

CHAPTER 6, LAW 1 - OF CAVE DWELLERS AND INSULATION

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

It is the inherent nature of man (lit., 'it is the way of a person's creation') to be drawn, both in his attitudes and deeds, after his friends and associates, and to act in the manner of the inhabitants of his country. Therefore, a person is obligated to befriend the righteous and to constantly be in the presence of the wise in order that he learn from their acts. He should [likewise] distance himself from the wicked who go in darkness in order that he not learn from their ways. This is as Solomon stated, '[One who] walks with the wise will become wise, and one who befriends fools will suffer harm' (Proverbs 13:20). It also states, 'Fortunate is the man who did not walk in the counsel of the wicked, [and in the way of sins he did not stand, and in the sessions of the scorers he did not sit]' (Psalms 1:1).

So too if a person is in a country in which its practices are bad and its inhabitants do not walk in the upright path, he should move to a place in which its inhabitants are righteous and act properly. And if all the countries that he knows of and has heard of act improperly -- as in our times -- or he is unable to travel to a country where its practices are good because of bands of soldiers or ill health, he should dwell alone, by himself, as it states, 'Let him sit in solitude and be silent' (Lamentations 3:28). And if [his country's inhabitants] are evil and sinful [so much so] that they do not allow him to live in the country unless he is involved with them and acts in their bad ways, he should go out to caves, briar patches and deserts and not accustom himself in sinful ways, in the manner that it states, 'Who would give me in the wilderness a guest lodge...' (Jeremiah 9:1).

We are now beginning a new chapter of the Rambam. It deals with man's relationship with his surroundings and with interpersonal relationships in general.

The overall theme this week is the extent to which man is influenced by his environment and the consequent importance of living in a healthy one. We are all familiar with the enormous pressure exerted by one's neighborhood and society and the almost palpable pressure not to stand out. (I discussed this once before in Pirkei Avos (2:14).) People will go to enormous lengths to hide their Jewishness (or any other shortcoming) in an irreligious environment -- or to demonstrate it in a religious one. Although such pressures are basically superficial, they are very real -- and quite difficult to overcome. And so, advises the Rambam, we must make every effort to live in a positive environment and avoid the negative -- even to the extent of withdrawing from society and finding a comfortable cave to dwell in unmolested.

(As an interesting aside, much of Rambam's early life was spent in such seclusion (or wandering

from place to place), while his family was on the run from the fanatical Almohad Muslims who conquered much of his native Spain. During that time, while still in his twenties, the Rambam authored his first great work, his commentary on the Mishna. Later in his life, in his capacity of court and harem physician for the Sultan Saladin, the Rambam obviously did not have the liberty to retire from public life (though he himself wrote above "as in our times"), and so resigned himself to residing in an environment he most certainly considered far from conducive to a Torah lifestyle.)

There's an obvious yet basic question on the Rambam's entire premise this week, one which actually sheds great light on the true mechanics of this law. The question was posed by [R. Zev Leff](#) of Moshav Matisyahu, Israel ([Outlooks & Insights](#) p. 175). If we are supposed to live only in the company of the righteous, well then who are the righteous supposed to live with? Why would they agree to live with **us**? Shouldn't they be attempting to live with people more righteous than **they**? And if so, why would they let us move in to their communities? They should move out for a worthier place as soon as we arrive! (And of course, those more righteous than **they** should be seeking a community yet **more** religious!) If so, how can the Rambam's advice ever be put to practical application?

Thus, clearly, the Rambam's advice cannot be viewed as entirely practical. For better or worse, it takes all kinds to make a community -- the scholars, the ignoramuses, the rich, the poor, the highbrows, the smart alecks, the schlumps, the schleppers, the nudniks, the yentas, etc. Although we should clearly opt to live in the best one we can find, there is no escaping the rest of the world -- nor (for better or worse) their escaping us.

