

CHAPTER 7, LAW 8(B) - WHO ARE WE? PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

So too anyone who bears a grudge against any Jew transgresses a negative prohibition, as it is stated, 'And you shall not bear a grudge against the members of your nation' (Leviticus 19:18). How is this? Reuben said to Simeon, 'Rent me this house' or 'Lend me this ox,' and Simeon refused. Some time later, Simeon needed Reuben to borrow or rent from him. Reuben says to him, 'Here it is; behold I am lending to you and I am not as you and I won't pay you back as your deeds.' One who acts like this transgresses 'you shall not bear a grudge.'

Rather, [a person] should blot the matter from his heart and not preserve it. For so long as he keeps it in mind and remembers it he may come to vengeance. Therefore, the Torah was particular regarding bearing a grudge that one blot the sin out of his heart entirely and not remember it. This is a proper character trait ('dai'ah'), through which it will be possible to preserve society (lit., 'the dwelling of the land') and the interaction of mankind one with the other.

Last week we began discussing the prohibition of bearing a grudge and we made an important inference. Although the intent of such prohibitions is that we not even **care** when another wrongs us, technically the Torah only forbids acting on our feelings -- such as giving your fellow your (well-rehearsed) lecture about how much better you are than he and why doesn't **he** act the way **you** do etc. (I'd personally prefer not receiving my fellow's darn hammer over having to sit through the lecture. I've had times where I just went without so as not to have to endure an "I told you so!") ;-)
Typically, the Torah commands us on the level of action alone whereas the intent is clearly that we sanctify our souls. It is just that modifying our behavior is the only true means of reaching and improving our souls.

From there we began discussing a relevant fundamental. The Torah commands that we act a certain way -- in the hopes that our feelings will follow. But let's say our feelings are not there? As we all know, when we behave properly we are often acting better than we feel. We at times long to misbehave, yet for various reasons -- some worthier than others -- we force our bodies to stay in line. Are we "close" to G-d because we forced ourselves to behave? Or does He see through it, knowing that we are really rotten, lustful being on the inside and that our affected behavior without is merely a facade?

Conversely, when we sin we often feel that it's not how we **really** want to be. **We** -- meaning our inner selves -- want to strive towards G-d, yet just now our flesh is too weak and out of our control. And again, are we our spiritual yearnings? G-d knows as well as we that our souls within are pure

and sublime, which want nothing of ugly, perverted behavior. Or is that immaterial because we did **not** control our bodies? How does G-d view and judge us, based on our behavior or based on our thoughts?

To this we made a very basic distinction, based on the writings of the Nefesh HaChaim. There are really two factors to consider. Our actions are stronger and more concrete. They do more damage (or good) -- both to ourselves and the world about. Yet actions generally stem from a lower and more external part of us. Our souls truly did not want to sin, yet we acted out or blurted something out before we could stop ourselves. The Talmud states that a person does not sin until a "spirit of madness" enters him (Sotah 3a). Our true selves were really not a part of it. It was all a bout of (and sometimes a rather long bout of) temporary insanity.

By contrast, our thoughts do very little. They do not leave the realm of our fantasies, of our minds. They thus make little difference to the physical world about (or so we imagine). Yet they stem from a very deep part of our psyches -- from the innermost recesses of our souls. They thus do less damage, yet the damage they do do cuts very deep. When we sin with our hands it is an inadvertent slip, not truly a reflection of who we are and not fundamentally altering our values and sensitivities (depending, of course, how premeditated our actions are). But when we daydream about sinning the sin has ever so slightly penetrated our deepest soul.

So which is more significant -- unthinking actions or thoughts which do not lead to deeds? It appears that on the one hand, Jewish law generally regards actions more seriously. If you murder, the courts will put you to death. It matters not at all that it was a "mercy" killing, an "honor" killing, or that you had 101 good reasons to kill the victim but are a perfectly nice guy underneath. Likewise, if you spend hours every day wishing you could shoot your boss dead, you may very well be a bloodthirsty murderer on the inside (OK, maybe there **are** 101 good reasons to do so), yet the courts could never hang anything on you. Jewish courts judge based on actions and dry facts alone -- in fact taking care not to permit psychological or sentimental considerations alter the exactness of justice.

Conversely, as we learned several times in the past, some of the worst sins in the book -- such as lashon hara (malicious gossip) -- warrant no legal punishment at all since speaking is not an "action". Similarly, the Sages state that the Second Temple was destroyed because of needless hatred ("sinas chinam") (Talmud Yoma 9b), although that too is a sin of the heart alone. Courts cannot touch you on account of hatred or gossiping, but such animosities destroy the fabric of Israel. G-d was literally not willing to dwell among us for a sin not even prosecutable by Jewish law.

And this is not only a matter of human courts. To a great extent, G-d judges us primarily based on our actions: Did we control ourselves, did we withstand temptations, as strong as they were, and choose to serve G-d? For the most part, we are much less culpable for thoughts and desires which are so much less within our control. (Of course, ultimately we should learn to control them, but for

most of us that is a more distant goal.) Rather, G-d examines how we **acted on** our desires. Did we serve G-d regardless or did we fall prey to our evil inclination?

But there is a deeper issue here, based on the distinction we made above. G-d judges man on a level far more profound than actions alone. He sees just how much of our true selves went into them. Are our actions -- both good and evil -- truly **us**, or do they stem from a lower part of ourselves? Human courts could never allow such considerations to enter the judicial process. Murder is murder; larceny is larceny. The judges may justifiably sympathize with the felon that his upbringing and circumstances led him to thievery, yet their job is essentially to see to it that the money is returned, not to feel bad for the unfortunates of the world. (There is, of course, much room for that in society. But that is **not** the role of sitting judges.) G-d, however, views us on a far more profound level, determining to what degree our actions truly bring us closer to or further from Him.

