

## CHAPTER 2, LAW 7(E) - THE PAIN OF INEXISTENCE, PART II

*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).***

Last week we began our discussion of this final section of Law 7. We discussed why the Rambam saw need to make special mention of the traits listed here. As we explained, such traits are not just excessive. They remove a person from the world altogether. One who is racked with jealousy, lust or the pursuit of honor really doesn't have a life. He pines away wishing he were someone else, or attempting to satisfy urges which merely intensify the more he attempts to satiate them. And in so doing, he never gives himself the opportunity to become himself.

We then began discussing one of the central dilemmas of our humanity, which as we'll see shortly, closely ties in to this law. The most basic need of human beings is not food, clothing or shelter, and is certainly not pleasure. It is the need to feel he exists. Strange as it sounds, in a sense we really do not exist as we are. We are merely beings created by G-d, an extension of the One who created us. And just being created by another makes us no more independent of our Creator than a painting is to its painter or a puppet to its maker (even if G-d hard-wired into us excellent cognitive abilities). We have done nothing on our own. We merely lived out the finite number of years G-d granted us and ceased to exist. And in a very real sense, even the time we are here — merely following our preprogrammed script — was really not independent existence. We were no more than a figment of G-d's imagination.

This is actually a quandary which plagues man to his core — or at least plagues those of us who allow ourselves to think about it. And so, man is obsessed with the drive to make himself immortal, to make some lasting mark on the world. It will drive him to build great structures, work long hours, spend years training for the Olympics, or somehow get his name in the paper. I want the world to remember me. I want to make a difference, to make some kind of imprint on mankind which proves I truly existed. And a person is willing to kill himself for this. He'll march off and die for a cause — so long as the cause is something greater than himself — to convince himself he did not live and die in vain. He will then feel his life — however fleeting — meant something, became a part of an eternal

cause. For better to die a "somebody" than live out your life an inexistent speck.

(I don't want this discussion to get too out of hand (especially because this is the 5th installment on the same paragraph), but this relates to one of the understandings of Adam's primordial Sin. Though G-d told Adam he would die if he ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, at least he would be acting as a real and independent being — making his own decision. And so better to have a shortened life which was his own than to live forever a created nothing. This is of course a pathetic oversimplification (and Adam's reasoning wasn't even correct — as his act was a sin). But I thought it was worth offering this brief tie-in just to demonstrate how deeply this issue cuts to the core of the human condition.)

What is the proper way out of this dilemma? Accomplishment. We must make something of ourselves. Once we've put in our own effort, we've become more than what G-d has put into us. We have now made a difference. We are no longer simply "created", we have now created for ourselves — through good deeds which will outlast us. And so, we make ourselves eternal.

And here the Torah, in its very basic outline, is clear: Do these actions and refrain from these other ones and you will achieve immortality. Perform acts which will outlive you and earn yourself a share in the World to Come. Only this will truly assuage your need for existence. Only this will make you independent of your Creator. Only this will make you real.

Thus, the Torah's solution for one of man's great struggles in life is almost teasingly simple. The problems, however, begin when a person is not privy to this simple solution — or refuses to look into Judaism's age-old recipe. As we saw above, such a person will be obsessed with the need to achieve prominence and make himself noticed — in his life or even his death.

It in fact has been observed that Jews who are not blessed with their religious heritage are most prone to this. Jews have inherited this sense of urgency. They recognize instinctively there is more to life than just living comfortably and meaninglessly. They are thus driven to accomplish and achieve greatness. And so, they are prominent in virtually every area of endeavor, having been awarded x-hundred Nobel prizes for their efforts, far out of proportion to their numbers worldwide. (Googling very quickly right now, Jews have received over 20% of the total.) To some extent, this can be attributed to Jewish brains and cunning. But without question Jews are driven. We know life is fleeting and we must make ourselves last. And if we don't have the Torah to direct us, nothing will stop us.

(The Talmud actually states this pointedly: "Why was the Torah given to Israel? Because they are fierce ('ahzin').... Had the Torah not been given to Israel, no nation would have been able to stand in their way" (Beitzah 25b). A view certainly shared by antisemites worldwide. Hopefully, Jews of all types, whether religious or not, will impact on the world positively. But whatever the cause, we're always there at the forefront.)

Now let's say a person takes neither of these paths — neither Torah nor worldly accomplishment to slake his drive for immortality. He'll be driven to other extremes. He'll go out and kill, he'll disturb the peace, he'll act out in school. He'll do something to make himself noticed — if it's too hard to do this in a positive way, then there's always the negative. Somehow such a person will want to make a difference and become known — if not for distinction, then for notoriety. (I know of a case of an eight-year-old who was quiet and not very popular, and who turned to exposing himself during recess to get some attention. It worked alright — but of course too well, attracting the attention of teachers, the principal, etc.)

But now we arrive at the main tragedy of the situation. Let's say someone does nothing to achieve immortality — not through the Torah's prescription, not through accomplishment, and not through trouble-making. What will he do? He may either drug himself with pleasure and distractions, or he may turn to what the Rambam warns against here: honor seeking. Such a person decides it's too much work to earn existence the right way — or he's too afraid of the consequences of learning G-d's prescription for achievement. So he opts out. But deep down he'll be tormented — not only with the guilt of knowing he has disobeyed a G-d he knows exists. But for a deeper reason: He knows he literally does not exist. He can enjoy himself for the time being, but deep within himself he'll be plagued by the need to assuage that burning empty feeling.

And how will he very likely alleviate the pain? Through honor seeking, at having people snap to attention at his call. Honor gives the impression you're a somebody. People make a fuss over you; they jump at your command (especially if you yell loud enough). You live a facade that you're important, that you actually exist. It's false and deep down you know it. (Do they really give two cents about you when your back is turned?) But then again you're a "false" person yourself, who really hasn't earned reality. But this is the strength of the human drive for honor. I want that feeling — because deep down I know that is what life is all about. But if the true way is too hard, I'll settle for the illusory stuff, I'll take the placebo — at least allowing me to fool myself a little while longer.

(It should be noted that there are people who **have** accomplished — but would just like the appropriate recognition for what they've done. That perhaps is more along the lines of what the Rambam discussed earlier — that it's okay to take the middle path in this, but the more pious should conceal themselves even further.)

This, to wrap up, I feel is why the Rambam here places such emphasis on honor seeking. Honor is not only evil and wrong. It is anti-life, and in the words of the Sages, it "takes a person from this world." It is a means of allowing ourselves to live without achievement — at the same time being lulled into a sense that all is well regardless. And this is failing in life on literally the most basic level. It's one thing to sin. Everyone has faults and makes mistakes. But more than anything else, we must at least admit there is a battle.