

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 28: STAYING IN THE WORLD

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Elazar HaKappar said: Jealousy, lust and the [pursuit of] honor remove a person from the world.

This mishna bears a strong resemblance to a much earlier one -- [Chapter 2, Mishna 16](#). We learned there: "Rabbi Yehoshua said: An evil eye, the evil inclination, and hatred of others remove a person from the world." Here too, R. Elazar lists three qualities which have the same catastrophic effects on a man's life -- and the qualities map almost precisely to the earlier ones. A person ruled by jealousy has an "evil eye" towards others who are better off, begrudging them their fortune and successes. A lustful person, whether for money or worldly pleasures, becomes slave to his evil inclination. And last, one who craves honor will quickly come to actual hatred of others. He will care first and foremost about himself and the recognition he receives. Anyone who has the chutzpah to be worth something on his own and detract from his own honor -- which is of course basically everyone -- will earn the honor-seeker's resentment and ultimately hatred.

It seems that our mishna is dealing with underlying character flaws, while the earlier mishna discussed their evil manifestations. Either way, the resultant behavior will be the same: "removing a person from the world."

All of this raises an interesting question. Our mishna is very harsh on such people. The world cannot so much as suffer their existence. And that's far worse than the run-of-the-mill sinner. We all sin, but somehow the world puts up with us. G-d is merciful; He is not so quick to "remove sinners from the world." He gives us a little time to come to our senses and repent.

But these guys are granted no such grace. Their traits are so self-destructive as to actively remove them from this world. And this is interesting: such people are not even really "sinning" per se. Does the Torah ever state "Thou shalt not be jealous" or lustful, or pursue honor? (It's true that the final of the Ten Commandments is not to desire another's possessions (Exodus 20:14), but the Sages understand this as primarily referring to acting on your desires, such as forcibly taking the other's coveted item, even if you leave money for it.) Are these really actually "sins"? I mean, we are all prone to occasional bouts of jealousy, we all desire honor to a greater or lesser extent, and no son of man is entirely beyond lusting for that which is forbidden?

The answer, in a word, is that it's true -- our mishna is not dealing with "sins". In fact, it does not state that G-d will strike you down if you engage in such behavior. It is dealing with character flaws. And in

a way, this makes them less serious: Regardless of what is seething in my mind, I haven't actually **done** anything wrong. And so from a technical standpoint, I deserve no punishment. Outwardly, at least, I'm a perfect saint!

Yet now we arrive at a Jewish fundamental. There is more than one way of measuring sin. We cannot simply gauge deeds according to the punishments they incur -- or if they're forbidden at all for that matter. It's very possible for a person to obey every jot and tittle of the law (That's actually from Matthew; it just happened to sound right for the occasion) but to not really be much of a committed Jew.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, Torah and Talmud commentator of 13th Century Spain) comments on the verse "You shall be holy..." (Leviticus 19:2) that one can observe the letter of the law in its entirety, but still basically be a disgusting human being. Most pleasures are permitted by the Torah -- at least in some form -- and so a person can live for his passions and still live within the parameters of Jewish law. And, continues the Ramban, the Torah never explicitly forbids such things as foul language. And so, a person can live a very coarse and vulgar life, imagining he has done no wrong. Thus, explains the Ramban, the Torah exhorts us to be "holy": not simply to observe the letter of the law, but to go beyond: to truly sanctify ourselves as beings in the image of G-d.

In a similar vein, I once heard R. Berel Wein observe that a person can act out the role perfectly -- wear the right clothes, follow all the stringent customs, hang out with the right crowd, send his kids to the right schools -- but not **really** be all that committed. He referred to such a person as a "professional" tzaddik (righteous person). It's a role he's filling; he's mimicking a tzaddik -- and possibly doing a fine job at it. But how intensely religious is such a person **really**?

On the other hand, we have a person such as King David who really did sin grievously, yet he had the passion, the devotion, the commitment of a truly holy human being. You can be truly righteous even if you slip now and then. But just because your behavior is always prim does not necessarily mean you are a true believer.

Thus, to return to our track (which at least at one point we had), character flaws technically may not be so severe. If I stew in my pettiness or jealousies, I may not have **done** anything wrong. Yet in a sense I am far worse than one who simply transgresses. A person who is always lusting or seeking honor may be distant from G-d in a far more profound sense. As our mishna puts it, he will be removed from this world. He won't even have a life. He will pine away wishing he were someone else or had that which is not meant for him. And in the process he won't even live his own life: He will be unable to enjoy the blessings and talents he does have. The Talmud writes, "Whoever sets his eyes on something inappropriate for him, that which he seeks will not be given to him and that which is his will be taken from him" (Sotah 9a). If a person refuses to accept his own lot in life, he will be unhappy, frustrated and unfulfilled. His faults may not have manifested themselves on the physical plane, yet in a very profound and tragic sense, his life will not be worth living.

To conclude, one of the truly profound messages of Judaism is that we cannot judge ourselves according to our deeds alone. It is not enough to do everything right. We must ask ourselves a far more profound question: What am I truly doing for G-d? What kind of relationship do I have with Him? Are my actions a reflection of heartfelt commitment, or are they just unthinking, habitual actions which happen to be good deeds? Even if I do it all, is it really an indication of passion and commitment, or is it basically a comfortable framework for my life -- within which I live for myself?

The Talmud, in its characteristic succinctness, sums it up perfectly: "G-d wants the heart" (Sanhedrin 106b). The commandments of the Torah provide us with the guideposts for true fulfillment, and as we know Judaism is not a religion which simply says "Have a good heart and everything else will (somehow) follow." It takes a lot of work to develop a truly good heart -- as anyone in the business can tell you. Yet the ultimate factor is not our deeds; it is our hearts. We must begin with deeds, but we must go far beyond them. Our actions must serve as indicators that we are truly divine beings, in the image of our Creator.

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