

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 5(A): LIVING IN THE WORLD'S VIEW

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Yochanan ben (son of) Beroka said, whoever desecrates the Name of Heaven in secret will be paid back in public. Whether one acts unintentionally or intentionally, [both are accountable] regarding desecration of the Name.

This week's mishna discusses the severity of desecrating G-d's Name -- "Chillul Hashem" in the language of the Sages (we'll use the Hebrew term below). In the vernacular, the term "Chillul Hashem" is understood to refer to public or conspicuous misbehavior on the part of Jews. When a Jew, especially a visibly Orthodox one, publicly sins or otherwise creates a scene, the image of the Jew and Judaism is lowered in the eyes of the onlookers -- both Jew and Gentile. When an observant Jew (in dress, if not in behavior) is caught in a money-laundering or insider-trading scheme (and the press is always gleefully there to report it), or if Israel is condemned for human-rights abuses, it not only reflects on the Jews (and certainly not only on the individual sinner). Tragically, it casts a negative light on the very Torah the Jew supposedly upholds and ultimately, on G-d Himself.

It has been wisely pointed out that Gentiles who are constantly seeking out and noticing the bad in Jews -- even if in very minor and nonreligious matters such as annoying personal habits -- are truly seeking to invalidate G-d Himself. They don't want to hear the message Judaism carries to the world -- that there is an all-knowing G-d who created man for a purpose and who will ultimately judge him for his every deed. And they will search for any means -- whether relevant or not -- of discrediting the nation which carries that message. Anti-Semitism is not simply a reaction to Jewish "pushiness", or to our capitalism, Communism, or racial inferiority. It is because deep down the world recognizes -- but refuses to admit -- that we alone bear witness to the truth.

Perhaps for this reason, Jews have typically been exceedingly concerned over Chillul Hashem -- of "sticking out" and shaming ourselves in the eyes of the world. This might be simply because we're overly self-conscious, and afraid of rejection at the hands of the Gentiles. But I believe we also have an instinctive sense that the message we bear is far too critical to be consigned to us alone. We carry the message of monotheism and of an all-knowing and all-caring G-d. And it is one all mankind must ultimately embrace. And so, we must not leave ourselves open to criticism -- of any sort. If mankind finds even the flimsiest excuse to cast off our message, we will have failed in our mission in the most fundamental manner.

While all of the above is valid, it does not reach the root of the definition of Chillul Hashem. Our

mishna makes it clear that Chillul Hashem is not limited to sins done in the public's eye. Our mishna began: "Anyone who desecrates the Name of Heaven **in private**...." (To be fair, at least one of the commentators does not understand "in private" literally for this reason.) The Hebrew word "chillul" is related to the word "chalal" -- vacuum or empty space. Any action which causes G-d's Presence to be "removed" or less evident in this world is a form of Chillul Hashem. If a person sins, even in private, to some extent he is driving away G-d's Presence. G-d does not dwell where there is immorality or impurity: "And there shall not be among you a matter of nakedness, and He shall turn away from you" (Deuteronomy 23:15).

But there are sins and there are sins. If a person sins out of temptation, out of an inability to restrain himself, it does make G-d Presence just a little less perceptible. But okay -- nobody's perfect. We knew G-d was there but we succumbed to our all-too-human desires. Most sins are not a blatant denial of an omnipresent G-d. I know I should be a better Jew, but sometimes I just can't help myself.

But let's say a person sins not through a lack of control but from a sense of disregard and denial. The negative act just didn't seem significant enough to be worth bothering to avoid. "Does G-d **really** care if I carry my handkerchief 10 feet to the door of my apartment on the Sabbath? Doesn't He have more important things to worry about?" I've heard that one (sometimes even subconsciously within myself) far too many times. And this is a denial of G-d's existence in the most profound manner. Judaism teaches us that G-d is omnipresent, that He cares about our actions, and that He is actively involved in shaping our lives (as well as the course of world history). If a person sins out of a sense of apathy, of rejection of this notion -- even in the innermost recesses of his heart -- he has, G-d forbid, committed the most profound act of Chillul Hashem.

