense, a time for sensitivity and a time for stoicism, etc. -- there is never room in this universe to serve yourself. For the more you are serving and pumping up yourself, the less you are serving G-d.

In the same vein the Talmud there (5a) states: "Regarding any person who has arrogance the L-rd says, 'He and I cannot dwell together in the world.'" This here world ain't big enough for the two of us. Only one being can dwell in the center of the universe. You either serve G-d or you serve yourself -- and there is no middle ground. You simply cannot have it both ways.

The Talmud there coins another choice phrase, which sheds much light on just how unlivable life is for the egotist: "Whoever has arrogance, the slightest breeze will 'sully' (unravel) him." It takes very little to set off the egotist. If you can't admit to human failings -- or you have to show your fellow (or spouse) you are **ALWAYS** right, you will never be at ease. One who cannot humble himself and admit his imperfections will always live in fear -- fear of being found out. He'll come down like a ton

of bricks on anyone who slights him, who even implies he has faults and needs improvement. Anything you tell him is either wrong or he knew already. (Remind you of anyone you know? ;-). The good employee gets the manager to think it was **his** idea.) ;-). And that is just not a way to live. When we feign infallibility we are living an illusion -- we are playing god. And one can only play such a game so long.

(I can't resist quoting a comic strip here. :-). Charlie Brown says to Lucy in the course of conversation, "I mean, you're not **perfect**, you know." She gives him such a shocked, bug-eyed look, that he walks off muttering, "I've just never seen anyone look so **insulted** before..." ;-).

One, however, who readily admits he is not perfect will be much harder to ruffle. I know I'm human; I harbor no illusions about my talents and abilities. And a personal slight or a few inconveniences will not really unsettle me. I've always felt one of the most important prerequisites for marriage (and all relationships) is the ability to learn from one's mistakes. Our spouses might be perfect but we certainly aren't. And the recognition that I need to admit failure and improve is the first step towards building meaningful relationships.

Thus, the Talmud (and Rambam here) tell us we must avoid arrogance to an absolute extreme. We must be entirely self-effacing. We must not see our talents as our own at all. They were gifts entrusted to us by G-d -- to be used in the manner He wishes. The more we value ourselves for that which G-d has granted us, the more we are taking what is G-d's and pretending it is ours. And as above, in this there can be no middle ground. This is not a matter of relativity, of finding the proper balance in our character traits. It is the basic issue of whom we are worshiping.

There is, however, a basic difficulty with this week's law, in fact a glaring one. In Chapter 1 Law 5 the Rambam wrote clearly that the wise man is one who is only moderately humble. One who by contrast eschews haughtiness to an extreme is considered pious. The implication is clearly that we should follow the middle path in arrogance vs. humility as well. We will G-d willing discuss this at length next week.

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