

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 12(B): WILL SPEAKS THE LOUDEST

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

He [Rabbi Chanina] used to say, anyone whose good deeds are greater than his wisdom, his wisdom will endure. And anyone whose wisdom is greater than his good deeds, his wisdom will not endure.

Last week we discussed the advice of our mishna -- that Torah study alone will never produce moral and ethical individuals. Pure and abstract wisdom will never "endure". It might linger in our brains for a good while, but it will never transform us as individuals. Only through practice will we truly appreciate the Torah and will its messages influence us for the better.

We also discussed a number of psychological insights which stem from our mishna. As we learned, deeds impact on a person -- regardless of his motives in performing them. If we act a certain way, that will become who we are -- even if deep down we feel it is not "us". Having a good heart is meaningless if our actions are wicked: our inherent goodness will quickly dissipate or become corrupted (although people cling to the belief that deep down they're alright long after that ceases to be). Likewise, a "bad" heart will become a good one if we only follow the behavior we know to be proper. Never feel you are dishonest with yourself if you behave on the outside while fantasizing within. We are our actions far more than our thoughts or beliefs. Eventually, good deeds will become good thoughts and a good soul.

This week I'd like to add another angle to this discussion -- yet another psychological insight which stems from the words of our mishna.

Rabbeinu Yonah, in his commentary to the mishna, asks the following question: What does our mishna mean "one whose deeds are greater than his wisdom?" How can our deeds be more than our wisdom? We can only "do" that which we "know"? Any mitzvah (commandment) which I fulfill, by definition I must know about? If so, how can I possibly do more?

(I believe the simple explanation -- and the one we implied last week -- is that one can technically know about a mitzvah, but can understand very little of its true complexity and significance. One who does more than he knows performs good deeds without fully comprehending their magnitude -- but performs them knowing that an all-good G-d commands only that which is best for His subjects.)

R. Yonah answers that although technically one cannot fulfill a mitzvah he or she does not know about, our mishna refers to one who has **accepted** to do all the mitzvos. This means if a person accepts upon himself to fulfill all the mitzvos -- including the ones he does not yet know about -- G-

d immediately considers him fully observant: He is fully righteous in the eyes of the L-rd. Ignorance of some of the details is not held against a person who would observe all the mitzvos if he would only know what they are. Ignorance is sadly all too prevalent today; true devotion is what G-d cherishes.

Further, it's likely that if a person truly desires to fulfill G-d's will, he will make every effort to study and find out that which he does not yet know. And so, his resolve will soon become reality. (Obviously, one cannot honestly claim he would **like** to fulfill everything if he never bothers to find out what the Torah requires.) And, as our mishna tells us, such a person's wisdom will endure. What he knows he fulfills and what he does not know he commits to. Both his will and his knowledge will be incorporated into his self.

I believe R. Yonah's comment brings to light yet another profound insight regarding the manner in which G-d runs the world. How can R. Yonah so grandly promise that G-d will reward us for that which we did not do -- just because we'd **like** to do it? What is the justification? Sure, we **would** have done had we known, but bottom line, we did not do? What is the reward based on? Is it a consolation prize? If the Torah said eat matzah on Passover, we either did so or we did not? Perhaps G-d would not hold it **against** someone who did not know better, but what is the justice on the Divine scales in playing make-believe, in pretending inaction is action?

(For that matter, if will is so significant, would G-d **punish** a person for planning to do something wrong even if when the time comes he resists his temptation?! At least for a time he **planned** to do something wrong!)

The answer to this reveals a profound lesson about G-d's justice system as well as human nature. In Leviticus (26:42), when G-d promises to remember the merit of our forefathers, the Torah states: "And I shall remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham shall I remember...." The midrash (Toras Kohanim Ch. 8:7, brought in Rashi there) on this verse asks: Why does the word "remember" appear both next to Abraham's and Jacob's names but not next to Isaac's? Answers the midrash, because G-d does not need to "remember" Isaac. His ashes are visible before Him always -- on the altar where Abraham sacrificed him.

Hmm... Any Bible buffs out there? Who remembers that at that last climactic moment, G-d sent an angel telling Abraham **not** to sacrifice his beloved son -- that the offering was unnecessary? Abraham and Isaac both walked away unscathed, having successfully passed their trial, and the story of the Jewish People continued. What in the world does the midrash mean by Isaac's **ashes**? He walked off and lived happily ever after?

The answer is that on G-d's heavenly scales, Isaac's binding was judged not by the physical act alone. G-d peered down from the heavens and saw a father and son wholeheartedly willing to overcome their strongest human emotions for the sake of their G-d. They went against every

personal drive and human impulse for a cause infinitely higher: the recognition that man exists to serve G-d alone and that all personal drives and desires must be directed towards that ends. Abraham was prepared. And Isaac was prepared.

And G-d saw this and told them to stop.

It was enough. The action **had been** done. Their commitment had been total. Once that point had been reached there was no reason for Isaac to **actually** sacrifice himself -- and to snuff out the nation just then being conceived and nurtured on such devotion. The sacrifice **was** carried out -- in every sense and in every realm other than the physical. For in G-d's eyes Isaac's ashes do exist. Our forefathers could then continue to **live** their lives all the more meaningfully and to continue their mission of fashioning the Nation of Israel. (Michtav Mai'Eliyahu Vol. 2, p. 199; see also ArtScroll Bereishis, overview to Parshas Vayeira, pp. 614-16.)

Ultimately, G-d does not judge us according to our actions alone. He judges us according to our commitment: who we **really** are, and what our actions represent. If our desire -- our true will and desire -- is to follow G-d's will -- and our actions reflect this to the best of our abilities -- then we **are** G-d's servants. We can build a relationship with G-d based on a very real, concrete foundation of devotion and spirituality.

And this is far more meaningful -- and real -- to G-d than physical deeds fulfilled with empty hearts and little commitment. Say a person grew up with little formal Jewish education and knows little Jewish law, but has the courage to recognize truth and pursue it -- he or she **wants** to grow. There is no estimating what his will is worth to G-d. It may well be far more precious to G-d than the actions of a person who was say, born and raised in a strictly Orthodox home -- who would never **dream** of entering a MacDonald's -- but who has never really thought it out and reached his way of life through sacrifice and commitment. Actions are essential. They demonstrate our commitment and help us realize our potential for growth. But their true worth is in what they demonstrate about us alone. Empty actions in no way equal true commitment.

But what of sin? Would we likewise say that a person who wants to sin -- who feels the lure of temptation -- is a sinner because of his nature? Does a desire for evil imply that we are intrinsically evil, just as our desire for good reflects our inherent goodness? Does G-d punish us for wanting to do evil even if we do not commit it?

To this the Talmud writes: G-d rewards us for planning to do a good deed along with the deed itself. However, (generally speaking) G-d does not punish us for the planning to sin, only for sin itself (Kiddushin 40a). It is Judaism's firm belief that man is inherently good. We are endowed with a divine soul -- which desires spirituality over pettiness, G-dliness over coarseness. When it comes to mitzvah performance, there is an assumption that the thoughts -- our will to serve G-d -- stem from our true desire. It is what we truly wanted, and we are judged accordingly. Our plans to transgress G-d's will, however, are not truly ours, and do not warrant Divine punishment. The Talmud tells us that

a person sins only when he is not thinking straight (Sotah 3a). When we follow -- or even want to follow -- our good inclinations, our thoughts as well as our acts are real and meaningful. If we slip, we may be taken to task for our actions, but our thoughts were and are always toward our G-d.

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