

CHAPTER 5, LAW 12 - FINANCIAL PLANNING

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

It is forbidden for a person to renounce possession of or sanctify his property (to the Temple or sacred causes) and [as a result] make himself a burden on society (lit., 'trouble the people'). He should not sell his field and buy a house, nor [sell] a house and buy movable property, nor do business with the worth of his house (i.e., with the proceeds from selling his house). Rather, he should sell his movable property and buy a field. The rule of the matter is that a person should make it his aim that his property be profitable (lit., 'to be successful with his property') -- not to appear a little well-off for a short time or benefit a little and [then] lose much.

The Rambam's simple business advice this week is readily understandable. A person should look towards long-term solvency and stability, holding on to his most secure assets. Under ordinary circumstances, he must not trade in any such belongings for short-term profit -- such as his field for a house or his house for movable goods. And certainly, he must not just dispense with his goods so as not to be bothered with them. We must treat all that G-d has blessed us with responsibly, making the best use of whatever we have, all in order to enable us to serve G-d properly.

Although the Rambam devoted this chapter of his work to laws applicable to the Torah scholar, the Rambam presents this law generically, since it is clearly of universal application. Based on this, it's actually not that clear why the Rambam places this law in this chapter altogether. I believe, however, aspects of this law have particular relevance to the Torah scholar, as we'll explain below.

The Rambam began by stating that a person must not give away all his possessions. We would tend to view such behavior as deranged. In fact, one of the Talmud's descriptions of a madman is one who willfully destroys valuable property (Chagigah 4a). Yet perhaps the Rambam felt special need to warn Torah scholars about it. There is a strong notion among spiritual people (of virtually all religions) that the truly devout eschew all involvement with this world -- especially with something so seductive and corrupting as money. Owning money, saving it, managing it, investing it, would surely sully a pure soul with one of the most hazardous elements of the material world. Better to wash your hands of it entirely and truly devote yourself to G-d.

Needless to say, although undercurrents of this notion certainly exist in Judaism -- that only poor people are truly pious -- the Rambam makes it quite clear that such behavior is reckless to an extreme. Giving away all one's wealth will do little more than turn him into a burden upon society -- who will have to pick the pious pieces up in order to keep this "holy" Jew from starving. There is nothing virtuous about making oneself dependent upon the good will of others. Pirkei Avos (3:21)

states it succinctly: " If there is no flour there is no Torah."

As an important aside, the Rambam is well-known for having strongly opposed people who devote themselves entirely to Torah study without a means of support. He absolutely rails against such behavior in his Laws of Torah Study (3:10), as well as in his commentary to Pirkei Avos (4:7). The Rambam appears to oppose even a community judge, rabbi or school teacher receiving a salary. Many authorities, however, contemporary to the Rambam and later, dispute his position and allow not only professional scholars to draw a salary, but rabbis in training as well. There are many good and comprehensive discussions of this topic -- one which is beyond the scope of this article.

On a different track, there is an interesting contradictory statement in the Talmud (Sotah 48b): "Whoever has bread in his basket and says 'What will I eat tomorrow?' is none other than one of little faith." The implication, clearly, is that one who **truly** trusts in G-d will not worry beyond the coming meal. All he needs concern himself is about today; beyond that is needless and unrealistic long-term speculation. There's more than enough time for the good L-rd to find a way to provide for him by then. And as the Manna in the desert, attempting to save from today to tomorrow evidences a terrible lack of true faith.

The answer to this is that the Talmud did not say one should not **plan** for his future, just that he should not **worry** about it, making sure he already has the money for it. In terms of planning, we must obviously do whatever is reasonable to assure our ongoing self-sufficiency. Invest in holdings which will give you steady returns; learn job skills which will afford you long-term marketability. Pirkei Avos (2:13) praises the quality of seeing consequences, of recognizing the long-term effects of our decisions, and likewise condemns one who borrows having no clue how he will repay his debts (2:14). There is no room for a responsible person to liquidate his assets for some quick and transient cash, or to live for the immediate to the detriment of his future viability.

In terms of faith, however, our attitude must be entirely different. If we are solvent today, we must not fret about tomorrow, getting ourselves worked up over what the future will bring. Every day is a new challenge. And just as we must pray to G-d daily for Divine assistance, we must turn to Him every day for yet another gift of life, health and success. Our attitude must never be that we want to be sure **today** that we can cover all future expenses -- so that we will never again have to turn to G-d. We should certainly see to it that we today have the **means** of earning tomorrow's wages, but there are no shortcuts to long-term solvency -- nor excuses not to pray to G-d daily for heavenly deliverance. King Solomon wrote, "Do not boast about the morrow, for you do not know what today will bring" (Proverbs 27:1). Enough can and will occur between today and tomorrow that tomorrow is, to quote the Talmud's expression, agonizing over a world which isn't yours (Sanhedrin 100b).

(Of course, such an ideal is not entirely practical today -- if for example you know you need to save up for your children's education or weddings or your own retirement, etc. (Once upon a time (not actually all that long ago), people didn't really expect to live long enough to retire. And if they

merited it, their children and extended family would provide both their physical and financial support. Nest-egg retirement savings plans (especially ones in which one's employer must contribute matching funds) are a fairly recent innovation.)

Even so, our overall message this week is a very important one. We all know people who saved diligently over the years to ensure their own future or that of their descendants -- only to have the vast majority of it disappear in the final few months of an elderly parent's terminal illness. (Some define a Jewish grandfather as one who wants to see to it that his grandchildren never have to do a day's work their entire lives.) For that matter, King Solomon was **not** a fan of saving vast sums for one's descendants to inherit -- see for example Koheles (Ecclesiastes) 2:18-19. See also the work Ahavas Chesed (Loving Kindness), II:14, in which the Chofetz Chaim sees this as a very flimsy excuse for not giving sufficient charity himself.)

I'll wrap up this week with a sharp thought I saw in the name of R. Zev Leff (well-known educator and lecturer of Moshav Matisyahu, Israel). What is the evil of the fellow who has bread in his basket today yet worries about tomorrow? It's that the fact that the only reason he **isn't** worried about today is the bread. Thus, clearly, the fellow is not truly trusting in G-d. He trusts only what he sees before his eyes. He wants bread in his stomach, not some heavenly promise of Divine providence. And this is far from the ideal. To be sure, one must plan responsibly for his future and never squander his life savings. But we must recognize that our own exertions are only the requisite effort we must make. Ultimately, our success, as well as that of our children, depend on none other than G-d.

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