As an aside, many small communities in Israel do have screening committees to ensure prospective neighbors will not badly compromise (or even slightly compromise) their religious standards. But practically speaking, it is unrealistic to hermetically seal off one's community, allowing only the "righteous" to live there. In fact, from what I've seen and heard, communities which attempt to take this to an extreme do not end off any better in terms of the spiritual standing of their residents, nor do they lessen such prevalent problems as teenage drop-outs. Some in fact suggest that such problems become exacerbated in such places. In more mixed communities -- or living in the Diaspora -- you and your children know what you stand for and with what and whom you should and should not be involved. In completely homogeneous communities, by contrast, life consists more of the unconsidered doing what everyone else does. And as we know, such religious behavior is quite likely to be a mile wide and an inch deep.

An equally important related point is that especially in today's times, it is virtually impossible to keep away all outside influences. Certainly we must try our best to maintain high community standards, but no amount of effort will keep the entire outside world at bay. Attempting to ensure one's children have never even **heard of** television, movies, Internet, video games, (or girls for that matter) just isn't going to happen. Rather, as I once heard esteemed educator and counselor R. Noach Orlowek comment, you cannot raise children by keeping all alternatives away. Bottom line we must convey to our children that what we offer them is the best -- and they must really know it. They

must feel good about who they are and what they stand for. They must appreciate Judaism for what it is, not because that's what everyone (except the goyim) do and because they've never been exposed to anything else. Believe me, that exposure will come sooner or later, and if they're not prepared, it'll hit them like a bolt of seductive lightening.

A further opposing idea is one expressed by my teacher, [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) -- that all of this really depends on who you are. Once while addressing budding rabbinical students, he advised that they should choose to live in a community in which they will make the most difference. Don't just cloister yourself in some "ultra-Orthodox" community in the Holy Land, where you can study undisturbed for the rest of your life. Rather, live where you can contribute, where you'll make a significant impact on your neighbors and community at large. Of course, such advice can only be offered to people strong enough in their own faith to influence rather than be influenced themselves. But if someone is such a person, my teacher considered it **selfishness** to retire from public life to become (to use my own expression) a no one in a sea of black, while he himself could have been the change (if that expression isn't too dated).

As we all know further, some people absolutely thrive when they recognize they're the best ones to make that difference -- say they're one of the few religious students in a college campus or one of the few devoted members of a far-flung community. They eagerly rise to the challenge -- and grow from it as well.

One final relevant point is that today as in past times, rabbis and educators are needed to strengthen small, distant Jewish communities. Often such selfless individuals spend their lives giving to those less enriched than they -- and as a result, are compelled to raise their own families in environments far weaker than they would consider ideal. Many would be hesitant to leave the confines of the study hall and established Jewish communities for such a life. However, I have heard that many great rabbis -- including R. Aharon Kotler (one of the founders of the yeshiva movement in America after the War), and my own teacher R. Yaakov Weinberg OBM -- would promise such young rabbis that if they make so great a sacrifice for G-d's children, He will surely watch over theirs.

I know personally one case of a young family years ago which moved out to teach in a Jewish day school in one such community. The daughter of the family told me that most of her years in school she was the only religious student in her class. All the others classmates hailed from only moderately traditional families from the surrounding area who merely considered a nominal Jewish education preferable to public school. And, she continued, she would **never** want her own children exposed to the type of frivolity and lewdness she was exposed to. Yet today all seven children in that family grew up to be absolute gems, each one better than the next (better so, in fact, than many of their New York City-raised cousins).

Thus, in conclusion, although the Rambam's advice is certainly relevant, it must be weighed against many other equally significant considerations. Certainly there are times in which the environment at

large is so deleterious that we can do nothing but withdraw into communities as insulated as we can muster. Yet at the same time our goal must not only be to flee from evil and save ourselves. We must equally attempt to **create** such an environment ourselves, one which others will be drawn to and inspired by. For ultimately we must remember that our mission as a people is not to run from or ignore the world at large, but to ourselves become an enduring light unto the nations (Isaiah 42:6).

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