

CHAPTER 7, LAWS 1-2(B) - THE SINS OF THE GREAT, PART II

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Law 1

One who 'spies' on his fellow [in order to find negative information to report] transgresses a negative prohibition as it is stated, 'You shall not go spying in your nation' (Leviticus 19:16). Even though one does not receive lashes for [transgressing] this prohibition it is a very grave sin and it causes the death of many souls in Israel. Therefore, [it is stated] adjacent to it, 'Do not stand on your fellow's blood' (ibid.). See for example (lit., 'go out and learn [from]') that which occurred to Do'eg the Edomite (see I Samuel 21-22).

Law 2 (start)

What is [the prohibition of] spying? It is when one bears words and brings them from one [person] to the other, saying 'This is what so and so said; this is what I heard about so and so.' Even though he is telling the truth, behold he is destroying the world.

Last week we defined the prohibition the Rambam discusses here and began to discuss the particular illustration of Do'eg. The prohibition against "spying" involves snooping about to find juicy bits of gossip about A to spread to others. The transgression, however, is not digging up the dirt alone, but specifically in fanning up hatred among men, saying things such as: "Guess what A said about you behind your back?" "Guess what A did to you when you weren't looking?" etc.

We then described in some detail the sin of Do'eg -- how he informed King Saul that the priests of Nov (Nob) assisted David in his flight from Saul. Although the priests themselves had no inkling David was fleeing the king, Saul, in his depressed paranoia, assuming the worst and ordered the execution of the entire city. When even his soldiers refused to carry out such an atrocity, Do'eg slew them himself.

As we pointed out, Do'eg's informing the king was a classic example of this prohibition. Although he said nothing evil about the well-meaning priests of Nov, his words fanned Saul's hatreds, culminating in catastrophic results.

To all of this we posed a basic question. Do'eg according to the Sages was the head of the Sanhedrin (high court) and one of the greatest Torah scholars of his age. How in the world could he stoop so low as to malign David and personally slay a city full of priests? The Mishna (Sanhedrin 10:2) lists him as one of the few who was so sinful as to receive no share in the World to Come -- the

default birthright of every Jew? Now, I do need to offer a brief disclaimer at this point. It is near impossible for us to attempt to measure individuals so great and distant from us -- even very wicked ones. It's all too easy for us to judge and castigate them according to our own hopelessly inferior standards, and to see within them the sort of faults which we've become accustomed to in ourselves. Thus, in attempting to gain a better understanding of this topic, I will try to stick as closely as possible to the statements of the Sages on the matter, resisting the writer's temptation to embellish and elaborate in his own style.

First of all, Do'eg's implication of the men of Nov had a history behind it. Do'eg had it in for David ever since David stepped onto the scene. David was the sort that everyone naturally liked -- nice, unassuming, unpretentious, not full of himself. He was great and devoted scholar without being overweening, pious and sometimes reclusive without being aloof. Handsome and of below-average height, he endeared himself to others without intimidating or dominating them (as great people often do). And on top of it all, he was a brave and heroic warrior, much admired and appreciated by the nation.

Now someone who is just too good -- who really **is** worthy of kingship -- is bound to arouse jealousy -- certainly of Israel's current king. And there were many other greats of the time who simply could not suffer David's presence and who just had to find fault. Do'eg was one such person. According to the Sages, he was actually the one who first suggested that David become Saul's personal attendant and musician (I Samuel 16:18 and Talmud Sanhedrin 93b). Yet even in doing so, he attempted to stir up the very first hints of rivalry. In describing David's great abilities, Do'eg intended to pique Saul's jealousies and eventually bring about David's undoing (see again Talmud there).

We must now hazard a response to an even more vexing question. Okay, perhaps even great people are not above simple jealousy. But how could so great a Torah scholar slip so low? Doesn't Torah study ennoble and inspire? Shouldn't it have made Do'eg a **better** human being, more kindly and G-d-fearing than others, rather than less so?

In fact, far greater people than we have been bothered by this question. The Talmud (Hagigah 15b) records that once the great Talmudic scholar Rav Yehuda was found **crying**. He said if such greats as Do'eg and Achitophel (another enemy of David who lost his share in the hereafter -- see II Samuel 15-17) could have gone sour and lost their share in the next world, what hope have we? In fact, the Talmud there saw Isaiah 33:18 -- "Where is the counter? Where is the weigher? Where is the counter of towers?" -- as an allusion to the fact that G-d Himself, so to speak, "missed" Do'eg's and Achitophel's great erudition, their ability to fathom every letter of the Torah ("the counter"), weigh every ounce of logic ("the weigher"), and pose 300 questions about a "tower floating in the air." (The commentators offer umpteen suggestions as to what in the world a "tower floating in the air" is, although my father OBM half-humorously saw in it an early rabbinic reference to space travel (or at least air travel).) :-)

And so again, we are forced to pose the near-impossible question: How could such greatness in Torah be no guarantee of closeness to G-d -- which we would assume Torah study is all about? Where did such people go wrong? And how can the likes of us, literally light years behind such people in Torah knowledge, have any hope of getting it right?

The Talmud makes two relevant comments regarding this. In response to the Rav Yehuda's tears above, his fellow sage Sh'muel responded, "There was dirt in their hearts." Elsewhere the Talmud states regarding Do'eg, "His Torah was from the lips outwards" (Sanhedrin 106b). Meaning, they studied and mastered the Torah but never truly took it to heart. Their study was intellectual but not spiritual. They pored over the Torah's texts but never approached it with a basic willingness to be changed and shaped by its teachings.

