

CHAPTER 3, LAW 11(B) - THE TRUTH ABOUT THE STATE OF ISRAEL

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

One who separates from the ways of the [Jewish] community, even though he did not transgress any sins, but has separated himself from the congregation of Israel, not fulfilling mitzvos (commandments) together with them nor being a part of their tribulations nor fasting on their [declared] fast days, but rather he goes about his way as one of the Gentiles of the land as if he is not one of them -- [such a person] has no share in the World to Come.

One who sins brazenly (lit., 'with a high hand') as Jehoiakim (Yehoyakim), whether he transgresses minor or major sins, is granted no share [in the World to Come]. Such a person is called one who 'bares his face' against the Torah because he is brazen-faced and 'reveals his face,' not being ashamed on account of the words of the Torah.

We are continuing to cover the Rambam's very short list of individuals who receive no share in the World to Come. In the last class we discussed the evil of one who separates himself from the community. As we explained, the sinfulness of such a person is not primarily in disassociating himself from the rest of Israel and being oblivious to their needs, bad as that is. Rather, the idea is that G-d granted the Torah only to Israel as a nation. We have a national mission to the world: to create a just and holy society which demonstrates G-d's existence to mankind. Only as part of that community were we chosen at all. One who separates himself -- even if personally he observes all the commandments -- is not a part of the nation and is granted no share in its reward.

There are a few further pertinent points related to the past class's discussion. Throughout most of our history, we have been exiled from our land and have had only very limited opportunity to create such a godly society for man to see. The Torah predicts that in exile G-d would "scatter" us among the nations (Leviticus 26:33). We will likewise be gathered from the "four corners of the earth" (Isaiah 11:12). Israel has generally been spread out fairly thin within its host societies. (Some of the much larger Jewish communities we see today are a much more recent phenomenon (at least in modern Jewish history). They are the result of a gathering together of vast exiles -- both to America and to Israel.) In fact, the Talmud states that one of the purposes of Israel's exile is specifically to "fan out" among the Gentiles, so that worthy converts be added to their ranks (Pesachim 87b).

As a result, throughout the years our mission has been much less to build a Utopian society for the Gentiles to behold, and more to hold our own among them, generally taking care to isolate

ourselves from their influence as much as possible. The time we will become a "light unto the nations" will primarily be after the Messiah arrives, when Israel will be ascendant and independent, and able to create a society on its own terms.

It's interesting to note that one of the motives religious Jews have had for settling the Land of Israel in recent centuries was in order to slowly begin building such a Utopian society, thereby hastening the Messianic Age. Further back in Jewish history and throughout the ages, there have always been instances of pious Jews who emigrated from the Diaspora to the Holy Land. However, as I once heard Rabbi Berel Wein put it, such people were generally coming to die. They were typically aging Jews determined to spend their final years in the elevated seclusion of the Land. They were withdrawing from society at large, to spend their most spiritual years in true and uninterrupted communion with their Creator.

In the early 19th century, however, students of the Vilna Gaon (R. Eliyahu ben Shlomo Kramer, widely regarded as the leader of 18th century Lithuanian Jewry) on their late teacher's behest, began the process of emigrating and building communities in the Land of Israel. They did not come to live and die in holy seclusion. They came as young families, prepared to settle and build the Land and the economy. It was a near-impossible task, populating a backwards, dangerous and economically depressed region. It required a lot of work, sweat, deprivation, and bribery. Nevertheless, those heroic pioneers began the slow but inexorable process of building up the Land of Israel into both a religious and economically viable country which must ultimately become a light unto the nations.

This admittedly is a rather sketchy outline of a very complex period of history. There were also Chassidic Rebbes and students who began a similar process. And later that century secular Zionists too came to develop the Land. And then there are and have always been religious Jews of the opinion that the Messiah cannot be hastened through such grassroots measures. Only G-d can bring about the redemption -- at least in a military or political sense. And on top of that, in the same period originated a religious-Zionist movement, of Jews who attempted to combine Torah observance with the drive to create a Jewish homeland.

Not being a historian, I am not attempting to describe how the development of the Land of Israel progressed, nor the good, bad and indifferent processes which shaped its growth. But there is an interesting moral in all of this. The Children of Israel in the Land of Israel are ultimately to become a light unto the nations of the world. Today we are blessed with a country which -- whether it so chooses or not -- to a small extent does assume such a role in the eyes of the world. And with this we can understand a phenomenon which for religious Jews is one of the most frustrating and exasperating of modern times.

