

CHAPTER 3, LAW 2 - PLAYING WITH FIRE

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

A person must direct all his actions towards 'knowing G-d' alone. His sitting, standing, and speech should all be directed to this. How? When he is involved in business or working for a salary, his intention should not be the amassment of wealth alone. Rather, he should do such in order that he be provided with his physical needs -- by way of food, drink, dwelling, and marriage needs.

So too when a person eats, drinks, or engages in marital relations, he should not focus his heart on doing such things in order to enjoy himself alone. If he does, he would eat and drink only sweet things and have relations only for pleasure. Rather, he should remind himself that he is eating and drinking in order to make his body and limbs healthy. Thus, he won't eat whatever the palate desires, as a dog and donkey. Rather he will eat things which are beneficial to him, whether bitter or sweet. And he will not eat unhealthy foods even if they taste good.

How is this? Someone whose body temperature is high should not eat meat and honey and should not drink wine. This is as [King] Solomon wrote allegorically 'Eating honey excessively is not good' (Proverbs 25:27). Rather, he should drink endive water even though it is bitter. Such a person will be eating and drinking for his health alone -- in order that he will be healthy and whole -- as it is impossible for a man to live without food and drink.

Likewise a man should engage in relations only to keep his body healthy and to procreate (lit., 'to establish his seed'). Therefore, he should not engage in sex whenever he desires but when he knows his body needs to ejaculate for health reasons (lit., 'as the way of medicine') or in order to procreate.

Last week the Rambam discussed the fallacy of those who believe man's body is basically wicked, an evil animal which must be subdued and crushed. As we discussed, not only is such a denial of human nature and failure to appreciate the great gifts G-d has bestowed upon man, but it is bound to backfire in multiple ways. Rather, a Jew must view his body as a temple, one which must be revered and cared for as a vessel fashioned in the Divine image and capable of being used in His service. True, many things don't belong in a temple. Yet anything G-d created -- certainly man, the crown of His creation -- is wholly sacred and must be utilized in the manner G-d desires.

There was, however, one basic gap in last week's discussion. We demonstrated quite convincingly that man must not view his body as his adversary: destroy it or it will destroy you. Yet how **does** one relate to his body and physical drives? Don't many of the things our bodies crave basically draw us away from spirituality -- if they're not outright sinful? True, you need a healthy body to serve G-d and

fulfill the commandments -- and so it can be viewed as a worthy and venerable vehicle for Divine service. Yet what about so many of the other things our bodies want to do? Are they just "evil" drives which must be quelled? Can such pleasures be enjoyed without compromising one's spirituality?

(When I was young, there used to be a popular saying which went: "Anything good is either illegal, immoral or fattening." (Do they still use that one today? Maybe I just no longer hang out with people who think that way.) I'd like to think my definition of "good" has progressed since then. Yet we must respond to this basic dilemma. Even if we enjoy nothing but permissible pleasures, don't they bring out the animal within us, making us less receptive to G-d?)

I feel Judaism's approach to this issue is addressed in the law we studied today. We are not to deny our desires or challenge them head-on. We must rather enjoy them -- but at the same time keep in mind that we are doing so ultimately for sacred reasons. My body is a temple. I cherish it and treat it with care. But I do not worship it -- for it is not simply a temple; it is a temple of G-d. It must be made happy and sated, but it must know it is because it must deliver. It must be used in service of our souls and divine calling. Work to the extent you need, eat to your fill, keep yourself in shape, marry and raise a family -- but only do so knowing that physical fullness and satisfaction can and must be directed heavenwards.

As I've pointed out in the past, I believe that generally different approaches to this may be found among the world's major religions. On the one hand, some see the ideal path as disassociating oneself with outside world. Live celibate, in a monastery; take vows of poverty. For indulgence leads to the vulgarization of man. The only true path is separation and denial. Although religions today are practical enough to recognize this is an ideal the vast majority of man cannot aspire to, such is still the **truly** spiritual life.

Others, recognizing that so basic a part of man cannot be denied, take the precise opposite approach, elevating physical pleasure to the plane of the spiritual. The promised world for them is a huge harem, full of all the pleasures imaginable to man. (I actually see such claims as an excellent marketing gimmick -- a great way of gaining "believers" (ones even willing to blow themselves up to go upstairs) -- if your religion is invented and you have the luxury of setting the rules, that is.) As preposterous as such a belief is theologically and as embarrassingly as it cheapens the spiritual potential of man, such an attitude does at least recognize that the physical is not all evil, utterly removed from G-d. If there is beauty, it must have some divinely-endowed sanctity to it.