And our mishna continues: If someone desecrates G-d's Name in private, G-d will punish him in public. For when we make G-d's Presence less visible, He responds in a manner all too appropriate: He **makes** His Presence known -- in grand and public fashion. To set the world back on course (if we're fortunate enough for G-d to pick up after our mistakes), G-d shows us He **is** around. When G-d openly punishes the sinner, the world is made to see that there are consequences for deeds, both good and bad. G-d shows that He cares and that He is involved in the affairs of man. And He not only cares; He demands. He demands that we realize our potential and turn the world into the reflection of G-d it ought to be. Thus, if we drive G-d's Presence away even in private, G-d brings it back unequivocally and publicly -- using the sinner as His hapless instrument for teaching the world this critical lesson.

(The commentator Rashi does point out that G-d punishes in such a manner as to make it evident what the sinner did privately and why he deserves punishment. If not, there would be an equal Chillul Hashem in that G-d would appear to be chastising an innocent man.)

Our mishna concludes that G-d punishes both for intentional and unintentional acts of Chillul

Hashem. This requires explanation. It is true in general that one who sins inadvertently is not entirely blameless. If we never learned a certain law (when we really should have been up-and-up in our studies), we bear some responsibility. (See Leviticus 4-5 regarding atonement sacrifices which must be offered in certain such cases.) A person's lack of knowledge may at times be viewed as a lack of serious consideration for what the Torah requires of him. (This of course depends on the situation, and is not a discussion for now.)

Regarding Chillul Hashem, however, the inadvertent sinner is judged even more harshly. Say a Jew unwittingly cuts in front of someone in line, splashes mud on the next fellow's good pants, or cruises by frustrated commuters in his single-occupancy vehicle not realizing he's in the HOV lane. These things happen to all of us one time or the other. The intentions of the perpetrator were perfectly innocent. Yet he has caused others annoyance and has portrayed Jews as being less than courteous or considerate. It is not his fault, but regardless, he has smeared the image of the Jew in the eyes of others. Does such a schlemiel (Amazing! My spellchecker let that through!) deserve punishment?

The answer is firstly that the inadvertent sinner will certainly not be held **as** accountable as the malicious one. Maimonides and Rabbeinu Yonah both comment that R. Yochanan did not mean to say both the careless and wanton sinner deserve the same **degree** of punishment. Yet neither will he be held blameless. What is the explanation?

I'm running out of space, so I will have to deal with this briefly. Many Jewish thinkers observe that there are two aspects to an evil act (as well as a good one). The first is that the sinner has defied G-d's will. The second is that he has introduced sin -- and therefore evil -- into the world. When Adam sinned by eating of the Tree of Knowledge, death was decreed upon all generations -- to be the inescapable fate of humankind until the Resurrection of the Dead. But does not the Torah state: "Fathers shall not be put to death on account of children, neither shall children be put to death on account of fathers; a man for his own sin will be put to death" (Deut. 24:16)?

The answer is that the world was irreparably damaged by Adam's act. Death came about not as punishment for Adam's defiance, but as the unavoidable aftereffect of his sin. The perfection of G-d's creation became tainted. When man ate of the Tree, knowledge of evil became a part of man's psyche and a part of G-d's creation. Good and evil became confused and intermingled. And man would no longer be able to exist perpetually in this world. He now contained within him the seeds of evil; they would ultimately have to rot and decay.

And the same tragically holds true regarding Chillul Hashem. When one who is visibly Jewish inadvertently creates a negative perception of Jews, he has damaged the world and distanced it from recognition of G-d. And he cannot be held unaccountable. The damage must be repaired. Perhaps if he is fortunate, G-d will grant him the opportunity to compensate: He will be given the chance to increase others' awareness of G-d's Presence by performing a sanctification of G-d's Name. But regardless, the world will have to be brought back on course.

Thus, the more visibly Jewish we are, the extent to which we represent Jews, traditional Jews or learned Jews to the world -- the higher are the stakes. We will be judged by high -- perhaps impossibly high -- standards of conduct. Much more than we care to know or admit, our actions will be viewed through the prism of -- "So this is what Jews are like...." If, on the other hand, we hide our Jewishness and attempt to fade into anonymity, our faults will not carry such weight. They will matter little in the immense, uncaring world in which we live. But neither will our good deeds. And this is not the mission G-d has in mind for us -- to lose ourselves in the crowd, to be out of the world's sight and mind, to live quietly and unobtrusively in a reserve in Colorado. It was to be a light unto the nations. Our sobering yet inspiring task is to stand out and to stand out proudly, and to show the world the potential for goodness and achievement inherent in every Jew -- and in all of mankind.

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