Let me bring this out by contrasting two statements of the Rambam. In the first chapter of the Laws of Repentance ([Law 4](#)), the Rambam describes the process a person must undergo to effect full expiation for his sins. The most minor sins can be atoned through repentance alone. More serious ones require both repentance and the experience of Yom Kippur. Yet more serious ones require that the sinner repent, experience Yom Kippur, and endure suffering. And finally, the most serious sins -- ones which involve the desecration of G-d's Name, require repentance, Yom Kippur, suffering, and death. Only after the person dies can such sins be fully purged from his soul.

Yet in Chapter 7 ([6-7](#)), the Rambam writes as follow: "Repentance brings close the far. Yesterday this one was despised by G-d, detested, distanced, and abominable. And today he is loved, desired, close, and cherished... Yesterday this one was separated from G-d, the L-rd of Israel... he would cry out and not be answered... he would perform mitzvos (good deeds) and they would tear them up before him... And today he cleaves to the Divine Presence... he cries out and is answered immediately... he performs mitzvos and they accept them pleasantly and joyously..."

But didn't the Rambam earlier state that repentance is a slow process? If this fellow was so despised yesterday, presumably he transgressed some fairly serious sins. We would think that he wouldn't become "loved" by G-d until at least the atonement of Yom Kippur?

But this is precisely our point. There are two ways of looking at a person -- based on his actions and based on whom he **actually** is. Based on actions alone, it's true -- a sinner may require a long and grueling expiation until his slate is wiped clean. Yet he may become close to G-d immediately. Does he **want** G-d? Does he care about his relationship with his Maker? If so, G-d will drop everything, so to speak, to embrace him. G-d **loves** such a person. True, no sin may go unpunished. To entirely wipe out the aftereffects of sin, the repentant sinner will have to undergo a protracted process. You can't just snap your fingers and instantly come clean. It takes serious and concerted effort and mental retraining to utterly excise wickedness from your system -- not to mention Divine retribution. But **close** to G-d you can become immediately! I **want** G-d -- that's who **I** am, regardless of various

slips in my past, never mind how many. Sure my blunders will have to be dealt with and atoned for properly. But becoming close to G-d can take place in an instant.

A perfect illustration of this is King David (as heard from R. Berel Wein) . As we all know, David sinned grievously with Bathsheba (II Samuel 11-12). (To be fair, as the Sages explain, **technically** David did not sin, as standard practice in those days (and since -- actually at least till the First World War) was to divorce one's wife before going to war in order that she not be shackled in case her husband disappears. Yet still... Bathsheba was hardly a woman free for the taking.)

Yet David -- possibly more so than anyone before or since -- was one who never swerved from G-d on account of it. He lived with G-d constantly, in his good times and in his bad, in the midst of his good behavior and during his times of weakness. Sure he slipped -- we all do -- but that didn't mean he rejected or distanced himself from G-d, just that he couldn't restrain his body. You can sin and still be G-d's loyal servant. Punishment would surely have to be endured -- and as both Scripture and the Talmud state, David would suffer much on account of his sin (see Talmud Sanhedrin 107a). But punishment may merely be G-d's means of purifying a beloved soul until it can cleave to Him entirely.

Conversely, if your heart is **not** there, you may be doing everything right on paper but not really be close to G-d -- because G-d knows full well that on the inside you really don't care for Him. You can do every mitzvah (commandment) in the book, and you can avoid all the bad, yet it means nothing if you haven't truly used those mitzvos to build a relationship with your Creator. And again, good deeds must be rewarded. Such a person will be rewarded in some form for everything he accomplished. But I really don't know if that means he'll be granted box seats in the World to Come. G-d will pay him off somehow -- perhaps in this world if that's the only one he cared for. But is such a person, who merely watched his p's and q's, **truly** close to G-d? I'm really not sure.

And this serves as an excellent conclusion to our studies. (Yes, this is the final law -- more on that below.) Certainly, no one can pretend he is close to G-d deep down if he ignores G-d's mitzvos. Actions are the basis of everything. They, simply put, are **the** way of cleaving to the Almighty. But they in themselves are not the **true** goal of life. The Torah is not "Watch your behavior and I'll give you reward" but "Condition yourself for a relationship with Me." Proper behavior is important but that is not where Judaism ends; it is where it begins. Through that we can build a **true** relationship with our Creator. As the Talmud puts it simply, "G-d wants the heart" (Sanhedrin 106b).

And so our conclusion, perhaps the single-most important lesson of our studies: If you have slipped you can still latch back onto G-d -- instantly -- simply by getting in touch with your innermost self which wants nothing of evil behavior. For as low as you have fallen, there is a deep place within your soul which is untouched by it, which desires nothing but G-d. There is no room for giving up on yourself that you're too wicked and filthy for G-d to accept. That is merely Satan's means of attempting to hold on to his own miserable lackeys. Sure, true repentance is a lot of work, but

closeness to G-d is within everyone's grasp, no matter who you are and what you've done. It only really means taking that first step. And at times that is all G-d truly asks of us.

Conversely, if you **are** behaving never believe that Judaism ends there. One of the worst misconceptions people have about Judaism is that it's primarily a religion of ritual and form. Those who practice it and practice it truly know that nothing could be further from the truth. If a person is so busy observing the nitty-gritty details of the Torah that he forgets the G-d who commanded it, he's building a relationship with no one. And that is all but pointless (though without question better than nothing). If, however, you care and truly care about G-d, there is no limit to the heights you can reach.

(Based in part on thoughts heard from my teacher R. Yochanan Zweig.)

With this and with G-d's help, we have completed the Laws of De'os. God willing next week we will begin the Laws of Repentance.

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