

# CHAPTER 2, LAW 7(D) - THE PAIN OF INEXISTENCE, PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

***...Neither should a person be one prone to arguments, nor one obsessed with jealousy or obsessed with lust, nor a pursuer of honor. Likewise did the Sages state, 'jealousy, lust and [the pursuit of] honor remove a person from the world' (Pirkei Avos 4:28).***

***The rule of the matter is that a person should follow the middle path in every quality until all his traits are directed toward the center. And this is as King Solomon said, 'And all your ways shall be directed' (Proverbs 4:26).***

We have been studying the multi-sectioned Law 7 for a number of weeks. This week I quote the final section of the Law. With this we will G-d willing conclude our study of the second chapter.

The Rambam this week lists a number of other negative qualities one should stay clear of, ones so thoroughly evil and irredeemable the Sages say they "remove a person from the world."

One issue I feel should be addressed is why the Rambam made special mention of these particular traits. He already told us generally that we must always follow the middle path in our ways. And he more specifically warned us to avoid anger, lust and arrogance (see [Law 1:4](#)), advising that we avoid anger and arrogance to an extreme ([Law 2:3](#)). If so, what was added with this repetition?

The answer is perhaps hinted in the language of the mishna the Rambam quotes -- that such qualities remove a person from the world. This adds an important angle to the Rambam's discussion of character development. These traits are in a class of their own. They are not merely bad; they are life-destroying. There are many faults a person may suffer from but which are more or less "manageable": they do not make life unlivable. Nearly everything can ruin one's life if taken to ridiculous extremes, but one can live with being somewhat too stingy, too extroverted, too callous, too reckless, etc. These traits however require special mention. Because if you suffer from them, your life is simply not a life -- not for you nor for any of those around you.

This is simple enough to see in the qualities listed. The first is a person prone to arguments and contention. Ever come across a person who's always sulking, who can never be pleased? There is **always** something to complain about! If you've ever been in the position of trying to reason with such a person or cheer him up, you'd have better luck with a brick wall (which is anyway much more pleasant to be around). Such a person estranges others, sooner or later becoming incapable of being cheered or inspired. They're too busy taking revenge on mankind -- showing the world how mistreated and neglected they've been. And at a point it becomes quite clear that they really do not

want to be any different.

The danger of unbridled lust is equally self-evident. A person whose spends his days in headlong pursuit of his passions really doesn't have a life. He is unable to develop himself and become who he could be. He is a mere slave -- to passions which will never truly satisfy, which will in fact only increase the more a person attempts to gratify them. The Sages, in their uncanny perception of the human condition, write pithily: "There is a small limb in a man: if he starves it, it is satisfied; if he satisfies it, it is hungry" (Talmud Sukkah 52b). Human drives are an undeniable part of our reality, and as we know the Torah does not tell us to crush or deny our natures. But as with all aspects of nature, if we do not control them they will control us.

The same is true of jealousy. One who pines away wishing he were someone else really doesn't have a life. He fails to develop his own talents -- or even recognize what they are -- because he spends all his time attempting to be someone else. Regarding this the Talmud states, "Anyone who sets his eyes on something which is not [meant] for him, what he seeks is not given to him, and what is his is taken from him" (Sotah 9a). He will certainly not get what is *not* meant for him, and by his own actions, he will deny himself that which is his as well.

And last but not least, the pursuit of honor is equally empty and meaningless -- and frustrating. One who doesn't really care about himself but only about what others think of him, really isn't a person of substance -- or even of reality. He doesn't actualize himself. He merely attempts to get others to **think** he's a something. And whether or not he actually receives any honor (which is unlikely), he will never be a fulfilled person. He will at best attempt to replace true fulfillment with an illusory sense of esteem.

There is a much deeper idea here which we're beginning to touch upon and which I'd like to discuss at a little more length. Every human being in creation lives with a gnawing sense of emptiness. It is the sense of an unfulfilled drive, the most basic human drive: to feel we exist. It sounds strange, but until we make something of ourselves, we really do not exist. Man is merely a created being, an extension of the G-d who fashioned him. And in a real sense, merely having been created by another does not grant existence. Life was handed to us for free; we did nothing to earn it. And unearned existence is not existence at all. We are not really any more independent of G-d than a painting is from its painter. Independence and true reality cannot be handed to us by our Creator. And so, we go through our lives plagued by the sense that we must do something real and lasting, that we must achieve immortality before we go. We must do something to justify our existence -- or otherwise we are literally no more than a figment of G-d's imagination.

So how does one escape this dilemma? And what happens to one who does not? There are actually some fascinating angles to this concept, but they will have to wait for the next installment, G-d willing next week. Stay tuned!

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