(Keep in mind that our patriarchs and matriarchs were all physically beautiful people, and that the Holy Land is a place of physical as well as spiritual majesty. External beauty without should ideally reflect spiritual magnificence within.)

Judaism has never been plagued with such doubts or ambivalence. Virtually all of Israel's greatest men married and had children (if they merited). Though most lived austerely, they never saw wealth as an evil to be shunned. Such people recognized that any drive G-d has granted us must potentially

be good -- meaning usable in a purposeful way. We must only look into the Torah to find out what that way is and how to best utilize it. And further, the stronger we are tempted to misuse a drive, the greater the potential for good it must have -- and thus the dark side of the force attempts all the more to ruin it.

Judaism thus strikes a very healthy balance between asceticism and physical satisfaction. It is perhaps the most realistic approach to life. Yet in an important sense, it actually confronts man with an even greater challenge. It's actually much easier to completely ignore or crush a drive you feel is detrimental to your spiritual well-being (or to just fall prey to it). Stay completely away from it; don't play with fire. But in a sense, this is a cop-out -- running from challenge rather than meeting it.

Judaism demands something different. We are to engage in those very activities which may overwhelm us. We must play with that fire -- for only through this do we become whole human beings, dedicating every part of us and every drive within us to G-d. **Enjoy** this world, but do it for G-d's sake -- because He commanded it and because ultimately only through this can we fully realize our Divine potential.

Thus, the Torah, while offering complete fulfillment, presents us with the ultimate challenge. And it makes for a difficult balancing act. We must find every ability and every drive within us, neither crushing nor indulging it, and utilize it in G-d's service. And only through this can we experience true satisfaction.

There is one final important thought here -- one particularly relevant to us. I'll begin by way of illustration. The Kotzker Rebbe (R. Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, 1787-1859), one of the greatest, most insightful and most demanding of the great Chassidic masters, was once sharing a Sabbath meal with other great rabbis (I believe he was at the table of his father-in-law; other greats were present.) One of the others, before he partook of a certain delicacy, launched into a long soliloquy, something like: "For the sake of the holy Sabbath and not for the slightest consideration of physical enjoyment whatsoever..." The Kotzker, no doubt catching on to the other rabbi's affected manner, promptly picked up a piece of herring (or whatever), and announced his comeback: "For the sake of my pupick (stomach)!" and took a large bite. To the raised eyebrows of the other rabbis, he responded, "At least I'm telling the truth!"

I believe this sheds some important light on the challenge of all this. There are in fact two tracks here. Ideally a person should enjoy this world for G-d's sake alone. And the more we are able to remove ourselves from the picture and think about G-d, the better. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzato great 18th Century Italian scholar, philosopher and ethicist, in his Path of the Just (Ch. 26) sees this as the ultimate human being -- whose very eating a meal can assume the sacred dimensions of a sacrifice consumed on the altar. For such a person, the physical world does not conflict with the spiritual whatsoever. His very physical activities are directed entirely upwards.

Yet as the Kotzker readily admitted, very few of us can aspire to such a level. Most of us have bodies

with a mind of their own (if that made sense). And for such people too, there is a way. We enjoy this world. We can't help it; we know that denying our natures and desires would simply backfire. We know we must have sated bodies, not too weak or frustrated to function as vessels capable of Divine service. Yet we must live with an overall sense that ultimately we enjoy this world for G-d's sake: not for the sake of indulgence but simply so we are well and sated. And at the same time, if enjoyment is important to us, we can do so appreciating the G-d who placed such in the world.

(Note likewise that the Rambam above wrote that when one is earning money or enjoying this world he should not have in mind his enjoyment **alone**. For the vast majority of us, pleasure is something we are hardly beyond. We are not told to pretend we do not **like** pleasure, yet we must bear in mind the ultimate purpose of our involvement in this world.)

And this too is a difficult balancing act: Enjoy enough that you're not frustrated but not too much that you begin to live for it. This is no small feat, and as we saw above, even the greatest rabbis can fool themselves. And we can likewise appreciate the value of occasional abstinence -- of denying ourselves certain pleasures so they don't get the better of us (which the Sages view as an important stepping stone to true sublimation).

Yet in the eyes of the Torah, this is clearly not the ideal. G-d's world is not here to be denied or ignored -- nor worshiped. As part of G-d's handiwork, it is beauty and perfection. It may take much effort to keep our physical in line, but we must never fail to recognize the truth. Ultimately we are to enjoy all G-d grants us while not distancing ourselves from Him in the slightest. For it's a beautiful world out there -- of beautiful sights, sounds, tastes and pleasures. And G-d created it all for us.

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