In another part of the Talmud, when it quotes the many questions Do'eg and Achitophel posed on a "tower floating in the air," the sage Rava responded: "What great achievement is there in asking questions?" They posed a lot of sharp questions, to be sure, but were they interested in the answers? Were they just enjoying themselves applying their considerable minds to intriguing theoretical cases, turning the details over and over again in their minds posing every question imaginable. Perhaps they even purposely discussed questions so hypothetical (if not literally in outer space) they had no relevance to properly living as a Jew.

This also apprises us of a very real danger in Judaism -- of being too great. It's not an oft-discussed issue, but many of the great geniuses in Israel -- and we've had more than our share -- did not exactly turn out. Some openly rebel against authority and some just basically amount to nothing. It's the rare combination of genius plus complete dedication to G-d and Israel that produces the very few leaders among us.

And this is because being too smart is a dangerous thing. Someone for whom study comes so easily, who never has to put in any effort, really never transforms himself in studying Torah. He didn't have to work, apply himself, devote himself to G-d's Torah -- or pray that G-d assist him. It all came without effort -- and changed him not at all in the process. The Talmud there writes that G-d was "worried" about Do'eg all along. He was clearly a high-risk individual. Enormous scholarship without effort really does not make for people who can withstand the challenges of life -- and certainly not of leadership. A little jealousy of upstart David, and he became completely unraveled -- and vicious in his opposition.

(People often fret about the weaker students in our school system -- how they fall behind, get frustrated, and are at risk of dropping out entirely. It's worth pointing out, though, that the top 5-10% are also at very real risk. They breeze through their studies effortlessly, and the entire effect Torah study should have on a human being is completely lost on them. In fact in the long run, some of the most outstanding scholars of Israel were only above-average students -- who struggled and sweated and worked their way to greatness.)

Another important closely-related issue is that we tend to think that accomplishment in Torah study automatically makes for great individuals. Anyone who has tasted and become inspired by G-d's word must of necessity become sanctified and transformed. And we often find young yeshiva (rabbinical college) students falling in love with Torah study and devoting themselves wholeheartedly to their studies. Certainly many of us do experience such an uplifting transformation. Yet we must keep in mind, there can be perfectly rational and non-metaphysical reasons for such a transformation: people just like doing what they're good at. If you have the brains and the IQ to excel at Torah study -- and there is little on this earth as intellectually satisfying -- then certainly you'll get a thrill from advanced Torah study (as well as the honor it grants you) -- and you may even stay up quite late at night pursuing your studies.

More generally, it's not difficult to envision a person who fully lives the Torah life, but primarily does so because it's just the nicest way to live. It certainly is: G-d Himself gave us this recipe for living. A person may simply realize that the higher pleasures of Torah study, stable family life, enjoying a heaping portion of Sabbath cholent (and taking a great big nap afterwards), etc. are superior to the baser pleasures of hanging out on the streets and doing drugs.

People often wonder how rabbinical students today -- presumably the holiest and most devoted element of society -- not rarely succumb to such pleasures as heavy drinking and illicit use of the Internet. And at times such thrills get the better of even relatively serious students. But keep in mind, you can be a devoted student of Torah but still basically be a hedonist. You've just found that for the great mind, Torah is the greatest pleasure. Certainly, by far the majority of students do become religiously inspired as well. But at the same time, young men today are not devoting themselves to Torah study out of want and abject poverty. They come from comfortable homes, expect all their creature comforts, and are basically going to study because that's what everyone else does. And with that dangerous mix of physical comfort plus intellectual enjoyment, a young man may well be drawn after other fancies.

Anyway, this topic is a lengthy one and can be extended in many ways. But I'll basically leave it with what we've said thus far and wrap up with one more observation. The Talmud notes that in spite of Do'eg's great erudition, he never merited to reach the correct conclusions when he studied Torah, meaning the rulings we follow in practical Jewish law -- something that David did merit. And the reason for this is that G-d only grants true understanding of His Torah to those worthy, as it states, "The secret of G-d is to those who fear Him" (Psalms 25:14; see Talmud Sanhedrin 106b and 93b).

This first of all is not as far-fetched as we might imagine. Anyone who has engaged in advanced Talmudic studies (or abstract studies of any sort) can appreciate that advanced learning has a lot of inconclusive conjecture and deliberation. It's possible to have worked through the material fully but to have minor shifts in logic lead one to the wrong conclusion. The Talmud considers it to require Divine guidance for a person to have that instinct for the truth -- a sense David was granted and Do'eg was not.

But the true idea behind this is far more profound. Torah study is not some simple intellectual endeavor that anyone can come along and truly master. G-d does not grant such to everyone. Before all else you must become the type of person whom G-d would want to entrust His Torah to. And without that, you may possess great wisdom -- which may well drive you to extremes of wickedness as much as to goodness -- but without any real sense for G-d's will. For greatness does not result from Torah study alone. Ultimately it only resides within those worthy of being called servants of the L-rd.

(There's another important relevant point which the length of this class did not permit me to touch upon. I did discuss it once in Pirkei Avos ([2:5](#)). If you're not too tired of reading by now, you're welcome to view the discussion there. Be well!)

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