

CHAPTER 5, LAW 10 - IS POVERTY THE IDEAL?

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

The Torah scholar provides for his needs justly. He eats, drinks, and supports his household according to his means and prosperity. He should not burden himself [financially] unduly.

The Sages commanded that the appropriate way (lit., 'in the ways of the land') is that a person should not eat meat except when he really desires it (lit., 'only according to his desire'), as the verse states, '...[and you will say, 'I will eat meat'] for your soul desires to eat meat...' (Deut. 12:20). It is sufficient for a healthy person to eat [meat] every Sabbath eve (lit., 'from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve'). And if he is wealthy enough to eat meat every day, he may do so.

The Sages instructed that a person should always eat poorer than appropriate for him according to his means, he should wear that which is appropriate for him, and he should honor his wife and kids more than appropriate for him.

The Rambam is continuing to discuss the behavior appropriate for the Torah scholar, this week focusing on how he maintains his living standards.

For the most part, the Rambam's words this week are quite rational and understandable, requiring little further elucidation. The scholar should basically live according to his financial abilities, not veering far to either side, whether beyond or below his means.

The first half of the Rambam's advice -- that we not attempt to live beyond our means -- we can all readily appreciate. We must recognize and be realistic about our monetary situation, making sure to live within our means. We must avoid the social pressures exerted by our surroundings -- looking over our shoulders at the clothes the neighbors are wearing, the vacations they're going on, the weddings they're making, etc. -- something we accept intellectually, even if we don't always apply in practice.

The second half of the Rambam's first point I found a bit more eye-opening. We **should** (more or less) live up to our standards. If a person is of comfortable means, there is no great reason to deny it and live like a hermit. If G-d has blessed you with a little more, why not appreciate the blessing and live better? The meaning, of course, is not to flaunt one's wealth or to use it solely for one's own selfish purposes. But neither does the Torah ask us to give everything away beyond the bare minimum. Rather, as with all blessings, we may enjoy what the L-rd has bequeathed upon us, making sure to recognize and appreciate the G-d who has granted it -- as well as being generous with it in the manner He certainly wishes.

There seems to be a common misconception among many religions -- Judaism included -- that truly holy people are dirt poor, or that poverty is the only truly pious way to live. What could be "holier" than living with miserable want, the cold weather seeping into an unheated apartment through broken shutters, putting the kids to bed hungry every night? How could one show greater devotion and dedication? Perhaps we also idealize the abject poverty of our great-grandparents in Europe. Somehow, we imagine, when life was desperate, everyone was pious, humble, long-suffering, stoic, and generous to a fault with the little bit they had.

Well, apart from the historical revisionism in such an appraisal (bluntly stated, most people were running from want (and religion) as fast as they could), the Sages are far less sentimental about poverty, stating rather dryly, "A poor man is considered dead" (Talmud Nedarim 64b). And the idea is not simply because such a person is deprived and hungry. Living from hand to mouth, constantly worrying about the next meal and the next bill drains a person. It saps him of his vitality. All of his energy is spent on worry and aggravation. "The days of our years among them are 70 years, and if with strength 80 years, and their proudest deeds are but toil and pain" (Psalms 90:10). And such toil and pain takes a mighty heavy toll on one's peace of mind, his relationships, and his health.

To be fair, the Talmud in one place writes that G-d searched through all the good qualities (Heb., "middos") to give Israel and found nothing better than poverty (Chagigah 9b). The risks of laxity and assimilation are far greater the more pampered our lifestyles and wider our opportunities. Furthermore, there is certainly room for some denial, of living more simply than one's standards -- not unlike how pious Jews occasionally deny themselves certain comforts and pleasures to keep their baser drives in check (as we've discussed in the past). Yet for the most part, Judaism does not view want and deprivation as an ideal. There is nothing evil about enjoying and appreciating the blessings G-d has granted us.

More generally, Judaism has always had a practical side to it, viewing the pursuit of wealth (within reasonable limits) as entirely consistent with the Torah lifestyle. There is no inherent contradiction between spirituality and making money, even a lot of it, if G-d so grants you -- though of course, as with most all worldly activities, risks undeniably exist.

Although as we will discuss G-d willing in future weeks there are higher tracks -- and room for people to transcend the curse of man that "with the sweat of your brow you will eat bread" (Genesis 3:19), most of us can and must earn our keep. And if we're honest and prudent about it, G-d will determine to what extent our efforts are blessed. (See Talmud Niddah 16b that whether a person will be rich or poor is determined prior to his birth. It depends on Divine providence -- solely -- and not at all on man's abilities. Many real-life examples of this certainly come to mind...) And if and when the blessings come, we are asked to appreciate what we've been granted and be ever aware of the One who granted them to us.

The final issue I'd like to discuss is the Rambam's final point -- his division of living standards into

three categories (based on Talmud Chullin 84b). One should eat less well than he can afford, dress according to his means, and care for his wife and kids more than he can afford.

This division is readily understandable. For our own pleasure, we should skimp just a bit. There is no reason to indulge our stomachs (or any of our fancies) to every extent we can afford. Our dress however, should be according to our means. As the Talmud commentator Rashi writes, we should not shame ourselves by dressing shabbily -- or by doing anything which may lower our standing in the community.

Finally, we must care for our family members even better, at times (and in practice most of the time) exceeding our financial abilities. As the Talmud there continues, "for they are dependent on him, while he is dependent on the One who spoke and the world came to being." For oneself, it is proper to do with a bit less, and certainly to stay within his means. And if he must at times make do without, he need not fear, for he may trust that the L-rd in heaven will provide him with his needs. But he has no right to impose such a high degree of faith upon his family. They look to him for support, and he must care for their needs. He cannot just tell them to keep the faith and turn to G-d. Faith is a wonderful quality if you attain it yourself, but if you're not there, no one can impose it on you from without.

Even further, if a breadwinner feels spiritually able to work a little less and do without, it is wonderful for him, but he must take his family members into careful consideration. We can never impose our own high level on others. And even more significantly, we will do our children a terrible disservice if our lifestyle conveys to them that the spiritual life is one of deprivation. We may be comfortable ourselves with self-sacrifice and denial, but our wives and children will not appreciate having it foisted upon them. And a very possible result is that our children, when they come of age, will rebel against the way of life they viewed as an unwanted imposition. Tragically -- but not surprisingly -- great sacrifice on the part of the parents often does little more than assure their own children will not follow in their ways.

Thus, the Rambam this week offers us several wise words of advice regarding how we must maintain our living standards. And I found his words this week refreshingly rational and agreeable. We need not (and should not) maintain standards much higher or lower than our means. And in allotting our resources, precedence is given to our dependents, at the expense of our own pleasures. And by so doing, we can live lives of comfort and self-sufficiency, whatever our station in life, being ever thankful to the One who allotted us the blessings we have.

(A small part of the above based on thoughts heard from [R. Berel Wein](#).)

Text Copyright © 2014 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and [Torah.org](#)