

CHAPTER 5, LAW 2 - UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Let it not pass through your mind the matter which the fools of the nations and many unlearned Jews claim that G-d decrees on a person at his creation to be righteous or wicked. The matter is not so. Rather, every single person is capable of being as righteous as our teacher Moses or as wicked as Jeroboam, or wise or foolish, or merciful or cruel, or stingy or generous, or all other types of qualities. And there is no one who forces him nor decrees upon him nor draws him to one of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own and through his own volition inclines to whichever path he wants. This is as Jeremiah said "From the mouth of the Most High One does not emanate the bad and the good" (Lamentation 3:38), meaning, the Creator does not decree on a person to be good or wicked.

Since this is so, it follows that when one sins, he has harmed (lit., 'lost') himself. Therefore, it is appropriate for him to cry and wail over that which he has done to his soul and caused (lit., 'repaid') it harm. This is as it is written afterwards (v. 39) 'Why should a living man mourn [over his sinfulness]; [let him be] a strong man over his sins.' [Scripture thus] returns to state that since free will is in our hands, and out of our own volition did we do all our evil deeds, it is appropriate for us to repent and forsake our wickedness, since the ability is now in our hands. This is as it is stated after (v. 40), 'Let us search out our ways and examine [them], and we will repent unto the L-rd.'

In this law the Rambam continues his discussion of the topic of free will. As we began discussing last week, free will is one of the most fundamental concepts of Jewish theology. Many of the most basic principles of Judaism are predicated upon it. Since man is given free will to choose good versus evil and determine his fate, G-d can command him how he must behave. And since man is at liberty to choose, he deserves reward if he chooses good and punishment for choosing evil.

Here the Rambam brings the discussion to its next logical step. Since our actions are our own doing and responsibility, it is up to us to repent over them. We may not claim that we were predestined to a certain path in life -- nor that our family, friends or environment forced our mistakes upon us. Although such factors undeniably do exert a powerful influence, the final decision was ours alone. No doubt our ultimate judgment will be ameliorated by such concerns, but **we** have to stand in judgment for our actions; no one else.

There are a few important qualifications we must make on the Rambam this week. The Rambam states that each and every one of us can be as great as our teacher Moses. It is true that most of us could and should be doing far better, but even given that, I feel there is something very difficult about this.

When Moses was born, Exodus states that his mother saw in him "that he was good" (2:1). What was "good" about him? The Talmud (Sotah 12a) offers various interpretations -- that the entire house filled with light when he came into the world, that he was born circumcised, or that they could tell immediately that he was destined for prophecy. Likewise, when Pharaoh's daughter found Moses, his older sister Miriam offered to find her a Jewish wet-nurse for the infant. Why a Jewish and not an Egyptian one? Explains the Talmud there (12b) that the infant Moses refused to suckle from Egyptian women, for a mouth destined to speak with the Divine Presence should not nurse from people who eat impure (i.e., non-kosher) food.

Now I'm sure we all possess many more fine qualities than we realize, but none of us filled the room with light when we were born, nor did we possess the discernment as infants to decide whom to nurse from. (According to one reading of the Talmud there, it was G-d who specially protected Moses from nursing from Egyptians. But either way, this was rather special treatment for a very special child.)

It therefore goes without saying that when the Rambam stated we could all be as great as Moses, the meaning was not that we have the potential to receive the Torah, split the sea, go forty days without food and water, or intercede with G-d on behalf of the nation. I'd be happy myself to witness a single burning bush -- or to master a very small part of the Torah for that matter.

Even so, the Rambam tells us that we can be as great as Moses. Clearly, the meaning is not that we have the potential to **achieve** as much as Moses. He was a special person possessing special abilities from the start, and which he utilized to their fullest. Rather, if we fulfill **our** missions, be they ever so humble (and they are probably much **less** humble than we imagine), and we carry them out with perfect and unwavering devotion, we can be every bit as righteous as Moses. Maybe our job is to be that accountant or computer programmer who lives honestly, raises a family with Torah values, studies Torah when he can, and supports worthy causes to his ability. As we all know, our purpose is not to fulfill the most glamorous, high-profile job -- which makes us **appear** the most accomplished Jew. It is to fulfill **our** mission -- to figure out why we were placed on this earth and to make our mark on ourselves and the world in our own special way.

But at this point there are two ways of looking at things. On the one hand, it's hard to imagine Moses in the World to Come flanked by an accountant and a computer programmer. Perhaps Joshua, Aaron the High Priest. Or maybe Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides, or the Vilna Gaon. But someone whose life was so "ordinary", whose days were occupied with wholly mundane matters? It just seems out of place. Even if it's not my fault that my job in life was clearly not to be the rabbi or the Torah teacher, isn't my life somehow so much less spiritual and meaningful? Isn't the pursuit of a livelihood altogether nothing better than a necessary evil -- the cursed fate of the descendants of Adam, but hardly the ideal means of striving towards G-d?

