

# CHAPTER 5, LAW 7(B) - UNDERSTANDING MAN, PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

(Middle of Law 7, beginning quoted in previous class)

***If [the Torah scholar] sees his words will benefit [others] and be heard, he should say [them]; if not, he should be silent. How is this? He should not [attempt to] appease his fellow when [his fellow] is angry. He should not ask about his [fellow's] oath [in order to absolve it] right at the time [his fellow] swore -- until his mind has cooled and become composed. He should not comfort his fellow when his dead [relative] is still placed before him -- as he is dazed (lit., 'confused') -- until they bury him. So too anything similar to these. He should also not appear before his fellow at the time of his [fellow's] disgrace, but should rather avert (lit., 'hide') his eyes from him.***

This week the Rambam continues the theme of this chapter, offering guidance specifically for the Torah scholar. The particular cases enumerated here are all based upon Pirkei Avos [4:23](#).

The overall theme this week is actually fairly self-evident. The scholar should attempt to help others, but must have the awareness of his fellow's situation as well as the common sense to know when his words will benefit his fellow, and when they are better left unsaid. King Solomon wrote, "[There is] a time to remain silent and a time to speak" (Koheles 3:7). Attempting to reason with someone in the heat of anger, or before coming to terms with the loss of his relative, may only increase his pain and agony -- and engender bitter retorts -- as well as words both parties will come to regret.

Many years ago, I was studying in yeshiva (rabbinical college) with a young married man who tragically lost his first child to SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome -- when a healthy infant dies in his sleep suddenly for no apparent or diagnosed reason). Besides the terrible suffering the parents endured over the loss itself, the father was just appalled at some of the patently stupid things people said to them during the mourning period in attempt to console them. He mentioned sardonically afterwards that he started compiling a list of the outright moronic things people said to him in attempt to "convince" him his loss wasn't so bad. Well-meaning people, lacking the sensitivity advised here by the Sages, can tragically cause even more pain with their misguided, if well-intentioned, efforts at consolation.

(As an aside, some of the statements he mentioned were clearly thoughtless to an extreme. Some, however, were actually not so obviously insensitive to one who has never suffered such a loss. The overall point, however, is that the silent presence of close friends offers far more solace than logical attempts at explaining G-d's unknowable ways. As King Solomon said, there are times for silence -- and such silence often says far more than words. (As a further aside, I'm happy to mention that the

parents (now well in their middle years) have since been blessed with many healthy children.))

The theme of this law is thus that good deeds often require a careful judgment call. It is not sufficient that the Torah scholar understand the Torah well. He must also well understand people and human nature -- knowing when his words will be well-taken and when they are better left unsaid. Applying the Torah to everyday life situations requires far more than mastery of classic texts. The scholar must equally have an awareness how its rational principles can be applied to often erratic, irrational man.

I think we might also suggest that this lesson is particularly relevant to the Torah scholar. It is not difficult to imagine a learned, book-smart rabbi more accustomed to texts and commentators than to human foible and fickleness. The truth is, being a community rabbi is basically an impossible task. It requires a person scholarly and erudite yet warm and caring, one exacting and demanding of himself yet patiently forgiving of the imperfections of others, one commanding the awe of others yet accessible to all, one at home with abstract wisdom yet sufficiently down-to-earth to deal with the day-to-day business of running a community, an original and creative thinker who staunchly upholds tradition, and finally one strictly demanding of his own tight schedule yet who has the time to listen to everyone's problems as well as the patience to sit through countless interminable social functions.

(Occasionally the rebbetzin (rabbi's wife) can complement some such rabbinic failings, often infusing some much-needed grace and charm into the community's first couple. My maternal grandfather for one (R. Zvi Elimelech Hertzberg OBM, a longtime Baltimore rabbi), was said to be far too visionary and absentminded to actually keep a synagogue running in any practical sense. My grandmother, so they said, was the one to actually hold it all together -- as well as make the potato kugels which **really** held it together...)

Thus, we can easily imagine a rabbi of great erudition, but hopelessly lacking the patience and social graces to relate to the concerns of common man. When Moses searched for suitable judges to assist him in judging the nation, he told the nation to seek "men wise, understanding, and known to your tribes" (Deut. 1:13). In actuality he found only "men wise and known" (v. 15). As the Sages observe, wise, pedantic men he found, but ones of "understanding" he could not find (see Sifri 15 and Rashi there). And in fact, throughout history until this day Israel has known many a great scholar who had little time or patience for the masses -- even would they be so bold as to venture so close. Not every great man is the sort you can start schmoozing with and telling all your problems so he can wipe away your tears. And not every sympathetic listener has the ability to become very much of a Torah scholar.

However, much more often this is not the case. Ideally, Torah study engenders greatness which does not distance the sage from the masses but in fact brings him closer to them. This might simply be because the more the scholar studies the humbler he becomes, as he becomes ever more

aware of his own insignificance before the vastness of Torah. Alternatively, the scholar may recognize that every individual, no matter how small, has some unique words of wisdom to offer, as the Mishna states, "Who is wise? One who learns from every person" (Pirkei Avos [4:1](#)). And of course, the Torah, being G-d's sacred word, possesses a sanctity, and its studier can practically not learn it without becoming a more spiritual, giving human being.

But I believe the crux of the issue lies in a better understanding of the true purpose of Torah study. As we'll see, the Torah provides the bridge between contemplating G-d and understanding man. Next week, G-d willing, we'll develop this idea further.

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