

## CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 21(A) : WHY NOT A GOOD SAMARITAN?

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

***Rabbi Elazar ben (son of) Azariah said: If there is no Torah [study] there is no proper conduct; if there is no proper conduct there is no Torah [study]. If there is no wisdom there is no fear of G-d; if there is no fear of G-d there is no wisdom. If there is no knowledge there is no understanding; if there is no understanding there is no knowledge. If there is no flour (sustenance) there is no Torah; if there is no Torah there is no flour.***

This week's mishna introduces a number of what are basically circular-logic dilemmas. Before we discuss the particular cases, let's take a look at the structure. If there is no X, there is no Y, meaning, one cannot acquire Y unless he has first acquired X. And now, continues our mishna, how does one acquire X? With Y! (Gee, there's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza...) ;-) We are thus caught in a circle -- with neither beginning nor end. X and Y are both necessary for one another; neither can be achieved on its own. If so, how does one ever embark on the paths of X and Y (say of Torah study and of proper conduct -- our mishna's first example)?

Evidently, R. Elazar intends more to impress upon us the challenge of spiritual growth than to give us a quick-fix recipe to achieve it. To achieve in Torah, wisdom or any of the great endeavors of life, one does not advance in simple linear progression. There is no simple, easily-defined, step-by-step program. One must first make an effort in X -- say Torah study, and then he will slowly begin to improve his personal conduct. Having made himself a somewhat more decent and refined human being, he will then begin to truly appreciate his Torah study -- and it will impact upon him all the more. And as he becomes more caring and sensitive a human being, he will **really** appreciate the depth and beauty of the Torah's teachings -- and then they will **truly** impact on both him and his understanding of Torah. Ad infinitum.

And this, of course, introduces us to the true dilemma of spiritual growth. It is no simple cause-and-effect process. One has to work, to push himself in the necessary directions without noticing any discernible gains. (How does learning some obscure laws of leprous houses or of Temple meal offerings make me a greater human being?) And eventually he will find that he has become a different person. An old friend of mine once repeated to me what his karate teacher told him: "For the longest time you will run drills and practice moves feeling like it's just a bunch of forced motions. Then one day you will wake up a master."

For when we advance spiritually, we attempt to touch something deeper than our bodies or minds. We reach out to our very souls, that hidden piece of godliness within ourselves. And there is no

direct route. When it comes to spiritual growth, there is no start, finish, or clearly-defined course of action. We latch onto a circle -- at one of its infinite points -- and begin to spiral upwards.

Let us now move to our mishna's first statement -- "If there is no Torah there is no proper conduct." The simple understanding is that the Torah and the words of our Sages teach us proper behavior towards others. Our consciences provide us with some guidance for distinguishing between right and wrong, but they alone will not provide us with sufficient direction for living. How much charity should we give, to whom should we give, what is too little, what is too much, how do we honor our parents and raise our children, what is fair advertising, invasion of privacy, a meaningful relationship, etc., etc. The Torah fills in all of the blanks. It not only tells us to "love our fellow" (Levit. 19:18 -- often wrongly translated as "love your neighbor"), but it defines it with volumes of detail, without which "love your fellow" is little more than poetic cliché.

But even more fundamentally, the Torah teaches us what **is** proper conduct and what is not. Human wisdom alone can never be trusted to dictate moral behavior -- as the past century's experiences can certainly testify. Scripture provides us with an important case in point.

Early in our history, King Saul was instructed by Samuel the Prophet to fulfill one of the commandments of the Torah -- that of wiping out the wicked Nation of Amalek (I Samuel 15). He was to lead an army to kill every member of that vile people -- the fighting men, the elderly, the women, children, babies, livestock -- in order to "wipe out the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens" (Deut. 25:19). G-d in His infinite knowledge knows that there is something irredeemably evil about Amalek, so much so that, as the Midrash states, both G-d's Name and His throne are not complete so long as Amalek exists (Tanchuma Ki Saisai 11). The Sages view Amalek as the force of evil in this world which opposes the force of good Israel represents. The world cannot reach its apex so long as Amalek exists.

I realize such a Heavenly command raises uncomfortable questions for most of us. Could such a decree really be just? How could an all-merciful G-d command such? Aren't all men basically good? Aren't children innocent until proven guilty? I personally have no pretenses of understanding G-d's inscrutable ways. I can accept that G-d's wisdom penetrates far beyond puny man's. But people far greater than we have been plagued by such issues -- and have failed.

