

CHAPTER 6, LAW 1-2 - ETERNAL ACTIONS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

[Law 1] There are many verses in the Torah and in the words of the Prophets which appear to contradict this fundamental (that man is granted free will, as discussed in the previous chapter). Many people are misled by [these verses] and as a result imagine that G-d decrees on a person to do good or bad, and that a person's heart is not in his control to incline it whichever way he wishes. I will therefore explain a great fundamental from which you will understand the explanation of all these verses.

When a single person or the citizens of a country sin, and the perpetrator sinned knowingly and willingly as we have explained, it is proper to punish him, and G-d knows how He will punish him. There are some sins that justice dictates that the perpetrator will be punished in this world -- in his body, his property, or through [the loss of] his small children. [This is] because the small children of a person, who do not yet have understanding and who did not reach [the obligation to perform] the commandments, are as a person's 'possessions'. It is stated, 'A man for his own sin will die' (II Kings 14:6; see also Deut. 24:16) -- only when he becomes a 'man'.

There are also sins for which justice dictates that the perpetrator should be punished in the next world, and no damage will occur to him in this world. And there are sins for which the sinner is punished in both this world and the next.

[Law 2] When is this the case? When [the sinner] did not repent. But if he did, the repentance is as a shield before the punishment. And just as a person sins out of his own will and volition, so too can he repent out of his will and volition.

In the previous chapter, the Rambam discussed the principle of free will -- that man has the ability to choose his path in life and decide between good and evil. In this chapter, he will discuss some of the ramifications of this principle, especially by dealing with verses in Scripture which seem to imply otherwise. The most famous example, as we will see G-d willing in the next class, is G-d's "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart, seemingly taking away his ability to set his Hebrew slaves free.

The Rambam thus far has not answered his query -- nor even fully articulated his question. Yet already there are a few important points which require elaboration. The first, which I'm sure many of you found disturbing, is the concept that G-d punishes parents by taking away their small children, i.e., those under the age of Bar- or Bat-Mitzvah. To us this seems inexplicable -- that wholly innocent children, not even yet culpable for their **own** actions, can be punished for the actions of their parents

over which they had no control. How can G-d punish one for the sins of another -- even his parents? How can small children be considered the disposable "property" of their parents? They may be small, but they're independent human beings. They have their own souls and their own lives. (Imagine someone making this same argument -- even more plausibly -- to justify abortion.)

Unfortunately, there is no great answer to this, except that such is G-d's decree. It's not "fair" to the children? Well, G-d brings human souls down to this world for a designated time, to perform the mission He decrees, and He determines when that time is up. Our very lives are a gift from G-d to begin with -- and He alone determines when that gift is no longer deserved. To quote Job's immortal words "The L-rd gives and the L-rd takes; blessed be the name of the L-rd" (1:21). Do they suffer undeservedly? No doubt. But such is the will of our Creator -- who then lovingly returns their souls to heaven.

(We should add that this does **not** imply every parent who has lost a young child must be "sinful". There are so many factors contributing to G-d's judgment that we can say almost nothing with certainty about G-d's inscrutable ways. The Talmud quotes that R. Yochanan would comfort bereaved parents by showing them a baby tooth, explaining, "This is a bone from my tenth [lost] child" (Brachos 5b). We can never really understand G-d's ways -- and yes, at times He seems to treat most harshly those most precious to Him. I am therefore certainly not explaining this point of the Rambam as a definitive statement of G-d's justice, but merely as a single consideration among many -- some more and some less explicable to man.)

As bothersome, frightening, and inexplicable as this concept seems to us, there is one important message we should take from it. Parenting is an enormous responsibility. Our children are our precious deposits, entrusted to us both physically and spiritually. We all know how much our own behavior impacts on our children -- how they learn so much more from how we act ourselves than how we lecture them. What is now clear to us, however, is that this is not merely a wise parenting technique. Our children's lives may literally depend on it.

At a boy's Bar Mitzvah, the father recites a special blessing: "Blessed [is G-d] who has exonerated me from this one's punishments." The wording of this ancient blessing is cryptic, and several explanations have been suggested. One is that the father literally thanks G-d that his child will no longer be punished on account of his own actions -- that he is absolved from the fear of endangering his child's life. His son now stands on his own and is responsible for himself -- for better or worse. But at least he will no longer suffer on account of somebody else's faults.

There is a second very important principle contained in the Rambam's words today. He makes the general statement that G-d determines where each of our sins should be punished, whether in this world, in the next world, or in both. Naturally the same is true regarding our mitzvos (good deeds; see for example the Ramchal's Ma'amar Halkkarim, sect. on reward).

