

CHAPTER 4, LAW 5-6(B) - GETTING ADDICTED TO EVIL, PART II

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 last class (sorry for the long interruption!) we began discussing the sins listed by the Rambam. As we saw, unlike his earlier lists, this list does not refer to specific actions but to more general traits or behavioral patterns. As such, they are especially difficult to change. Once a person gets hooked on gossip or anger, it will be near impossible to retrain himself to act more appropriately.

We were in the middle of the fourth example last time -- the person of negative thoughts. We discussed why negativity and depression are so addictive. We all get down here and there, but why is it that when that happens we want to stay that way? A depressed person does not even want to be cheered up. He wants to wallow in his self-pity, being too busy feeling bad for himself to pay attention to anything or anyone else. Isn't it so much better to be happy and a part of the world than miserable and alone?

We answered on two levels. The first point is that this is somehow the depressant's way of striking back at the rest of the world -- in vain hope of restoring his own bruised ego. They don't value or care for him, so he'll withdraw as a means of showing how terribly they've treated him. Look how much harm you have all done! I don't need them anyway! I wouldn't even **want** them as friends! They're not worthy of it! He rebuilds his injured self-esteem by pretending he doesn't even care for the people who ignored or slighted him -- he never regarded them in the first place. And such a person will not even **want** to be cheered up -- lest his disdainful attitude be disproved.

A second related idea, based on my teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#), is that depression is an enormously selfish attitude -- of only caring for myself and blocking out the rest of the world. If I see that other people really are kind and caring towards me, I become beholden to them. If they do for me, I must reciprocate. I must care about them and do for them myself. But that means not caring only about myself. And people have an enormous resistance to this. They would rather be miserable and claim no one does anything for them than admit they owe others. They would rather only look at and care about themselves than turn their focus outwards. Admit life isn't all that bad and you must own up to those who have made it more bearable for you. And when someone is down in the dumps, self-centeredly thinking of and caring about himself alone, practically no force on earth can raise him out of it.

This, however, is not merely an interpersonal issue. It describes mankind's entire struggle in his relationship with G-d.

Deuteronomy 28 outlines the horrific, unspeakable punishments which will befall Israel if it refuses to serve G-d. Verse 47 (according to one reading) interpolates a cryptic comment right in the middle of the curses: "On account of that you didn't serve the L-rd your G-d from joy and goodness of heart, when you had much of everything." Thus, the Torah appears to threaten such terrible punishments not for sinning against G-d or ignoring His commandments, but for **performing** them -- but doing so without joy.

Now of course we know how important attitude is and how much more pleasant our good deeds are if with do them with enthusiasm, but why such terrible punishments simply for lacking joy? Isn't such a person basically serving G-d regardless? Isn't the main thing that he's fulfilling the commandments?

Furthermore, why **didn't** Israel serve G-d with joy when they had "much of everything?" If G-d really provided us with all we could ask for when we first came into the Land, why was our service of Him so lacking in happiness and enthusiasm? What more could we have wanted? Why **not** be happy and serve G-d accordingly?

The answer (also from R. Zweig) touches upon one of man's great challenges in life. Ask anyone how he's doing -- even if things are perfectly fine with him -- and you'll typically get a very muted response. "Not bad." Alright, perhaps people don't want to brag unnecessarily when things are good,

and at time things really are much worse than they appear to us. But people tend to downplay their blessings. Things are "okay", "so so," "could be better" -- or they're just "not bad" (not really positive, but at least not negative). Or more religiously, "baruch Hashem" (thank G-d) -- which too actually says absolutely nothing.

Now, when we view all of the blessings G-d has granted us and continuously grants us in life -- every part of our body which is constantly functioning, our families, talents, livelihoods -- not to mention the planet, the air we breath, the weather, etc., we should be ecstatic, overwhelmed with joy -- even if there are many minor issues we wouldn't mind improving. But we're very lukewarm about how things are with us. We're almost unaware of our blessings (whereas we are quite keenly aware of our few problems and shortcomings). Why is that? Why not admit -- at least to ourselves -- that life is wonderful -- not perfect, but downright fantastic?

