

CHAPTER 5, LAW 1(A) - THE WAY OF THE WISE

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Just as a wise man is distinct in his wisdom and his character traits, and he stands apart from others regarding them, so too he must be distinct in his deeds, in his eating, in his drinking, in his marital relations, in his going to the bathroom, in his speech, in his walk, in his clothes, in his caring for his needs, and in his business dealings. All such deeds of his should be especially pleasant and proper (lit., 'fixed up').

How so? A Torah scholar should not be a glutton but should eat only food which will maintain his health. And he should not overeat [even] such foods. He should not run to fill his stomach as those who fill up from food and drink until their stomachs are ready to burst. Regarding such people it states explicitly in Scripture, "I will scatter dung on your faces, the dung of your holiday offerings" (Malachi 2:3). The Sages stated, this refers to people who eat and drink and treat all their days as holidays (Talmud Shabbos 151b). Such people say, 'Eat and drink for tomorrow we will die' (Isaiah 22:13). Such are the eating habits of the wicked. Such tables Scripture denigrates, saying: 'For all [such] tables are full of vomit, excrement without space' (Isaiah 28:8). A wise man, by contrast, eats only one or two dishes, and eats of them enough to live, and it suffices. This is as Solomon stated, 'A righteous person eats to sate his soul' (Proverbs 13:25).

In this chapter, the Rambam discusses superior types of behavior which are appropriate for the wise. After spending a number of chapters describing how the average individual should behave (hardly very average at that), the Rambam now devotes a chapter to describing the more refined behavior of the Torah scholar. This topic he discusses this week is eating. Beforehand, however, I would like to like to discuss this notion more generally. Next week, God willing, we'll get to eating -- er, to discussing the subject of eating.

There appear to be two basic ideas behind the Rambam's theme. The first is that the Torah scholar, as a result of his study, should develop a greater appreciation for proper behavior. His value system should become more refined. He should no longer be the sort who lives to fill his stomach or partake of whatever he can get his paws on. Even if certain pleasures are technically permitted -- even in great quantities, he will understand there is far more to life than distracting oneself with pleasure. Intellectually, he will recognize that they pale before the true purpose of life. And slowly, this awareness will cause his interest in such petty distractions to wane.

Secondly, the Torah scholar must recognize what he represents. He personifies Torah to the masses, and he must act accordingly. If his behavior is coarse and vulgar, if he cuts people off on the

roads, if he acts with pettiness, arrogance, callousness, etc., it will reflect on the Torah itself. Others will see his faults not as his own personal shortcomings (which everyone admittedly has), but as a reflection on the Torah he studies.

The Talmud (Yoma 86a) states this perfectly. It derives from the verse "You shall love the L-rd your G-d..." (Deut. 6:5) that each of us is obligated to make G-d beloved through his actions. If a Torah scholar deals kindly with others, people will say, "Fortunate is his father who taught him Torah! Fortunate is his rabbi who taught him Torah! Woe to those who do not study Torah! This one to whom they have taught Torah, see how beautiful are his ways!" If, however, he is not honest in his dealings and doesn't speak kindly to others, people will say the opposite: "Woe to this one who has studied Torah! Woe to his father who taught him Torah! Woe to his rabbi who taught him Torah! This one who has studied Torah, see how crooked are his deeds and how ugly are his ways!"

We are constantly being judged by those outside us -- both Jew and Gentile -- and far more often than we'd care to know. And apart from our own Torah-bred appreciation for decency, we must ever be aware that how others perceive us is how they view and judge the Torah itself.

I believe there is a fascinating general insight into the Rambam's words. The Rambam did not simply introduce this chapter as the ways of the **pious** -- of anyone who wants to improve his behavior. He stated that these are the ways of the wise -- of the Torah scholar. Our desire to improve our behavior must stem from our Torah knowledge. Such superior ways to act are not appropriate for any old person who decides he wants to be "pious". It must be built upon something; it must be an outcome of his study.

Now it's true that one of the bases for this law, as we explained above, is only relevant to the Torah scholar. He is the one who represents Torah to the masses and must maintain the Torah's reputation. Yet I believe there's a far more profound idea here as well.

Ultimately, improving our behavior must be a consequence of our understanding, of a reasoned and deliberate decision to perfect ourselves and reorient our priorities. It must stem from knowledge -- from a profound understanding of the beauty of the Torah and our role within the world.

If, by contrast, our drive for saintliness stems from other motives, it may be a dangerous thing indeed. Without some very strong intellectual backing, the saint-wannabe may just be on an irrational "high". And that could lead a person to all sorts of dangerous -- and ridiculous -- extremes. If you're inspired (or at least think you are) but don't know what to do about it -- you just want to somehow be "holy" -- anything goes, whatever grabs your fancy. Why not roll in the snow, mutilate yourself, blow up infidels, or do anything painful (to you or others) that shows you truly got the "spirit". Bar Kochba, the famous failed-Messiah later defeated by the Romans (2nd Century C.E.), supposedly had an admission requirement to his army that the applicant cut off one of his own fingers to demonstrate his toughness. The Torah warns many times against doing "weird" things for the sake of mock spirituality: offering animal blood to the demon-gods (see Leviticus 17:7), roasting

your child to the fire-gods (Molech) (ibid. 20:1-5). Don't get fooled into thinking that just because something is bizarre and exotic it's otherworldly. It might just be strange.

When G-d requested that Abraham offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, G-d took great care not to rush Abraham into it. The approximately one-day journey from Abraham's home (according to the Sages in Hebron) to Jerusalem, the place of the binding, took them nearly three days. The reason? Explain the Sages: "So no one would say G-d confused and confounded him suddenly and his mind was bewildered, and that had he time to consider he would not have done it" (Midrash Tanchuma Vayaira 22 brought in Rashi to Genesis 22:4). Likewise G-d didn't even immediately tell Abraham the name of the intended sacrifice so as not to startle him suddenly (Midrashim, see Rashi to v. 2).

Finally, I've heard in the name of the Kotzker Rebbe (R. Menachem Mendel Morgenstern) that the hardest part of Abraham's challenge was not agreeing to sacrifice his son but **stopping** himself at that final moment when the angel told him to refrain. Try psyching yourself up for some ecstatic moment and then taking control at the last moment. It's so easy to just ride the wave and rush headlong into mindless acts of devotion, letting blind emotion take you where the rational being would never go.

But none of this is what G-d wanted of Abraham. "I want you to know what you're doing. I don't want the child sacrifice of the nations -- the ecstatic, the rapturous, and the idiotic. I want you to serve Me because you know what you're doing and why, because you deliberately determined that all belongs to G-d and must be devoted to Him. I want you to carefully consider your actions and then make the ultimate decision -- and the ultimate sacrifice. I want this to be **your** act, a true reflection of who you are and what you aim to be. And I want this to be the legacy you bequeath your descendants ever after."

And this, in the final analysis, is precisely what Abraham achieved. After passing his historical challenge, G-d responded to Abraham: "For now I know that you are one who **fears** the L-rd" (v. 12; emphasis mine). Not passion, excitement or blind devotion -- and not even love -- but fear. And this was the man who could father the Jewish nation. Highs will always ebb; exhilaration will invariably wane. But fear -- the reasoned and considered sense that we must give all we have, no matter how precious, to G-d: this is the undying force which would pass on to his descendants. And for this did G-d promise Abraham, "For I will bless you and increase your descendants as the stars of heaven and the sand by the shore of the sea." This could beget a nation of godly servants, not lacking for passion, yet ultimately dedicated upon the profound sense that all must be devoted to G- d.

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