(As an aside, people today typically equate Nazi Germany to Amalek. There was an old tradition (dating from long before the Holocaust), attributed to R. Eliyahu Kramer (known as the Vilna Gaon, 18th Century leader of Lithuanian Jewry), that the Germans descend from that evil nation -- a nation differing fundamentally from the rest of mankind, evil at its very core (even if not visibly on its surface), and which instead serves to oppose the message Israel brings to the world. Recently, one of my readers brought to my attention a fascinating relevant opinion piece by Dennis Prager on the subject: <http://www.jewishworldreview.com/0309/prager030309.php3>. There is real evil in the world -- then and today. Civilized man would do well to recognize it for what it is.)

(I'll add another important aside the Mishna states that today the nations have become dispersed and mixed together (see Mishna Yadayim 4:4). There is no single nation today which is evil to a man. Taking Nazi Germany as an example, even if one would say the proportion of sadistic anti-Semites was far higher than other comparable nations (in itself not obvious), there were certainly good Germans among them who stood up against evil -- and many more who opposed it inwardly but were too afraid to take a stand. The more relevant lesson for us today is that there are Hitlers and Ahmadinejads in every generation, ready to strike at us if they have the power. (Anyone who has studied the history of the Third Reich knows that Hitler was an unknown misfit whose rise to power came about only through a long confluence of unexpected factors.) We are always threatened. Our safety comes about through the hands of G-d alone.)

Returning to the story of King Saul, as a result of this dilemma -- the justice of wiping out an entire nation, Saul did the understandable but the unthinkable: he defied G-d's will. He did not do so directly or maliciously, but he did not stop the soldiers from sparing both the Amaleki king and some of the livestock. Their sin, according to some, was in substituting their own concept of mercy for G-d's. Why kill the animals? Why not bring them as **sacrifices** -- to G-d! Samuel responded: "Are offerings and sacrifices pleasing to G-d as listening to His voice?!" (v. 22).

The result of Saul's act, according to the Sages, was that Agag, King of Amalek, lived long enough to beget a son. Generations later his descendant Haman nearly succeeded in wiping out that Jewish nation that had been so "merciful" as to spare his ancestor. Who knows how much more evil and corruption has since existed in this world because of Amalek's continued existence?

For that matter, take another famous hypothetical question: Go back 120 years or so and meet cute little toddler Adolf, darling child who has never hurt a fly. (He was probably an obnoxious brat back then too, but two-year-olds can get away with it.) ;- ) Should you kill him? To those of us who -- like G-d -- know the future effect of all events, could there have been a greater act of **mercy** in history?

Even more interesting -- and equally tragic -- were the ramifications for King Saul himself. He later became a depressant who became as obsessed with hunting and slaying the future King David -- who he knew would succeed him -- as he once was with fighting Amalek. Interesting: Wasn't Saul previously the kindhearted one -- to the extent that he was "more" merciful than G-d? Now he is ruthlessly pursuing a fellow Jew and devoted servant?

Needless to say Saul was a great man. The Talmud writes that he committed but one sin his entire life (Yoma 22b -- although as commentators explain, his one fault manifested itself in multiple fashions). His faults cannot be viewed by today's superficial standards. Yet what seems to have occurred is that his mercy turned into something other than true mercy. He had not acquired **G-d's** everlasting trait of compassion. He lived according to his own definition of the trait, one even capable of defying G-d's definition.

The result for Saul was that his own compassion waned with his once-sterling character. His trait

was not a spiritual and eternal one, founded upon G-d's infinite mercy. It was a human contrivance. And likewise, Saul's battle against Amalek was no longer a spiritual act -- of Divine service and ultimately of Divine mercy, but a non-sacred act of war. And Saul, became transformed -- ever so slightly -- into a man of violence rather than compassion. The Midrash writes that one who shows mercy when cruelty is appropriate will ultimately show cruelty when mercy is appropriate (Koheles Rabbah 7:36). In the end, Saul's sense of right and wrong lost its divine anchoring and direction. It became the unstable mercy of a troubled human conscience, rather than the unbending, infinite compassion of an all-merciful G-d.

(Based in part on ArtScroll Megillas Esther, pp. xxvii - xxxi, and on a lecture heard from R. Yisroel Riesman.)

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