This point is in a sense quite obvious, yet at the same time it is very frightening. We tend to think that

once we have performed a good deed, it is **ours**. We **have** it -- safely under our belts. We can now just sit back and enjoy the eternal reward it will earn us. OK, so we didn't do it all that well: We had other things on our mind during synagogue services, or we came late and had to hurry to catch up. Or we basically observe the Sabbath, keep kosher, send our kids to day school etc. because that's just how things are. This is how we were raised and we're keeping up the tradition. We don't put that much thought into exactly **why** we do these things (and heaven help us if someone would actually ask us). This is just how religious Jews are. This is just what we do.

I really wonder how G-d will reward such actions -- the vast, vast majority of what we do. Any action we do without thought -- because of habit, inertia, social pressure, or nostalgia -- are basically actions of this world. We do not do them as an expression of our love for G-d, but because, well, that's just what Jews do, I'd be embarrassed before the neighbors to do things differently. If what the neighbors think -- down in this world -- is my real impetus for behaving, then my actions of creatures of this world as well. Will they magically become transformed into heavenly reward in the hereafter? I really wonder.

(In truth, most of our sins are probably of the same nature. We rarely sin because we want to stick it to G-d, (G-d forbid). Usually we were careless or let our guard down. Hopefully (and I wouldn't want to rely on this too heavily) G-d understands that this is not really who **we** are, but a bit of careless, unwanted laxness.)

The Rambam, in his commentary to the Mishna (Makkos 3:16), writes (slightly paraphrased) as follows: Among the fundamentals of our belief is that when a person fulfills one of the 613 commandments properly and fittingly, and he does not combine with it any intention relating to this world whatsoever, rather he does it for G-d's sake, out of love, he earns through it a share in the World to Come. This is why the Torah gives us so many commandments, for in all of them we are bound during our lifetimes to do at least one wholly sincerely.

This is what G-d is really after. He wants our hearts, our truly sincere actions. Certainly, as the Rambam wrote here, there are actions which deserve some reward in this world and some in the next. If we serve G-d with some spiritual motives while some ulterior ones, some reward will certainly accrue for us in heaven. Yet, ultimately our actions must be real expressions of our belief and commitment. To the extent that this is the case -- and only to that extent -- they will earn us eternity. Sadly, most of our unthinking, mechanical or short-sighted actions will in the scheme of things earn us very little true closeness to G-d. Only our greatest and most selfless acts can span the confines of the physical world and be transformed into acts of eternity.

In the passage I quoted above, the Rambam buttresses his point with a quote from the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 18a). The great sage R. Yossi ben (son of) Kisma was lying on his deathbed. R. Chanina ben Tradyon came to visit him. As great people often do before departing this world, he had very harsh words for the visiting rabbi, criticizing him for his badly mistaken judgment in a certain matter,

and predicting (accurately) that R. Chanina would be put to death at the hands of the Romans. The rabbi accepted the rebuke, only asking if he would then merit the World to Come. The sage did not respond immediately, but asked him if he did any action to merit it.

Now to us R. Yossi's question is bizarre. To us R. Chanina was one of the great scholars of his generation who on top of it was to suffer a torturous death at the hands of the Romans. He was burned at the stake on account of his beliefs. (His is the famous story in which the executioner was moved to the degree of increasing the fire to hasten the rabbi's death and then throwing himself into the flames. A Heavenly voice then emanated: "R. Chanina and his executioner are destined for the World to Come.") How could someone be greater than **that**? Was there really any doubt which direction he would go after his death?!

R. Chanina answered that one time a mix-up arose with charitable donations he was in charge of. To be safe, he replaced the entire questionable amount from his own pocket. (There are actually several explanations in the commentators precisely what happened, but the above is the gist of it.) R. Yossi answered, "If so, may my portion [in the World to Come] be as yours."

From everything we know about him, R. Chanina was a great Jew in every sense of the world, who devoted his entire life to G-d and Israel. And to top it off, his life was painfully and tragically cut short by a Roman executioner. Why only this one act? What about his entire life -- and death?

Yet that is our great lesson of today. What did R. Chanina **really** do for G-d, not what was his wonderful daily routine. He was a wise and caring man who served G-d constantly -- and no doubt much of his share in the World to Come was based upon that. Yet G-d asks something more of us. There are times in our lives -- in every one of our lives -- in which we can be great, where we can go completely and utterly beyond our daily service, where we can break free and do something great for mankind. There are times when we face great challenges -- when in fact all of our good decisions and good actions up until that moment serve only as a preparation to enable us to rise to that climactic occasion. And that is what our World to Come is truly based upon. Yes, I'm sure we'll receive our due reward for all our deeds, great and small, so long as we had some sincerity in performing them. Yet there are moment in our lives in which everything hangs in the balance, where we can rise to great heights, or let it slip through our fingers. May G-d grant us the ability to recognize those moments in our lives and may we rise to their challenge.

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