

CHAPTER 3, LAW 3 - IN ALL YOUR WAYS KNOW HIM

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

One who accustoms himself to live in a healthy manner (namely, who engages in physical activities only to the degree which is medically beneficial as per Law 2), if he intends with this that his body and limbs be whole and strong alone, or that he have children who will serve him and work for his needs, such is not a good practice. Rather, he should intend that his body be whole and strong so that his soul will be directed (lit., 'straight') to knowing G-d, as it's impossible that one understand and delve into wisdom when he is sick or in pain. He shall [likewise] keep in mind that he should have a son who will possibly be a great and wise man in Israel.

One who follows this path all his days is considered to be serving G-d constantly, even when he engages in business or in marital relations. [This is] because his thoughts in all such activities are in order that his needs be met so that his body will be whole to serve G-d. [The same is true] even when such a person sleeps. If he sleeps with intent that his mind be composed and his body rested so that he will not become ill (for he will not be able to serve G-d when he is sick), his [very] sleep will be considered Divine service.

Along these lines did our Sages command us, 'All your acts should be for the sake of Heaven' (Pirkei Avos 2:17). And this is as Solomon in his wisdom stated, 'In all your ways know Him and He will direct your paths.' (Proverbs 3:6).

This week's law relates very closely to some of the themes we've been discussing recently. Last week the Rambam instructed us to enjoy this world, but to do so only in the manner appropriate. Earn money only according to your financial needs. Eat, drink and enjoy this world but only according to the dictates of your health. You can and should enjoy this world, but you must ever be cognizant that it is for a higher purpose.

This week the Rambam brings this concept home even more pointedly. Living according to the needs of our health is certainly wise advice. But if we stop there, our lives are not pious, merely sensible. And it is very easy to live a comfortable and healthy existence -- which a Torah lifestyle certainly engenders -- and to see it as not much more than just a wonderful way to live. And the next easy step is to forget the G-d who commanded it all.

And this doesn't stop with our health needs. Most of our other religious activities could be viewed as just wonderful ways to live -- and little more. Sabbath and holidays afford relaxation and quality family time (without any of our electronic devices buzzing, beeping, chirping, tweeting, or whatever

they do). Torah study is a challenging and inspiring intellectual exercise. Giving charity, acts of kindness, community involvement, etc. all infuse our lives with meaning and just plain make us feel great about ourselves.

And so, the Rambam here finds need to warn us: Don't stop there. Don't enjoy the Torah lifestyle so much that you forget the God who commanded it upon you. Don't just enjoy the fruits of a healthy and meaningful lifestyle. Do it for G-d. Remind yourself that you're taking care of yourself because you have G-d's mission to perform. Make all your acts for the sake of Heaven. And then your every moment and every act will be ones of cleaving to G-d.

And as the Rambam writes further, at this point all your actions will be considered acts of Divine service. If I sleep because I need the strength to serve G-d, then even my sleep is a holy act, one of cleaving to the Almighty. The real trick of this, of course, is in my intentions. To transform acts I happen to enjoy into good deeds, I must consciously and actively remind myself why I am doing them. If by contrast I'm doing a mitzvah (good deed) proper -- such as wearing a tallis (prayer shawl) or eating matzah on Passover -- well, why else would I be doing it other than for G-d? Such acts are inherently spiritual; they speak for themselves (although of course the more spiritually-inclined my act the better). But to sanctify the rest of the world and my very mundane activities: such requires a far more conscious effort.

There is an even more fascinating idea here, along the same lines. The Talmud, quoting the above verse -- "In all your ways know Him," makes a perplexing comment: "even for a sinful matter" (Brachos 63a). What does it mean to know G-d even when you are sinning?

The commentator Rashi explains the meaning to be that one should consider G-d even when faced with a potentially evil act. Specifically, he must consider G-d and only do the act if the circumstances are such that the Torah would permit it. Thus, we must know G-d even when confronted with a sin -- and as a result generally not do it.

I, however, have always felt there's a different thought here. And in fact an alternate reading of the Talmud adds the following statement: "Rav Pappa said: This is as people say, a robber at the mouth of the tunnel (meaning the hole he is about to use to break in to the victim's home) calls out to G-d."

And the idea behind it is fascinating -- even touching. We should never forget G-d -- even if we know we're not acting in a way which is making Him proud. The burglar may well like to put G-d out of his mind at such times. He goes about his business without the slightest thought of G-d, wholly caught up in carrying out his wicked plans. Yet when a trying moment confronts him -- when he is just on the verge of that break in, attempting to pass through undetected, he cries out -- and to G-d. For he knows it is the L-rd who determines all that transpires in this world. He knows deep down it's all up to G-d.

Now isn't it kind of silly to pray to G-d that He help you steal? Do you really think G-d would heed such a "prayer"? I mean, if you really believe in G-d enough to pray to Him, don't you realize He very

emphatically does **not** want your fiendish plans fulfilled?

Yet even so, such a "prayer" contains an important acknowledgment -- one the Sages want us to make. For we must "know" G-d at all times, both our good and our bad. For the burglar it took a particularly trying circumstance to wake him up to that reality. And we too must strive to tune in to such an awareness. Don't forget about G-d just because, well, you'd rather He not be paying attention to you just now (while you know full well He is). Level with G-d even if you know your behavior is not what it should be. And your prayer may sound something like this: "G-d, I know I'm not acting the way I should. I know right now I'm not making You proud. But all the same I don't want to forget You -- and I don't want You to forget me either. Please watch over me in my darkest hour. I don't want to lose my connection to You even now. For if You allow me to hang on to You just a little, I can still hope and pray that one day I'll come back."

Sometimes, as an on-line rabbi, people write to me in a kind of apologetic tone: "Well, I'm not really as good a Jew as I should be..." Now imagine yourself saying that to G-d. Look, He knows it already, so no sense not admitting it. And it's important: it keeps the lines of communication open; it helps you relate at least in some way to a G-d you may be afraid to face. Too often I see people refusing to face themselves and their faults. Since they're afraid G-d disapproves of certain aspects of their behavior, they keep out of G-d's way altogether (or so they imagine). And they just laugh it all off, ignoring a G-d who really is staring them in the face -- and they know it. But such is a tragedy. Failure does not have to mean writing off ourselves from G-d entirely. We must level with our G-d, at least admitting to our faults even if we're not doing very much about them.

Thus, two critical concepts are alluded to in King Solomon's single wise statement. Know G-d in all your ways. As the Rambam took it, we must know G-d when we are fulfilling His will properly. Don't just find the Torah lifestyle so wholesome and fulfilling that you observe it forgetting the G-d who commanded it. You **should** enjoy a religious life: The G-d who created the world **told** us it is the perfect way to live (at least given that we're in a post-Primordial Sin world). Yet it is so easy to enjoy it and forget that it is not only the means of making sense of this world; it is Divine service itself.

And at the same time, as the Talmud tells us, we must know G-d even when we're failing. Just because you're sinning today doesn't mean you should cut off all connection to G-d -- even if you sort of wish He wasn't noticing your present behavior. Even if you're not at your best, you still can and must know G-d. Don't break off and reject the G-d who still loves and wants to know you. Don't burn your bridges behind you. Keep on talking to G-d and confiding in Him. For if you keep those lines of communication open, chances are that when you **are** ready to return, He will be there waiting.

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