Allow me to ask this in a different way. In spite of the Rambam's spirited defense of free will, let's

face it: Some people **are** just born better. Think back to your grade school class (whether 10, 20, 50, or 80 years ago -- some memories will always stick with us) -- to that small group of kids you knew well during their formative years. Some kids were just born troublemakers. They had serious cases of (what we'd today call) ADHD, had nasty, aggressive personalities, seemed to enjoy picking on other kids, etc. They couldn't be gotten to behave no matter what you'd do to them, and no matter how many times they were sent to the principal's office. (Every teacher has at least a few of these in his class -- it's just one of the realities of education.) Conversely, some of our classmates were just natural goody-goodies, who did as they were told and didn't even seem to **want** to make trouble. They just wanted to stay out of the way of the bullies. (Where did we all fit into the spectrum? Probably our subjective memories serve us the least well for that...)

Equally surprising is that the Rambam here states that each and every one of us can be merciful or cruel, stingy or generous. But as we all know -- and as the Rambam himself attested at the beginning of the Laws of De'os ([1:1](#)), people do have natural predilections. Sure, everyone has challenges and most inbred good-traits have to be developed, but some people are just born more sensitive and giving than others. Free will we may have, but to state so all-encompassingly that the possibilities are so wide open to us all is really quite difficult to swallow.

Yet there is a second way of viewing all of this -- and no doubt it is much more in line with G-d's view of the world. Say person #1 is by nature studious. He drinks up knowledge, remembers it well, and was born with a penetrating, analytical mind. Person #2 by contrast, is spacey by nature, a lousy focuser, limited scholastically, etc. Now naturally, person #1 will become a far more accomplished Torah scholar than person #2. People will honor him as the budding Torah scholar and no doubt that very regard he receives will contribute to his achieving greatness in Torah. Ultimately he will become the great Torah teacher and leader in Israel -- whereas person #2 in all likelihood will amount to nothing.

But in a sense all of this misses the point. The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) records that R. Yosef passed away briefly and was then revived. After his recovery, his father asked him what he saw during his brief journey Heavenwards. The son answered tersely: "I saw an upside-down world. I saw upper ones below and lower ones above." His father answered, "My son, you have seen a clear world."

Ultimately, G-d does not judge us based on our standing in this world or on if we simply accomplished in areas we were naturally strong in. It may hardly be meaningful to G-d that the natural bookworm mastered the Talmud or that the person who really does not have very strong urges overcame temptation. Sure, to our superficial view such people are saints worthy of honor. But G-d sees beneath that. When the Rambam states that we can be as great as Moses, the meaning is not in the specifics of what we can achieve, but that if we put an equal amount of effort into our own spiritual growth -- even if we went from 0 to 20 rather than 1000 to 10,000, we will be equally deserving, if not more deserving, of reward, whether our lives were filled with Torah study or just living the way G-d meant us to be.

And in fact, being holy when your entire life is involved with Torah study and religion is in a sense quite easy. It's "obvious" that you're involved in holy tasks and G-d's work. Moses, once he "made it," had no doubt that he was serving G-d and Israel in the highest manner possible.

But Moses started out as a shepherd. As the well-known Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 2:2) explains, it was because such individuals as Moses and David showed such concern for every little sheep in their care that G-d ultimately selected them as leaders of Israel.

And the same lesson holds true for us. In the upside-down world in which we live, G-d does not judge us based on outer appearances or our perceived accomplishments, but on how greatly we achieved considering just who we are and where we came from. I often hear from readers living in the most far-flung locations, who in spite of every difficulty and negative influence imaginable, manage to keep a nominally kosher home -- let alone that they discovered G-d on their own through no outside assistance. Sure, the Jew residing in Monsey might choose to be stringent in yoshon, chalav yisrael, pas yisrael, etc. (don't worry if those mean nothing to you), and I certainly don't mean to knock people who are extra careful. But when it's a matter of going to the convenience shop and spending a few extra dollars, such actions are worth a few extra dollars to G-d and not much more. By contrast, when an unlearned Jew walks umpteen miles on the Sabbath to the nearest synagogue -- resisting the temptation to drive as do all his Jewish neighbors, the worth of that to G-d is immeasurable.

Of course it's not our business to judge individuals. As the Rambam told us elsewhere (De'os 6:1), we **should** live in the best environment possible -- so that our challenges are not finding basic kosher sustenance. Rather, we should expose ourselves to as many positive influences as possible - - so that our personal challenges will begin from there.

Yet as it is immediately evident, there is no way we, on this earth, can judge the true worth of individuals. What is trivial for one person may require enormous effort on the part of another -- for any number of reasons. And of course, some people are natural hard-workers, while others naturally shy away from challenge.

And so, yes, we can all be as great as Moses. Will we **look like** him or fulfill an even remotely similar role in Israel? Hardly. Will our names go down in history? Perhaps -- it really depends what our mission in this world was. But our names **will** be recorded where it truly matters -- and many of us humble and unassuming "lowers" will at last be recognized for who we truly are.

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