We are all well aware of the fact that the State of Israel is routinely a victim of some of the worst press coverage known to man. Everything Israel does is portrayed in a negative light. Israel is invariably depicted as the aggressor (for retaliating, that is -- or simply because it has the audacity to

exist), the big bully Goliath tormenting the helpless, pathetic Palestinian David. Its every little act -- building a single house on "occupied territory" -- bears intense international scrutiny and often a UN condemnation. As usual, the world seems to have nothing better to do than condemn Israel -- actually one of the few things virtually the entire world can agree on.

By contrast, of course, Muslims and especially Arabs can do virtually no wrong. Almost as a misbehaving child, gross acts of violence, utter disregard for human rights, can all be blamed on an array of outside causes (usually including Israel and the US) not really their own doing. While Israel is blamed for all the ills of the Middle East, the excesses of the Arabs themselves are almost invariably ignored or at best explained away.

For us believing Jews, such a phenomenon is painful and frustrating beyond words. Why not just be fair about us for Heaven's sake?! State the facts without contorting them!

But there is a very basic reason for this. The world does not have such strong anti-Israel feelings simply because of dual standards -- because they instinctively expect more from us compassionate Jews. Nor does their hatred stem from straight-out antisemitism (at least as a root cause).

Rather, the idea behind it is deeper. The nation of Israel is trying to -- and to a small extent is -- building a better society. It is endeavoring to create a productive, democratic country, one which displays unusual compassion towards both its enemies and the world at large. We certainly have a long way to go -- in particular until this nation becomes much more universally observant of G-d's Torah. But we have certainly made a start.

Yet, to the extent that we represent G-d's values today, the nations of the world today simply cannot take it. If we really are becoming a light unto the nations, they will have to see it -- the beauty will be too striking to ignore -- and recognize the message of the Torah. But if the Torah is right, then they and all they stand for are wrong. They will have to admit the fallacy of their ways. And the world is not ready for this. Thus, as their only alternative, the world does everything in its power to deny Israel's greatness -- to see all we do and all we stand for in a negative light. We **must** be the aggressor, the bad guy, the terrorist, the Nazi. For if the world stops for a moment to see us objectively, they will be forced to at last recognize the truth of G-d.

This of course will all change when the Messiah arrives and the truth becomes patently clear. At that much longed-for point in history, G-d's reality will become evident to all. There will no longer be anything holding the nations back, and they will naturally be drawn towards Israel. As the Prophets foretell, they will beg to serve us. But until that era dawns the nations will go to every extent to block out Israel's message to the world. And we can scream the facts all we want, but it will make little difference. For the world will continue to twist itself into a pretzel to deny the beauty of a nation already like none other.

Before closing, I would like to briefly discuss the second half of the Rambam. The Rambam states that one who sins brazenly such as Jehoiakim too receives no share in the World to Come. King

Jehoiakim (Heb.: Yehoyakim) was one of the last kings of Judah (see II Kings 24). Both Scripture and the Talmud describe him as a thoroughly wicked man who contributed mightily to the nation's decline, culminating shortly after with their exile at the hands of the Babylonians.

By way of clarification, earlier the Rambam listed the "apostate" (meshumad) as one who receives no share in the World to Come. One of the definitions of an apostate was one who rejects a single prohibition of the Torah, and does so out of spite. The sin listed here is similar in attitude. However, whereas the apostate completely rejects a single Torah law, acting as if it does not exist, the brazen sinner is not so selective. He does not single out any specific law to reject. He rather sins here and there, not questioning the legitimacy of the mitzvos (commandments), merely obstinately refusing to observe them.

Even so, as the Mishna states, "The boldface are [destined] to Hell" (Pirkei Avos 5:24). It's one thing to sin. But one who is **proud** of it has clearly gone beyond the bounds of acceptability. Sinners G-d can countenance. We all sin here and there, yet G-d still loves us and looks forward to our repentance, especially if we're ashamed of ourselves. But one who refuses to be ashamed of it -- who looks G-d in the eye and says he just does not care: Such a person will never merit the Divine Presence in the World to Come. Very often in life it is not the sins we do which matter so to G-d. It is the attitude we have when we do them.

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