

CHAPTER 5, LAW 6 - MORE PRIVATE MATTERS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Torah scholars accustom themselves with great modesty. They will not degrade themselves nor uncover their heads or bodies.

Even when the Torah scholar enters the bathroom he will be modest and not uncover himself until he sits. He will not wipe himself with his right hand. He will distance himself from all others. He will enter an internal room (lit., 'a room in a room') within a cave and relieve himself there. If he relieves himself behind a wall, he will distance himself so his fellow will not hear any sound if he passes gas. If he relieves himself in a valley, he will distance himself so his fellow will not be able to see his wastes. He will not speak when he is relieving himself even for a great need. Just as he accustoms himself with modesty in the bathroom during the day, so too during the night.

A person should always train (lit., 'teach') himself to relieve himself only in the morning and evening (i.e., early and late) so that he will not have to distance himself [from others].

The Rambam here is continuing to discuss the more refined behavior appropriate for the Torah scholar. This week we again discuss the scholar's private behavior -- this time a subject even less appropriate for public discourse.

I'd like to begin by explaining a few quick surface issues which may be unfamiliar to my readers. We'll then address this topic on a more philosophical level (yes, really!).

First of all, as I'm sure all of you know, the Rambam lived long before indoor plumbing and flush toilets (which only became widespread a century or so ago). (I doubt even my oldest readers remember the days of outhouses -- unless you hail from some underdeveloped part of the world.) People would have to find a quiet but not too distant place to relieve themselves. The Rambam here advises that one find a private indoor place such as a cave, but if impossible, one should distance himself so as to be as invisible to others as possible.

During the night the Talmud (Brachos 62a) states that one need not distance himself as much as during the day, since people are much less visible. Yet, advises the Talmud (and the Rambam here), one should be equally modest in all other ways -- such as covering himself and behaving with modesty.

Finally, the Rambam, also based on Talmud Brachos 62a, instructs that the Torah scholar not wipe himself with his right hand. (In general, the right side is considered more important than the left. See

Talmud Sotah 15b: "Any turn that one turns should be only to the right.") The Talmud offers a number of reasons why it is inappropriate to use one's right hand for such an activity, ranging from the spiritual to the practical, as follows: since the Torah was given from G-d's right hand (see Deut. 33:2); since one typically uses his right hand for eating; since one ties his Tefillin (phylacteries) with his right; or since a person draws out the signs of the Torah's incantations with his right hand.

Now onto something a little deeper. One of those perverse theological questions people never think to ask (until I came along, that is) is why G-d willed it that man must go to the bathroom. Of course, scientifically we know just what happens and why (as well as the many things which can go wrong), but certainly G-d could have easily done things differently, creating man (or his food) in such a way which precludes producing wastes which must be discarded.

(Keep in mind as well that the Sages state that the Manna Israel ate in the desert did not produce any wastes (see Talmud Yoma 75b) -- one reason why Israel complained about the "light bread" they were forced to subsist on (Numbers 21:5, see Rashi there). Purely spiritual food ("soul food?") can theoretically produce no wastes while nourishing man, both body and soul. And though in a sense this was too good to be true, some of our number were so unaccustomed to it that to them it was intolerably bizarre.)

There is a curious contradiction in some of the statements of the Sages regarding bathrooms (there are actually quite a few). On the one hand, a bathroom is considered an "unholy" ("tamei") place. One may not utter words of Torah or prayer in or near a bathroom (see Talmud Brachos 24b). One must also wash his hands upon exiting a bathroom, according to some even if he entered without using the facilities. Finally, Jewish law strongly disapproves of "holding it in," (I'm sure there's a more scientific way of saying it, but it escapes me just now...) stating that if one initiates his prayers when he needs the bathroom his prayers are an abomination (Talmud Brachos 23a). Clearly, anything associated with restrooms and defecation is antithetical to religion and spirituality.

Yet on the other hand -- and this one is really wild -- the Talmud (Brachos 57b) lists various items or experiences in creation which "resemble the World to Come" ("mai'ain olam haba"), and one of them is relieving oneself. (The other two are the Sabbath and the sun.) I suppose one could explain simply that for some it's such a relief to have a successful BM that it's a heavenly feeling. But I actually feel the message here is much deeper.

(You'll pardon my humor, but actually, I'm repressing a lot of poor-taste wisecracks here...) ;-)

There is a general concept in creation that everything G-d made is for a purpose. Nothing would exist in this world if G-d did not have some reason for its existence. Everything must have some place in G-d's scheme for the universe.

In a sense, however, there is one exception to this: human excrement. When man eats, everything beneficial and usable from man's food is consumed and digested. The body extracts everything it can possibly make use of (and often things it would be better off without). Man's wastes, by contrast,

represent that part of the food which has no redeeming qualities, which serve man no purpose whatsoever and so must be excreted. They thus represent purposelessness in this world, things that which has no function in G-d's universe. They are thus anti-existence, hearkening back to the nothingness which preceded Creation. They are perhaps the only existent matter on earth which stand in contrast and in opposition to G-d's plan for creation, which represent existence without purpose.

Thus, the bathroom and excrement are "unholy" / "tamei": they are anti-life. Divine service cannot be performed in their proximity, nor can one pray to G-d when his body contains such wastes. Devotion to G-d can in no way coexist with matter which denotes purposeless reality.

On the other hand, relieving oneself -- removing such wastes from one's system -- resembles the World to Come. Disassociating oneself from meaninglessness provides a taste of Heaven -- a place in which man (those of us who will merit) will live in a truly real state -- of complete connection with G-d. Further, the more we recognize that that which has no purpose must be discarded, the more attuned we become to the purpose of existence, and ironically, the more ready we become to ultimately cleave to G-d in the hereafter.

So, actually a fascinating insight relating to one of our least philosophical activities, to something we all live with but attach very little significance to.

It's interesting to note, in addition, that man often wants to deny this basic message. There's a lot of bathroom humor out there. Additionally, foul words (in all languages) almost invariably relate to the lowest parts of man's anatomy and his crudest bodily functions. The reason is because man has a deep-seated drive to deny his potential for greatness. On a level, man would like to see himself as a purposeless being -- one not bound by any morals or constraints. He is no more than an excrement-producing machine, living without true connection to anything higher.

We likewise often find great scholars and intellectuals possessing awfully foul mouths. I believe the message such people are subconsciously trying to convey is that they may be smart and capable, but they're not "holy" -- nor do their higher IQ and greater achievements obligate them to be any more spiritual than anyone else. My intellectual greatness in no ways implies I have any connection to -- or need to strive for -- eternity.

I believe the Rambam's advice here can best be understood in this light. One must be modest in the bathroom, not drawing undue attention to himself. Don't convey the message that you are a "bathroom person" -- that this is who you are and how you view your role in the world. Don't identify with the part of you that stands for emptiness and purposelessness. We must rather see ourselves as living beings, connected to the purpose of the world and striving for immortality. And with that, one of man's most bodily acts can actually lead him one step closer to salvation.

Many of the above ideas are based upon various lectures given by my teacher R. Yochanan Zweig (<http://www.rabbizweig.com>).

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