

## CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 14: THE LIVING DEAD

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***Rabbi Dosa ben (son of) Hur'kenus said: Late morning sleep, wine in the afternoon, the chatter of the youth, and sitting in the gathering places of the ignorant -- drive a person out of the world.***

The author of this mishna lists a number of time-wasting activities, all of which are detrimental to productive living. For most of us, morning naps are unnecessary. Many of us know how heavy our eyelids become in the afternoon. Evening may also be the home stretch of an exhausting day. But morning is not the time to be going back to bed (at least after overcoming the initial hurdles). (Alternatively, the commentators Rashi and Rabbeinu Yonah understand this to refer to a person who oversleeps -- beyond the prescribed time for morning prayers.)

Likewise, the afternoon is not the time to be inebriating oneself. I've seen some older synagogue members down more morning schnapps than this writer could ever handle (believe me, I've tried), but perhaps a morning shot gives a little livening jolt to the senses. It might even serve alternately as a stimulant or relaxant in the evening (see commentary of Tiferes Yisrael). Afternoon beverages, however, drug the mind and body when there are still many productive hours to go.

Finally, the coarse, empty talk of the youth and the ignorant is time-wasting at **best**, grossly unsuited for spirituality at worst. This stands in contrast to scholars, whose very "light" talk is filled with wisdom and value. There is certainly room for relaxed conversation and banter in most everyone's life. Hardly anyone mouths nothing but prayer and Torah study all the time. (There have always been pious Jews who would speak only of sacred matters on the Sabbath.) However, the speech of someone who lives with -- and lives for -- the Torah's values is never totally empty. If it involves building relationships and sharing feelings and values it is not so mundane. The Talmud states that the light speech of the scholars of the Talmud is considered words of Torah (Eiruvim 54b). Such speech can be a learning and a growing experience.

My teacher R. Yochanan Zweig once told me that it often happens to him that while having a "casual" conversation with someone he is struck all of a sudden: "**Now** I know what the Sages meant when they said X..." Our words have great potential for building and expressing our humanity and our souls. We must ever be wary that they not be cheapened into a means of expressing our bodies and pettiest emotions. (See our discussion on 1:17.)

R. Dosa's language -- "drive a person out of the world" -- is surprisingly strong. He's clearly saying more than just that these activities are wrong or harmful. They are so counterproductive as to

actively remove a person from the world of the living.

And this requires some analysis. Say someone squanders his time in one of these ways. Is it as bad as an **actual** sin -- murder, adultery etc.? There is practically no evil so heinous that it precludes repentance, yet here G-d seems to be so furious at this time-waster as to actively take him out of this world, not granting him a second chance to improve. But these faults are not even sins per se! Everyone talks and sleeps at one time or the other, and wine has a place in our religious ceremonies. These people are just excessive. Why do their misdeeds warrant such vicious and condemnatory singling out?

The answer is that these actions all have one aspect in common. They are not committed out of a strong lust for evil. They are done primarily to "kill" time. The average person does not need sleep in the morning, nor does he have to drug himself in the afternoon. (We of course are not discussing people with real substance abuse disorders.) A person who engages in such activities is **seeking** ways to pass the time -- even to the extent of inventing pastimes -- ones his mind and body clearly do not require. (The contrast with today -- with our endless array of pointless electronic games and gadgets, apps, blogs, on-demand everything etc. -- has to be a classic case of "You ain't seen nothing yet!")

And there is a terrible evil implicit in such behavior. I've discussed this from a slightly different perspective not long ago ([2:15](#)), but I feel it deserves mention here as well -- and I think it's a message Pirkei Avos too intended to repeat. If a person sins out of temptation -- or even out of laziness or carelessness, he knows he's done something wrong. He knows G-d demands better of him and that he has failed. Hopefully, such a person will own up to his mistakes, pick himself up, and start anew. This is life. We all make mistakes. Life is a constant challenge, and the fact that we all fail here and there does not mean the game is over. So long as we recognize G-d has something greater in mind for us and there is more to life, we can suffer setbacks but continue in the game of life.

The people in our mishna are not even playing the game.

People who sit around **inventing** ways to kill time are refusing to face life in its true sense -- or to even admit there is a life to live. They are perennially distracting themselves -- not allowing themselves to think about what life is all about. Read the paper, follow your ball team, go to work, return from work, watch TV: the years will go by in a mindless fog. And that our mishna sees as tragic and unacceptable to an extreme. Sinning does not "drive a person out of this world." Defeat and failure are a part of all of our lives. But there is no room for self-imposed brainlessness. We **must** take life seriously. Vacations? Great. A little R&R? Fine. But devoting ourselves to idle gatherings, drugging ourselves senseless, or sleeping off our lives in pathetic stupor? Such G-d and the Sages can never countenance.

Again, R. Dosa does not come down so hard on sinners. Yes, four out of five rabbis agree that sinning is not good for your spiritual health. (Maybe even five out of five, but I can't speak for all

denominations.) But you can be a sinner and know something greater is expected of you. Idlers are committing an evil even more sinister than transgressing a commandment. They are refusing so much as to think about and accept the mission of life in the first place. And there is no room for such people in the scheme of things, in G-d's plan for mankind. Such people are not truly alive in the cosmic sense. If you're for G-d, fine. If you're against Him... well, not so fine, but at least you're in the picture. There is hope for you. But you must take a side or life **literally** has no meaning. You **must** take a side!

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