

## CHAPTER 2, LAW 5 - GOING PUBLIC

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***It is very praiseworthy for the repenter to confess publicly and make his sins known [to others]. He should reveal the sins he committed against his fellow to others, saying to them, 'In truth I have sinned to so and so; I did such and such to him and behold, today I have repented and regretted.' Whoever is too proud and does not make [his sins] known but covers them, his repentance is not complete, as it is stated, 'One who covers his sins will not be successful' (Proverbs 28:14).***

***When is this the case? For sins between a man and his fellow. But those between man and G-d one does not need publicize. [In fact,] it is brazenness if he reveals them. Rather he should repent before G-d, blessed be He, specifying his sins before Him, confessing them in the presence of the public without specification. (I.e., the public should see him confessing but not realize what it is for.) It is [further] good for a person if his sins do not become revealed, as it is stated, 'Fortunate is one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered over' (Psalms 32:1).***

This week the Rambam discusses the importance of public confession. Rather than hiding your faults pretending nothing is wrong, you should openly admit to your shortcomings. They may well catch up to you anyway. Far better to admit to them yourself than having G-d's justice make your wickedness clear to all.

Regarding this the Rambam makes a basic distinction (based on Talmud Yoma 86b) -- between sins one commits to others and ones he does directly to G-d. This is one of the primary methods Jewish literature employs for classifying sins. This distinction will surface many times in our studies. Sins between man and man include such things as theft, assault, gossip, false testimony. Sins between man and G-d basically cover everything else -- Sabbath observance, holidays, dietary laws, wearing clothes containing wool and linen, shaving off one's sideburns, etc.

States the Rambam, **all** sins one should confess at least in the presence of the public. One should never be too proud to admit he has faults which require rectification. However, ones between man and G-d he should not specify. People should see him repenting but not know what it's for. Sins between man and man, by contrast, the sinner should publicize. His repentance is not complete until he lets other know just how wrongly he acted -- and how much he regrets it.

The first half of the Rambam's principle is readily understandable -- that for all sins one should repent in public view. We should never be too proud to admit our faults and make up for them. What's to be embarrassed? Everyone slips and has debts to pay up. It's no great revelation that we

sinned and need to repent -- no matter who we are. The lesson we do convey -- which too is relevant to all -- is that when we **do** sin we rise up and own up to our mistakes. As some of the commentators to the Talmud (there) observe, by repenting publicly, others will observe the repenter and learn to improve themselves as well.

Another relevant concept is based on the Talmud elsewhere (Sotah 3a): "If a person sins secretly, G-d 'announces' it publicly." (Compare also to Mishna Pirkei Avos 4:5: "Whoever desecrates the Name of Heaven in secret will be paid back in public.")

Explains R. Yehuda Loewe (known as the Maharal, great Torah scholar and philosopher of 16th-17th Century Bohemia) that one should never view his sins as his own private affair. They're my own business and I'll atone for them at my own discretion and convenience. This is simply not true. Sins destroy the fabric of the universe, interrupting G-d's bounty from descending earthwards. We are all affected -- though to be sure the sinner much more so than everyone else. G-d therefore punishes in public view. Just as my sins were hardly my own private doing, so too G-d does not confine punishment for them to my own private space.

And likewise in our own law. Attempting to suppress my sinfulness by repenting in private is inherently wrong. Just as my sins affected all, so too I must repent before all, in the hopes of undoing the damage to the world.

One issue which I feel requires clarification is the fact that sins between man and man one must publicize before everyone. Why to everyone? Certainly the sinner must beg forgiveness of the one he wronged -- as the Rambam himself will discuss later ([Law 9](#)). But why must **everyone** know just what I did to Joe? Is it because they're bound to find out anyway so I might as well admit to it first? (It's always better to admit to your shortcomings up front before others point them out to you...)

As an important aside, the Ra'avad (R. Avraham ben Dovid of Posquieres of 12th Century Provence), a contemporary of the Rambam who authored glosses to the Rambam's Mishne Torah (published in all standard editions), adds here that the same is true regarding all well-known sins -- even of the type between man and G-d. If the lead story of all the major news outlets is "Rabbi Nabbed in FBI Sting" (and unfortunately, when such happens it always makes big headlines -- never mind who else was nabbed), the culprit might as well openly repent for his sin (assuming the media has it right). Everyone "knows" about it anyway; the damage has already been done. At least now let the sinner repent just as publicly in the hopes of at least slightly undoing the damage.

(This opinion is based on the same Talmudic passage the Rambam quoted -- discussing when one should and should not publicize his sins to others. The Rambam quoted one opinion in the Talmud there, distinguishing between sins between man and man and those between man and G-d. The Ra'avad quoted a different answer there, which distinguishes between well-known and not well-known sins. The commentators debate whether or not the Rambam agrees with the Ra'avad's position.)

Returning to our issue, in the Ra'avad's case we can certainly understand that the sinner should publicize his repentance to everyone. His sin has become public knowledge anyway. Everyone knows he sinned. Let them at least now know he regrets. In the Rambam's case, however, it is far less evident. Why must **everyone** know I sinned to Joe? I could have easily sinned in such a way that very few will find out about it -- that's how people typically rip off their fellow. It's not as if my sin was bound to become public knowledge.

I believe the answer is that sins done among men lower the image of G-d in this world. If others see me act in ways entirely unbefitting an Orthodox Jew, it will not only lessen their esteem of me. It will reflect on the G-d and Torah I represent. Others will interpret my behavior as exemplary of all who adhere to (or claim to adhere to) the Torah. If you can observe the Torah -- at least outwardly -- and act like **that**, then clearly there is no point being religious. Never mind that a person who does act like "that" really is not religious to begin with. The world is rarely sophisticated enough to draw such distinctions. You dress like that, you wear a yarmulke (kippah) on your head, and you unwittingly become a representative of G-d's Torah. It's an obligation we must all recognize and be prepared to live up to.

(Many years ago, when I was a schoolchild traveling to school daily on the school bus (Hebrew Academy of Gr. Washington), there was a wild fellow who occasionally behaved extremely inappropriately toward other commuters on the road. (Let's skip the details.) ;-) Every now and then when he was about to act out, there would be a call among the students: "Everyone take off your yarmulkes!" The intent was that at least no one should see that Jewish kids act that way. In later years, I would always wonder if that really made sense. Pretend you're not Jewish so you can act any crazy way you'd like, or admit your Jewishness and hopefully live up to it. I guess there was something to it that even at that young age, we recognized that as Jews we must represent something higher.)

Therefore, when a Jew sins to his fellow man -- whether few or many see it -- it lowers the image of G-d in this world. People see in personal and intimate fashion that G-d's representatives to this world are more liabilities to the cause than role models. And far more than the specific people who witnessed it, a spiritual void is created in this world which must be redressed. The sinner must make an effort to raise the image of G-d in this world, to increase the awareness that there are absolute moral values -- as well as a price to pay for those who fall short. Thus, the sinner must repent publicly, in the hopes of undoing just a little of the damage he has wrought.

The reason for the above is because the world operates on a strictly-enforced balance sheet. If G-d's Name is obscured or sullied, He sees to it that it is restored. If, however, we openly repent and admit our mistakes, there is hope for mankind. For if not, G-d in His wrath may have to see to it that his Name again become known.

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