

CHAPTER 3, LAW 2 - WHO WILL LIVE AND WHO WILL DIE

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

"A person whose sins are more numerous than his merits dies immediately in his wickedness, as it is stated, 'for your many sins' (or: 'for the majority of your sins') (Jeremiah 30:14). So too a country whose sins are more numerous immediately perishes, as it is stated, 'The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great' (or: 'in the majority') (Genesis 18:20). So too if the entire world's sins are greater, it is immediately destroyed, as it is stated, 'And G-d saw that much (or: 'more numerous') was the evil of man on the land' (Genesis 6:5).

"This weighing [of merit versus wickedness] is not according to the number of merits and sins but according to their magnitude. There is a merit which is equal to many sins, as it is stated, 'for there was found in him a good matter ' (I Kings 14:13). And there is a sin equal to many merits, as it is stated, 'and a single sinner will destroy much good' (Ecclesiastes 9:18). The weighing is solely according to the understanding of the G-d of understanding. He is the one who knows how merits are measured against sins."

In this law the Rambam continues the basic theme of the previous law. The Rambam previously stated that G-d judges man based on a simple majority of his deeds. One who is 50.1% good is deemed a tzaddik ("righteous individual"), whereas one 49.9% good is "wicked". We explained that the issue under discussion was not G-d's ultimate justice in the World to Come -- in which man's every deed is carefully weighed and judged, but in this world. If someone is a slightly positive force in the world, he deserves life. He is bringing the world in the right direction. He is far from perfect, but G-d has reason to keep him around. If he is even slightly negative, he is a liability. He deserves no existence in this world.

This week the Rambam continues the same thought, writing more explicitly that the issue at stake is existence in this world. If a person, nation or the world is considered righteous he or it will continue to exist. If not, destruction is visited upon him or it -- totally and immediately.

There is an extremely obvious question on this week's law, one which virtually all the early commentators to the Talmud ask. (The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16b) makes a very similar statement to the Rambam, discussing the judgment of Rosh Hashanah.) We do not have to look very far to realize that there are many wicked people doing quite well in the world today. They most certainly do not immediately self-destruct as the Rambam here writes. Likewise, righteous people die all the time, many living far shorter lifespans than their wicked counterparts.

The simplest answer -- which really seems the intent of the Rambam -- is that G-d's method of measuring merit versus liability is impossible for us to fathom. The world may seem a pretty awful place today, but perhaps most of its inhabitants do not truly know who G-d is and what He wants of them. They perhaps are not truly "guilty" -- just ignorant. By contrast, the generation of the Exodus, which virtually *saw* G-d and certainly did know better, were several times on the brink of Divine annihilation for much smaller infractions -- had not Moses intervened on their behalf.

Thus, goodness and wickedness as they appear to us may be little indication of how worthy or unworthy a person is on the Divine scale. As I always point out, the simple Jew who was not blessed with a religious upbringing but who brings himself to order fish rather than pork at a not-kosher restaurant may well be more precious to G-d than the fully-observant Jew (who would never *dream* of entering a MacDonald's) who is really not doing his job very well -- at least not up to the potential to which he is capable.

So too, the Rambam concludes this law by stating we cannot possibly know G-d's criteria for measuring good versus evil. What appears to us one way may be something entirely different on the Divine scales. Thus, although the Sages share with us the basic parameters of G-d's justice, there is very little practically we may conclude from it. As always, G-d's ways are not really ours to judge -- nor question. (And just as well for us, since we would think of the world as much more guilty than G-d, in His infinite wisdom, has determined.)

There is another basic approach to this question. I don't believe it is the intention of the Rambam, but it provides us a very important practical guide for understanding G-d's relationship with mankind.

As I wrote above, the Talmud makes a similar statement to the Rambam -- although it is referring more specifically to the judgment of the High Holidays. To it, the commentary Tosafos poses the same basic question we raised above. ("Tosafos" (lit., "additions") is a commentary on the Talmud authored by schools of scholars who resided primarily in 12th-13th Century France (though there were German and British ones as well). Several of the most prominent were direct descendants of the great Bible and Talmud commentator Rashi (R. Shlomo Yitzchaki).)

When the Talmud states that every year on Rosh Hashanah the righteous are decreed for life and the wicked for death, Tosafos asks the obvious: there are many undeniably righteous individuals who die every year and wicked who live. Tosafos notes further that elsewhere the Talmud states quite clearly that G-d often deals very mildly with the wicked (and harshly with the righteous) in order to truly do them justice in the next world.

Tosafos answers this question very cryptically -- an answer which merely begs further questions: When the Talmud states that the wicked are destined for destruction and the righteous for life, it is only in the World to Come. God is not determining who will physically live and die for the next 12 months, but who will -- after 120 -- receive a share in the Hereafter.

The difficulty with this too is obvious. Why would G-d judge a person right now, in this world,

regarding his share in the World to Come? After 120, when he goes upstairs, they can decide what to do with him! What relevance is there to deciding *today* where it looks like he will go after his death? When the time comes, let them decide! Being that according to Tosafos a person is *not* being judged regarding life and death in this world, he will quite likely live many more years -- and much will change during that time. So seemingly, nothing is achieved with this advance decision regarding his ultimate fate.

My teacher R. Moshe Eisemann of Ner Israel Rabbinical College (Baltimore, MD) explained as follows. There is great relevance to deciding today if a person deserves the World to Come. If a person does deserve the Hereafter, G-d will deal with him entirely differently even today. He's one of us! He *cares* about G-d and wants a relationship with Him. He's heading in the right direction. And G-d in turn will want a relationship with him. He will be more attentive to such a person's prayers, look more closely after his needs, and prod him towards the good with much more finely-tuned Divine providence. Such a person is alive with G-d, and G-d will have a much more living and dynamic relationship with him.

G-d does not judge us entirely in this world; far from it. He seems to permit much injustice, saving the true Judgment for the Next one. But one thing -- which the Talmud refers to as life versus death -- is determined right here and now: will each of us have a living relationship with his Creator, or as far as G-d is concerned, is he already dead.

To be honest, I do not believe this is the intention of the Rambam (although I've heard people try to read this basic approach into his writings as well). If you'll notice, the Rambam here quotes supporting verses which all discuss actual death in this world. The Rambam appears to take the Talmud more literally, merely concluding that we cannot possibly know the particulars of G-d's inscrutable justice.

Regardless, the message of Tosafos' approach is so critical a life lesson for us. On the High Holidays (and truly all year) G-d judges us -- not necessarily regarding life versus death: we know too well that the good do not live forever and the wicked often prosper -- but regarding true Life versus Death. Will we be *alive* with G-d this year? Will we have a living, caring relationship with Him? If yes, then we can and will see G-d involved in every aspect of our lives. He will help us, carry us through our difficult times, and gently cajole us to be better. If we slip, He will warn us, perhaps punish us, and help us rise up again. And if we grow, He too will be there with us, continually providing us more opportunities for growth and fulfillment. If, however, we live without G-d, we will be left in darkness, in the emptiness of a cruel and apathetic world, ignored by G-d and left to the mercy of nature's uncaring elements.

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