

CHAPTER 4, LAW 5-6(A) - GETTING ADDICTED TO EVIL, PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

[Law 5] And among them (i.e., the twenty four factors which interfere with repentance listed in this chapter) are five things which one will be drawn after constantly and which are difficult to desist from. Therefore, one must be vigilant regarding them lest he become attached to them. All of them are particularly bad behavioral patterns (Heb., 'de'os', lit., 'attitudes'). They are:

(a) Rechilus (speech which causes enmity between individuals -- such as telling A what B said about him behind his back).

(b) Lashon Hora (gossip)

(c) Being hot tempered ('ba'al chaima;' lit., 'the owner of rage').

(d) One plagued by negative thoughts (lit., 'the owner of bad thoughts').

(e) One who befriends a wicked person, as he learns from [the wicked man's] actions and they become impressed in his heart. This is as Solomon said, 'One who befriends fools will become evil' (Proverbs 13:20).

We have already written in the Laws of De'os ways in which a person must accustom himself constantly [to avoid such behavior], certainly in the case of a repenter.

[Law 6] Regarding all these things and the like, even though they interfere with repentance, they do not hold it back [entirely]. Rather, if a person repents over them he is [considered] fully repentant (lit., 'an owner of repentance') and he merits a share in the World to Come.

In the first law above, the Rambam concludes his list of sins which make repentance very difficult. The Rambam enumerates sins which are addictive, which one who transgresses them develops a behavioral pattern very difficult to break.

The common thread running through these examples is that they are not specific actions, such as many of the earlier cases the Rambam listed (ridiculing the commandments, purchasing from a thief, accepting a bribe, etc.). He is listing general character traits. Our behavior we can modify, but as we know, our characters are extremely difficult to change. They become who we are and define the basic patterns of our lives.

There is a lot which can be written about each of the flaws the Rambam lists. We could easily spend many classes examining the particular failing of each one. Yet in another sense, almost nothing

needs be added this week. We can all readily appreciate how harmful and self-absorbing the traits listed are. Once a person gets hooked on say, anger or depression, it is near impossible to break the vicious cycle.

Nevertheless, I will compromise below. I'll attempt to discuss each trait relatively briefly without getting too carried away. This will hopefully give us an appreciation of the evil of each of these traits -- as well as the wisdom of the Sages in enumerating them. There are a lot of important psychological insights contained in the Rambam's words this week; I hope we can capture much of the basics in a few short paragraphs.

I'll deal with the first two together since they are closely related. *Rechilus* is a term in Jewish law which encompasses many types of forbidden speech. The basic (though oversimplified) definition is speech which engenders ill-will between individuals -- the best example being telling A what B said about him behind his back.

Lashon hara (lit., 'evil language') is generally translated as gossip, and it too is a very broad term in Jewish law. Generally speaking, it refers to all types of derogatory speech directed at one's fellow, especially which lowers his esteem in the eyes of others. Significantly, *lashon hara* refers to true speech alone. Telling lies about one's fellow is also forbidden but is not included in the Rambam's list (see [7:2](#)). I think we'll be able to appreciate this distinction based on the below.

The simplest reason that *lashon hara* is so addictive is no doubt that gossip makes its speaker popular. The one who has the inside scoop, the juiciest, most salacious gossip, will draw people like a magnet. It's an excellent (or rather, a terrible -- but terribly effective) means of making oneself the center of attention.

A second thought is that speaking about others -- describing them, sizing them up -- is a very aggrandizing experience. If I can size someone up and define him -- especially if it cuts him down to size -- I feel bigger than he. I'm broad enough to understand who he is and to pigeonhole him -- discovering the faults he cannot see within himself. By definition it makes me feel like a greater and more insightful person than he, able to measure him up and see who he is, for better or worse. And psychologically this is an enormously satisfying activity.

(I once heard an expression along the lines that great minds talk about ideas while small minds talk about people. I simply do not agree with this. Human beings are a fascinating, infinitely complex topic. It takes an exceptionally great mind to understand them and fathom what makes them tick. Being able to size up another human being and describe him is an enormously broadening and aggrandizing experience.)

A final idea is that discussing and describing the faults of others is a great way of ignoring my own faults. Rather than introspecting and examining what's wrong with me, I turn my focus outwards, occupying myself with the problems of other Jews and other denominations. If I work myself up over how fault-ridden **those** Jews are, I subconsciously raise myself up -- simply by not being **them**.

