CHAPTER 3, LAW 5(A) - INDIVIDUAL VERSUS COLLECTIVE GUILT

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

At the time when they (i.e., the angels of the heavenly court) weigh the sins of a person against his merits, they do not take into account the first time he committed a [particular] sin nor the second time, but [they] only [count] from the third time and on. If the person's sins from the third time and on are more numerous than his merits, the first two sins are [also] included (lit., 'combine') and they judge him for everything.

If [however] his merits are found to be as numerous as his sins [counting] from the third [of each] sin and on, they excuse (lit., 'move away') all his sins, one at a time. [This is] because [now] the third sin is considered the first since the [first] two were already forgiven. And so too the fourth: it is now the first as the third was already forgiven. And so too until the end of them.

When is this the case? For an individual, as it is stated '[[G-d] will redeem [man's] soul from going to destruction]... Lo, all of this G-d will do twice, thrice for a man' (Job 33:28-9). But regarding an assembly, they overlook (lit., 'let hang') the first, second and third sin, as it is stated, 'On three sins of Israel [I will turn back punishment], but on the fourth I will not turn it back' (Amos 2:6)." And when the [angels] consider them, they consider them in the same manner [but] from the fourth [sin] and on.

(The second half of this law will be translated next week.)

In this law, the Rambam continues to discuss G-d's judgment of man. As Scripture teaches us, G-d strongly inclines His judgment towards compassion, but only to a point. He is willing to disregard the first few times we sin, but neither are our sins entirely forgotten. If even after Divine mercy we are found wanting, all our sins will be reckoned in full measure.

We can well appreciate that although G-d's judgment is basically an act of Divine mercy, there is a logic to it as well. The first one or two times a person commits a sin, it was likely not that considered and premeditated. The person was probably caught off guard. He didn't realize what he was getting into, or just how evil and reprehensible the act is. And G-d can easily dismiss such sins as unintentional and inadvertent.

We occasionally hear of a person running for an elected position, who when challenged regarding his past personal behavior, would employ such language as that he "experimented" with drugs or

alcohol for a short time during his impressionable youth. That might be plausible if his experiment lasted one or two times -- after which he quickly learned the folly of such behavior. But when such a person "experimented" hundreds of times over a surprisingly long period of time, such excuses of semantics clearly wear thin. The person had clearly abandoned all semblance of propriety.

The same is true regarding the Divine judgment. Acts we do when caught off guard are at times excusable. We didn't **really** know what we were getting into. Satan trapped us unsuspecting; we didn't realize what was happening to us until it was too late. And even if later we become hopelessly ensnared in Satan's web, the first two times can still be viewed as unintentional.

The Rambam then extends this principle. If the first two times I committed a particular sin are discounted, then the **third** times becomes the tentative first. And as a first infraction, it too can be discounted: I was only a first-time offender. And at that point, my **fourth** sin becomes my first -- and G-d can slowly but steadily forgive every one of my sins.

To be honest, the logic to this escapes me. It almost seems a Divine game, G-d's way of pretending we are much better than we truly are and forgiving us entirely. I'm sure there is more true justice to G-d's clever little scheme here, but I personally cannot come up with a ready explanation. Happily, G-d's ways are beyond our ken not only in the inexplicable justice He metes out upon mankind. We at times also cannot understand the wonderful compassion He bestows upon His beloved children.

The Rambam then goes on to qualify this principle by stating that G-d overlooks our earlier sins only if we are 50% good or better. If, however, a person is majority wicked -- even after discounting his earlier sins, G-d will throw the book at him, so to speak. Nothing will be ignored.

This actually appears much more logical. If you "experimented" with a sin once or twice, it was what we'd call a bout of temporary insanity. As the Talmud puts it, a person does not sin unless a spirit of "madness" enters him (Sotah 3a). No thinking, rational person would trade the World to Come for a few moments of pleasure in this world -- the equivalent of spending $50,000 for a can of coke. (I'm not **that** old, but to this day I recoil at the thought of shelling out anything over 50c for a can of such carbonated garbage. 25c sounds a lot more like it.)

If, however, you kept up the insanity, you have demonstrated that you really meant your evil behavior (provided, you're a majority-wicked person who really does mean it). It was no unconsidered slip, as it might have at first appeared. It was deliberate behavior. You knew full well how despicable this action is, yet you allowed yourself to become hooked and you kept up. Thus even the first two times must be considered wanton. Your eventual trek down the road of evil demonstrates clearly that your intentions were far from unwitting.

We now arrive at the Rambam's final point, that if an entire community sins in a certain way, G-d will overlook their third infraction as well, only judging them from the fourth.

There are two possible explanations for this. The first is simply because of the strength of the

community. G-d is not so quick to destroy an entire assembly of the L-rd, even if they have slipped precipitously. As bad as they are now behaving, G-d never entirely forgets His covenant with them.

A second idea is that the very fact that an entire community is sinning is cause for Divine mercy. If "everyone else" is doing X, it is very hard for me to resist the trend. All my friends are doing it. I wouldn't want to be left out or viewed as a nerd by being different. Thus, when wicked behavior is widespread and "in", G-d goes somewhat easier on the individual perpetrators. My act was even less considered. I was just "going with the flow," engaging in behavior the crazy society I live in considers acceptable.

This raises one final interesting thought. The Torah has a precedent for such a concept. We read in Deuteronomy 13 (vv. 13-19) of the law of a rebellious city (Ir HaNidachas), in which the majority of its inhabitants commit idolatry. In such a case, not only are all the perpetrators put to death (via the court punishment of beheading), but the entire city and everything in it is destroyed, burnt to the ground, never to be rebuilt. (Incidentally, as the Talmud (Sanhedrin 112a) makes clear, only those guilty of idolatry are put to death; not the innocents. However, all the city's property is destroyed, even that which belonged to the innocents.)

I once heard R. Noah Weinberg OBM, past head of Aish HaTorah, make the following observation. If an individual commits idolatry, what is his punishment? Stoning -- considered the most severe of the death sentences. Here, however, when an entire city became corrupt, the sinners are only punished with beheading -- considered one of the lesser death sentences (see Mishna Sanhedrin 7:1). Yet, when an entire city goes bad, the Torah decrees a new punishment we do not find anywhere else -- that the entire city must be burnt to the ground. So which is worse -- mass idolatry or individual idolatry?

R. Weinberg explained. On the one hand, the idolatrous city is less sinful. "Everyone else" is doing it -- so I just went along. Thus, the individuals within the city are judged more lightly -- given a lesser death sentence. However, at the same time, the Torah delivers a firm and unequivocal message. When an **entire society** goes bad, it must be wiped off the face of the earth. An evil society, which condones wickedness, must not exist. A society which permits evil and considers aberrant behavior acceptable cannot be countenanced by G-d even a moment. The individuals within it are certainly less culpable. But a society which has so lowered its standards as to give wickedness free expression and free reign must be destroyed utterly and never rebuilt.

I won't belabor this point, but this tragically is a very relevant message in the decadent societies in which most of us live. It is one thing to sin; it's quite another to openly declare sinfulness as an acceptable way of life -- even at times going after those who are courageous enough to believe otherwise. I honestly do not know how G-d suffers mankind's existence today (again, at times God's justice is inexplicably patient). Yet let us just do our small part in bringing G-d's world to the greatness for which it is destined.

Text Copyright © 2016 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and **Torah.org**