

CHAPTER 2, MISHNA 18(C): DOOMING OURSELVES

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Shimon said: Be careful with the recitation of the Shema and the prayers. When you pray, do not regard your prayers as a fixed obligation but rather as [the asking for] mercy and supplication before G-d, as the verse states, 'For gracious and merciful is He, slow to anger, great in kindness, and relenting of the evil decree' (Joel 2:13). Do not consider yourself wicked in your own eyes.

For the past two classes we have been discussing some of the basic themes of prayer. This week I would like to tie this in to R. Shimon's final statement -- that we not consider ourselves wicked. I believe it contains a fascinating psychological insight -- and one closely connected to the concept of prayer.

To begin with, we can certainly appreciate R. Shimon's final statement in its own right. One who considers himself wicked will likely live up (down?) to his expectations. If we see ourselves as rotten, as failures in life, very little will inhibit us from sinning even further. We are already doomed; there is no hope for us -- so we might as well enjoy ourselves while we're at it.

The correct attitude, certainly, is that no matter who I am and how many faults I have, I am basically a good person. I am a human being fashioned in the image of G-d. He endowed me with wonderful good qualities, and He has challenged me with many faults which I must overcome. As many sins as I have, I am not evil. I am a good person, just one who sometimes fails.

The Talmud (Hagigah 15) tells us of one of the great scholars of the Mishna, named Elisha. As a result of dabbling too deeply in Kabbalah, as well as having other faults, he embraced heresy -- and proceeded to live a life of sinful indulgence. He became known euphemistically as "acher" -- literally, "another". The Talmud writes that at the time he defected from Torah observance, a voice emanated from the Heavens (or so he imagined) stating: "Return, wayward children' (Jeremiah 3:14) - - except for Acher." G-d no longer wanted him or anticipated his repentance. And so, he reached the self-evident and self-serving conclusion: "Now that I've lost the World to Come, I might as well at least enjoy myself down here" -- which he proceeded to do -- with great gusto.

Even so, Acher was a Torah scholar of the highest caliber. The Talmud there records how R. Meir, great scholar of the Mishna, used to follow behind Acher -- while he was riding his horse on the Sabbath -- to study Torah from him. (This merely further validates the known phenomenon that accomplishment in Torah may have very little to do with closeness to G-d -- although to be fair, most of the time it most certainly does.) On one such occasion, Acher told his student, "You can

follow me no further. I have measured with my horse's footsteps, and we have reached the limit one is allowed to travel outside of the city on the Sabbath!"

This is virtually the only known case of serious defection among the scholars of the Mishna. (It, by the way, does not speak highly of Kabbalah study for the ill-prepared. Acher was far more prepared than the "Kabbalah center" students of today. But then again, he was actually studying the real stuff.) Yet Acher's story is in essence the theme of our mishna -- the danger of seeing oneself as a failure, as someone so sinful G-d could not possibly love.

At the same time, it's important to grasp just how psychologically gratifying such a belief is. G-d does not care about me? In a way, enormously depressing. I am alone and unloved in an uncaring world. There is not even an all-compassionate Deity to fall back upon. But then again, it lifts a great burden off my shoulders. The great inner turmoil which is the fate of conscientious man is removed from me. There is no struggle physical versus spiritual, selfishness versus selflessness. If G-d doesn't care about **me**, He certainly does not care what I **do**. And so, there is no reason to struggle with myself or to repress any of my basest desires. Nobody cares what I do -- so why not do it? There is no fancy or indulgence I must repress -- save at most that which my fellow or society will not tolerate (today precious little).

Thus, in a way, we would just love to believe G-d has forgotten about us or has just given up on us. Nobody even **wants** me to behave. As ludicrous as this is from a theological standpoint -- that an all-knowing, all-loving and long-suffering G-d would actually "give up" on someone ("By My life, says the L-rd G-d, do I want the death of the wicked one, but rather his repentance from his way that he may live" (Ezekiel 33:11)), it is so enticing a belief, that in our insanity we sometimes convince ourselves it is true. (The Theory of Evolution immediately comes to mind. There is no loving or caring G-d. Life is one grand accident.) The world is empty and meaningless, but within it I am totally free.

Thus, again, R. Shimon's words are invaluable in their own right: We must never give up on ourselves. In addition, however, I believe it has important relevance to the subject of prayer. It is possible to pray -- and to pray well -- and to fall into the exact same trap: I am a hopeless sinner who can turn only to G-d for salvation. Prayer is a form of self-deprecation before the L-rd: "Only You can help me, G-d. My life, my very existence is worthless and pathetically hopeless. I pray to You and await Your salvation. I could not go for a moment without You." Inspiring humility or hopeless laziness? Is prayer no more than a means of giving up on ourselves and asking G-d to pick up the pieces?

Equally sinister: Humbling oneself **too** much before G-d might be a means of self-debasement rather than self-improvement. As my teacher R. Yochanan Zweig observed, when we talk too freely and openly about how lowly we are, it becomes a means of getting used to ourselves -- almost of telling G-d to accept us for whom we are. We would almost like to confide in our G-d -- as one confides in a psychologist -- telling Him how lowly we are so that we can relieve the guilt from our

chests.

Unfortunately, however, prayer is not the confessional. We do not pray to assuage our guilt feelings, to talk ourselves into how wicked and irredeemable we are. Prayer must be our means of pulling ourselves out of it.

Perhaps for this reason R. Shimon warns us not to view ourselves as overly wicked. Although as he just stated we must pray intensely and regularly, we should never take ourselves too seriously! It is true that we require much Divine mercy and we have much to apologize for. But don't turn your life into a vicious cycle of sin -- guilt -- confession. Do not use prayer as a means of self-debasement. We pray because we require G-d's help, but as they say, the L-rd helps those who help themselves. And so, to state it more accurately, we pray because we know that we **can** do something about our faults -- and because we know that with G-d's help we will manage to get there.

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