I have made myself great without having to lift a finger, or even bother seeing what's wrong with me to begin with (for starters finding fault in other Jews).

A similar thought is that the gossipmonger, who always sees (and reports on) the downside of others, develops a very negative attitude towards the world at large. He sees the worst in mankind. Most of what they do is pathetically and irredeemably rotten. The little bit of good he sees he is certain is riddled with selfish, ulterior motives. People are just low-down good-for-nothings, incapable of aspiring to true heights.

Such an attitude too is a great way of taking it easy on oneself. The gossipier refuses to recognize the potential for greatness man contains within. No one has really gotten it right. And with such a premise, there is little point striving for greatness himself. Man is not a lofty being fashioned in G-d's image. He is a small, petty, self-serving, narcissistic, lazy creature. Just as no one else is particularly sacred and accomplished, there is little reason to attempt to be any better myself.

Let us now turn to example three - the angry person. (I realize I'm not doing much of a job at the brevity I promised. Hope none of you are too angry.) :-) Anger too is a terribly addictive quality. This is because it give QUICK RESULTS. Losing one's temper is a great way of getting whoever you want to come running (whether towards you or away). Your every demand, no matter how unreasonable, is quickly obeyed. You get the results you want, no questions asked.

Of course, the hot-tempered person realizes deep down he's fooling himself -- that he gains only the mirage of importance. His underlings (employees, family members, or whoever) do not really regard him in the slightest. They can't stand him, and no doubt slack off as soon as his back is turned. But the hothead allows himself to be taken in by the illusion of importance -- or that life runs smoother on account of his tantrums, never mind the emotional damage to his wife and children. And when a person gets hooked on such deceptive shortcuts, it is exceedingly difficult to wake up to reality. (See this recent class for a further elucidation of this topic: [Ch. 3 Law 13](#)).

We next arrive at the fourth example -- the person of negative thoughts. This too deserves a much longer discourse, but there is one primary message I'd like to bring out. I heard this from both my teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) and from [R. Noach Weinberg](#) obm -- so it's bound to be good.

Ever try to cheer up a depressed person -- to help get him out of his funk? Notice that such a person generally does not even want to be cheered up? He's too busy feeling bad for himself, he's too wrapped up in himself and his self-pity. As the Rambam teaches us, depression and negativity are **extremely** addictive. Why is that? Could a human being actually prefer being upset and alone to cheerful and outgoing?

The reason is because depression is an incredibly self-centered frame of mind. A person who is down becomes completely wrapped up in himself. Nobody else cares about me. No one notices me or wants to be my friend. No one has ever come to my aid or bothered to see what I need. In a way such thoughts are terribly sad and empty. Wouldn't a person who actually feels this way make every

effort to reach out to others and build healthy relationships?

But the reality is not that way. There is a tendency for such a person to block out the rest of the world, to withdraw into himself and let the lot of them go to pot for all he cares. Somehow, the depressant feels this is his way on taking revenge on an uncaring world. He doesn't need or want them himself; they'll just have to do without him. Perhaps now they'll realize how badly they've treated him all along.

But as R. Zweig explains, there is a deeper reason for this as well. If other people **have** been nice to me and have helped me out, I owe them something. They deserve my gratitude and my returned affection, perhaps even my assistance in their times of need. And human beings have a strong resistance to this. I don't want to owe anyone anything. I don't want to be obligated to them. If no one has ever done me anything, I can resent them and tune out the entire rest of the world. Nobody cares about me so I owe them nothing. But if I admit how much they have done for me, I must turn outwards and stop caring only about myself. Although we all recognize how much nicer it is to be a part of the world, it requires an enormous initial hurdle to draw ourselves out of our shells and begin caring about others.

There is a lot more to say about this, but rather than branching off in further directions today, I think I'll continue this subject in the next class. In the meantime, a quick homework assignment. If you've never noticed this before, next time you become depressed, notice that you won't even **want** to be cheered up, or for anyone to reason with you or try to make up. You'll even want things to continue to go wrong and annoy you. For a part of you just wants to wallow in it -- to block out the rest of the world while being busy feeling bad for yourself. For if we recognize what makes us tick at such times, we will have taken an important first step towards our own personal rehabilitation. G-d willing in the next class we will expand on this discussion further.

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