

CHAPTER 2, MISHNA 10-11(D): RELIGIOUS NEUROTICS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Mishna 10

Rabban Yochanan ben (son of) Zakkai had five [primary] students. They were: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkenos, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yossi the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach.

Mishna 11

He used to enumerate their praises: R. Eliezer ben Hurkenos is a cemented pit which never loses a drop; R. Yehoshua ben Chananya -- fortunate is she who bore him; R. Yossi the Priest is pious; R. Shimon ben Nesanel fears sin; and R. Elazar ben Arach is as an increasing river.

This week we are up to the quality of R. Yochanan's fourth student, R. Shimon ben (son of) Nesanel. R. Shimon was said to fear sin. He refrained from wrong acts not because he felt obligated to observe G-d's commandments nor because he was afraid of Divine retribution. Rather, R. Shimon feared the sins themselves. He recognized that a sin is in itself an inherently evil act, one which runs contrary to spirituality and personal growth.

When G-d tells us not to do something -- even an act not obviously morally wrong (eating lobster, wearing clothes containing wool and linen, shaving off one's sideburns, etc.) -- the act itself must be spiritually despicable. The G-d who created both the physical and spiritual worlds knows what is beneficial and what is harmful to our souls. And that in itself was reason enough for R. Shimon to distance himself from sin. As the commentator R. Yonah explains, R. Shimon created safeguards for himself so he would not come anywhere near sin. Most of us would probably not mind partaking in a few forbidden pleasures here and there, and only at best refrain because of the "imposition" of G-d's will. R. Shimon, however, grew to appreciate that no amount of pleasure or temptation could ever equal the soul-destroying severity of the evil of sin.

As we did with the previous trait, piety, I'd like to take some time to describe what fear of sin is not. There's an easy trap to fall into here -- an empty, feel-good version of fear, perhaps even more relevant than the mock-piety we talked about previously (wailing, fasting, rolling in the snow), and which too has surfaced at times in Jewish history.

As we defined, fear of sin does not imply fear of not following orders or of punishment, but fear of the sin itself. It is a recognition that sin is inherently evil. This, however, carries within it a danger --

that the sin will assume a life of its own; the person will have become so accustomed to refraining from the act he will acquire a kind of neurotic fear of the action -- long forgetting what is actually wrong with it. An illustration will bring this out perfectly.

Rabbi Zev Leff, well-known scholar and lecturer of Moshav Mattisyahu, Israel, describes how when he was a relatively young rabbi, one of his older congregants, a man in his seventies, had developed health problems which made fasting on Yom Kippur dangerous. The man's wife asked the rabbi to attempt to reason with her husband, who had no intention of eating on Yom Kippur. When the rabbi patiently attempted to explain the necessity of eating in life-threatening situations, the man responded something like this: "Rabbi, you're a young man." (I'm sure the congregant was twice the rabbi's age.) "It's easy for you to talk that way in an abstract sense. But I've been fasting on Yom Kippur for the past sixty years, and I have no intention of stopping this year."

I would have probably given up at that point. I have a rule in life never to argue with anyone twice my age (at 56+, not too many of them left...). However, the story continues as follows, and concludes with a happier ending.

R. Leff took the following tactic, which surprisingly worked: "Well, I can't force you on the issue. But I will have to tell the synagogue gabbai (sexton) that you will no longer be able to receive any honors during synagogue services." Man: "Why not?" Rabbi: "Because you are an idolater." Man: "Huh?" Rabbi: "It's clear to me that you're not serving G-d but Yom Kippur. If you fasted on Yom Kippur when G-d said so and did not when G-d said not to, you would be serving G-d. But if you fast even when G-d says not to, it is clear that it's Yom Kippur you're worshiping and not G-d."

This unfortunately is the attachment to mitzvos (commandments) we often have. People develop an irrational fear of sin -- not because they understand that if G-d forbade it it is inherently evil, but because they've refrained from the act so long, they can no longer imagine transgressing it.

R. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, one of the directors of the Orthodox Union, once made the following observation: "There's sometimes a very thin line between meticulous observance of every detail of the mitzvos and just being a neurotic." The more religious a person is, the more obsessed he becomes with the nitty-gritty details of religious observance. And he can pay such painstaking attention to all the details he's liable to utterly forget what the Torah is all about.

The Talmud illustrates a "pious fool" ("chassid shoteh") as one who sees a woman drowning in the river and refrains from saving her because -- it's forbidden to look at a woman! (Sotah 21b). If we have the big picture, we can and should be serious about the severity of sin and the many details of religious observance. But if the sin itself is the fearful ends, we are worshiping actions rather than G-d.

(A more recent example is my beloved teacher OBM, R. Yaakov Weinberg. When he was growing up in the Holy Land, a tragedy occurred in his school (in Tiberias) in which a woman's clothes caught on fire and as a result she burned to death. Right after the tragedy R. Weinberg overheard his teacher

saying to himself, "I just wasn't sure what to do. I couldn't touch a woman..." My teacher picked himself up and left the school that day -- to continue his education in Jerusalem. He was all of 8 years old, but he realized that his teacher was a "pious fool," and he refused to ever study from him again.)

There is an important corollary to this. If one has developed a fear of the action and not the Commander, it is really not so hard to break the ice. If once you slip and taste the forbidden fruit -- and lightning does not miraculously strike you -- all of a sudden the act loses its diabolical spell, and the irrational fear will quickly dissipate.

Likewise, if we tell our children to keep their tradition because that's just the way we Jews have always been doing things, then the next generation -- whose Jewish consciousness is that much less firmly rooted -- will be able to dispense with it without the nostalgic attachment. If, however, we introduce them to the G-d who created us and commanded us in the spiritually fulfilling life, then they will hopefully discover G-d on their own -- as every generation must.

This is the true message of R. Shimon. Fear of sin is not some kind of neurotic or nostalgic hang-up. It is having the proper sense of the severity of G-d's word. R. Shimon surely began with the proper fear of his Creator. And his respect for G-d made him appreciate just how despicable sinful acts are. Any act which is spiritually harmful and runs contrary to G-d's will cannot possibly be tempting or enticing. And thus his fear was not of "Sin" -- the entity incarnate -- but in truth of the One who forbade it.

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