

# CHAPTER 7, LAWS 1-2(A) - THE SINS OF THE GREAT, PART I

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

## Law 1

***One who "spies" on his fellow [in order to find negative information to report] transgresses a negative prohibition as it is stated, "You shall not go spying in your nation" (Leviticus 19:16). Even though one does not receive lashes for [transgressing] this prohibition it is a very grave sin and it causes the death of many souls in Israel. Therefore, [it is stated] adjacent to it, "Do not stand on your fellow's blood" (ibid.). See for example (lit., "go out and learn [from]") that which occurred to Do'eg the Edomite (see I Samuel 21-22).***

## Law 2 (start)

***What is [the prohibition of] spying? It is when one bears words and brings them from one [person] to the other, saying 'This is what so and so said; this is what I heard about so and so.' Even though he is telling the truth, behold: he is destroying the world.***

We are now beginning the seventh and final chapter of the Rambam's Laws of De'os. In it the Rambam discusses various prohibitions relating to proper behavior and cultivating healthy relationships. He begins with the prohibitions of gossiping and maligning and in particular the prohibition of "spying" on one's fellow.

There are a lot of important ideas here -- in this chapter as a whole and this law in particular. There are several general concepts to discuss as well as surface issues requiring clarification. I would also like to look a little more closely at the Rambam's telling illustration of Do'eg -- one of the greatest Torah scholars of his time yet one of the few listed in the Mishna as receiving no share in the World to Come. I'll attempt below to divide the discussion between these three areas, no doubt doing justice to none of them in the process.

The first prohibition the Rambam discusses is snooping or "spying". It involves keeping tabs on one's fellow in order to find something juicy to report about him. The simple reading of the Rambam is that the primary prohibition is the snooping (and reporting) itself, that clearly being a lowly sort of behavior. The commentators, however, based on the Talmud and the Rambam's example, understand the prohibition more specifically to be reporting to others information which breeds hatred among men: "Guess what he said about you behind your back?" "Guess what he did to you when you weren't looking?" etc. In other words, the issue is not just generally digging up dirt on one's fellow -- that will be included in future prohibitions in this chapter -- but bringing up the sort of

information which fans hatred.

Based on this, we can well appreciate the Rambam's comment that such a prohibition "causes the death of many souls" and "destroys the world." Such animosities, with a little gratuitous fanning by a meddlesome go-between, can let loose hatreds and feuds beyond the ability of anyone to control. Friends, families, relations can get involved and be destroyed as well -- all because someone volunteered to spread a little juicy information which should have never been let out. We all say things we regret later. We all say things behind another's back to let off a little steam (then allowing the matter to blow over peacefully). There was a reason why we didn't say such to our fellow's face. This busybody, however, who was "generous" enough to volunteer such extra information has literally destroyed souls which would have otherwise recovered and been happily reconciled.

We can also understand based on this a related point in Jewish law. The classic work on the laws of forbidden speech, Chofetz Chaim (lit., "desires life"), rules that it is forbidden to repeat to A that which B said behind his back even if A already knows about it (Laws of Rechilus 4:1). We might have thought that once no new information is conveyed, nothing is accomplished telling A what he's already knows. But in truth the repetition itself may fan up the same old animosities. A may have gotten over the whole affair -- or he never really took it seriously to begin with. One more repetition may open up the same old sores and tick A off once again.

(A fellow I know once mentioned that he was once in a particularly foul mood, and he woke up the next morning feeling angry over incidents which occurred to him years in the past. Often past feuds and hatred have simmered down but were never fully put to rest. All it sometimes takes is the wrong sort of provocation to set it off once more.)

Let us now turn to the example of Do'eg the Edomite. He was one of King Saul's chief advisers. Scripture refers to him as the king's "mightiest shepherd" (I Samuel 21:8) -- which the Sages understand to mean the head of the Sanhedrin (high court) (Yalkut Shimoni, Ezekiel 34:1). In other words, he was one of the generation's greatest scholars. Yet the Mishna also includes him in the list of individuals who did not receive a share in the World to Come -- one of the rare exceptions to the principle "All of Israel has a share in the World to Come" (Sanhedrin 10:1-2). How could such a great man, no doubt expert in all G-d's laws, not even merit the World to Come -- the blessed lot of every simple believing Jew?

Let us begin by examining Do'eg's sin, referenced here in the Rambam. In I Samuel 21 the young David was on the run from King Saul, whose animosity for him had by then come out into the open. In flight he stopped at the priestly city of Nov (Nob), feigning to be on a secret mission for the King. They supplied him with food and arms (Goliath's sword happened to have been deposited with them) and sent him on his way. Do'eg happened to be present to witness this all.

In the next chapter, when King Saul accused his men of siding with David, Do'eg stepped forward to volunteer what he saw. He offered the king a simple revelation -- that the priests of Nov aided David

in flight. Saul immediately went to the city, accusing its pious inhabitants of treason. Even though they rightly argued they had no idea that David -- Saul's longtime faithful servant -- had fallen into disfavor, Saul, in his depressed and paranoid state, assumed malicious intent and ordered them killed. When even his hardened soldiers refused to commit such an atrocity, Do'eg himself stepped forward to slay them all (save one who escaped). According to the Talmud this infraction was so serious that the threat of punishment for it hung over the Jewish people for generations to come (see Sanhedrin 95a).

Now Do'eg appears to be offering a simple revelation. And in fact, the commentator Kesef Mishne observes based on this that the prohibition of "spying" is equally forbidden when A tells B what C did even if C really did nothing wrong -- so long as it piques A's ill will. The priests of Nov were acting perfectly reasonably in their own minds -- and in the minds of any objective observer. Yet since their actions angered Saul (and look at the tragedy which resulted -- perpetrated by none other than Do'eg himself), it was forbidden for Do'eg to convey his report.

So again, Do'eg's action appears fairly innocuous, even if it was technically forbidden. But there was a history behind it. As we will see G-d willing next week, Do'eg had it in for David ever since he stepped onto the scene. David's very popularity made him the target of other greats' jealousies. And as a result, Do'eg opposed him tooth and nail, forfeiting his own share in the World to Come in the process. We will explore this whole tragic episode G-d willing next week.

---

Text Copyright © 2009 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and **Torah.org**