The answer is because the more we admit things are so good, the more we are obligated to G-d. Life is fantastic! -- and every aspect of it has been granted to us by G-d on a silver platter. How do we own up to that? The implications are that we owe and we owe and we owe G-d for every moment we have been granted. But how do we repay that? By devoting our every moment and our every fiber to G-d. And that is sobering and frightening beyond imagination.

Thus, we have a very strong defense mechanism against our religious obligations. We downplay (or try not to think about) how much G-d does for us. Rather, we focus on the little bit of bad -- perhaps by comparing ourselves to someone who (we think) has it better -- and allow ourselves to get down as a result, even imagining that G-d does not do so much for us to earn our allegiance.

"On account of that you didn't serve the L-rd, your G-d from joy and goodness of heart, when you had much of everything." We weren't happy even though we had it all -- or more accurately, **because** we had it all. We didn't **want** it to make us happy, lest we become obligated to devote our every moment and every fiber to the G-d who granted it all.

And when that point is reached, all hell breaks loose -- literally. G-d visits upon such people the most terrible chastisement imaginable. Why? Because if a person doesn't feel G-d does for him, if he feels he owes G-d nothing, then his every act of obedience will make him **resent** G-d. "Why do I have to do this for G-d? What do I owe Him for -- for making my life miserable?" Thus, every mitzvah (commandment) such a person performs will drive him further from G-d rather than closer. Every act will increase his resentment and annoyance. And the worse the resentment and resistance we feel towards G-d, the more He will return in kind. He will throw every one of our worthless, negative acts back in our faces.

I will mention briefly two other common examples of this phenomenon --- also both from R. Zweig. Take your adolescent child. "What do my parents give me? They give me no freedom! I'm **embarrassed** to be seen with them! (You've heard that one?) ;-) I can't even invite my friends because the house is such a mess, etc." When one human being owes another for **everything** he

goes into denial. "No -- my parents made my life miserable." Otherwise, he will realize he owes a debt he can never repay, and that he must be eternally beholden to parents who though no doubt hardly perfect, invested so many years of time, money and energy into his very existence. (Obviously I'm not speaking about a dysfunctional, abusive home, but an ordinary, far-from-perfect one.)

Another excellent example is that big imperialistic bully, the good old US of A. The United States basically gives away free tens of billions of dollars yearly to the world at large -- to developing nations, impoverished nations, nations in crisis, and thankfully to Israel -- basically as a complete act of kindness. Is it to contain Communism? To ruthlessly swallow up smaller nations and impose Western ideals on Eastern man? Hardly. Any such minor considerations would in no way justify the sums of money handed over. Rather, it's almost a complete, unadulterated act of kindness, of noblesse oblige. And, as to be expected, what is the reaction of the Third World countries which receive so much aid from America? "Why, those despotic, degenerate, imperialistic bullies, who think they know better and attempt to impose their will on the rest of mankind! Who do they think they are?" And ever since the Marshall Plan or so, hating America has been quite in fashion.

I think I've written enough for one week, so I will close up this lesson quickly. The final example -- befriending a wicked person -- is fairly self-explanatory. People do not like standing out and appearing different. It is thus imperative to stay clear of wicked people. As the Rambam taught us in the Laws of De'os (6:1), we should take care not to even live in the same country as wicked people. Some people naively feel that if they join the company of the sinful, they will shine by comparison -- and they may even influence the evil to improve. On the other hand, if they live with the righteous, they will become annoyed and resentful towards those who are so much more religious than they, and they will become negative and defensive. Or at the very least, they'll feel like such incompetents and will sink into hopeless depression.

Is there any validity to such an attitude? Perhaps. But the Rambam tells us otherwise. Stay away from the wicked. They will harm you much more than you will improve them. You will become addicted to their seductive ways, with little means of freeing yourself. You'll happily relax your own standards, even if you remain better than they. Rather, stay in the company of the righteous. Once you're there you can work on your attitude -- learning from them rather than resenting them. But one thing at a time. For seeing and observing the ways of the good is the first step towards adopting such wholesome ways yourself.

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