

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 20:3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The balancing act -- the act of setting out to be pious in G-d's eyes and of being sensitive to others at the same time -- comes to this in these instances. We're charged for example with the responsibility of letting others know when they're doing harm, and of even rebuking them for it if it comes to that (Leviticus 19:17). But what are you to do if you simply won't be listened to? When rather than being broken and stopped short by your truisms, the person you're addressing is further and daringly emboldened?

Continuing to rebuke him would do more harm than good then, in that you'd "actually cause the person to press on in his wrongful ways, to (even) profane the name of G-d, and to add rebelliousness to his transgressions"..

"In that instance," Ramchal offers, "the (truly) pious thing to do would be to remain silent", rather than be stiff-necked. And he cites our sages' cogent statement to the effect that, "Just as it is a mitzvah to say something that would be listened to, it's likewise a mitzvah sometimes to not say what wouldn't be listened to" (Yevamot 65b).

Thus, one would need to be sensitive to G-d's wishes to be sure, but to consider their costs, repercussions, and consequences in the here-and-now too. But that's not the only instance in which to be cautious, to be sure.

He goes on to offer the following. "Obviously, it's proper to be eager ... to do a mitzvah and to try to be one of those who busies himself with it" wholeheartedly and zealously. But sometimes you can set off a toxic controversy by acting that way, "and more likely disgrace the mitzvah and profane the name of G-d" in the eyes of those involved in the controversy "than honor" it. So the pious thing to do then, he advises, would be to "abandon that particular act rather than pursue it".

But don't misunderstand, Ramchal makes clear: We're all "duty-bound to observe the mitzvot as strictly as possible, no matter who's watching", and to "neither be afraid nor embarrassed" by our actions or others' malevolent reactions. "But this calls for discernment and forethought, as it refers to those mitzvot which we're all absolutely obligated to fulfill".

As far as those sorts of mitzvot are concerned, "be as hard as flint" and do what you must. "But when it comes to those extra flourishes of piety which, when done in front of many would make them laugh and mock" -- in those instances, Ramchal adjudges, "the pious person should abandon that particular practice" at that particular time, "since they're not an absolute obligation upon him"

anyway, and he'd be doing more harm than good.

Ramchal lays out the parameters as follows: we're certainly to "fulfill all essential, obligatory mitzvot when it's time to, and no matter who may mock you." But "don't do anything that's not essential, and that will cause laughter and mockery".

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