

MISHKAL HACHASSIDUS -- IS THIS THE TIME AND THE PLACE TO BE PIOUS?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #1033 – Conning Someone Out Of A Mitzvah. Good Shabbos!

In his classic work, *Mesillas Yescharim*, Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto [1707-1746] (the Ramchal) traces the different spiritual levels a person passes through on the path to perfecting Divine Service. In chapter 18, the Ramchal discusses *midas haChassidus* (the attribute of acting 'beyond the letter of the law'). The *Mesillas Yescharim* extols this virtue and comments what a wonderful attribute it is for a person to conduct himself on a higher level of righteousness than that which is required by the strict requirements of the law.

However, in chapter 20 of this work, the Ramchal writes a very important caveat defining when it is appropriate to act in accordance with *midas haChassidus*. The Ramchal calls the chapter the *mishkal haChassidus* (from the word *mishkal* -- scale), meaning that one has to weigh whether now is an appropriate time and place to employ the attribute of piety beyond the letter of the law (*Chassidus*). The Ramchal emphasizes that a person must be very careful and deliberate in weighing the appropriateness in any given circumstance of taking upon oneself requirements that are strictly speaking "over and above the call of duty."

The Ramchal cites an incident from our parsha as an example. At the end of Parshas Bamidbar, the Torah says that Moshe and Aharon instructed the Children of Kehas exactly what each of them should do in the *Avodas haMikdash* [Tabernacle Service]. In general, the Leviyim were entrusted with transporting the Mishkan and its component parts. The Children of Kehas had the most important job of carrying the *Aron* [Ark] and the *Klay Hakodesh* [Sacred Vessels]. Carrying the *Aron* was a tremendous privilege but it was a double-edged sword. Although it was a great honor to carry the *Aron*, if one was at all disrespectful or callous in carrying it, he would die. The task of transporting the *Aron* carried with it a special warning "Do not cut off the tribe of the Kehas families from among the Leviyim. Thus shall you do for them so that they shall live and not die when they approach the Holy of Holies. Aaron and his sons shall come and assign them, every man to his work and to his burden. But they shall not come and look as the holy is inserted, lest they die." [Bamidbar

4:18-20]

Despite the risk entailed, the Children of Kehas wanted to carry the Aron. They felt it was such a privilege that they were willing to take their chances. So then, the Medrash asks, why was it necessary to give them the special warning cited above? The answer is that the Kehasites all knew that those who carried the Aron received a great reward and therefore everyone in the family wanted to be involved with that task, thereby neglecting the other important duties assigned to them such as carrying the Shulchon [Table], the Menorah, and the Mizbachos [Altars]. Arguments broke out within the family: "I want to carry the Aron. You carry the Shulchon! You carry the Menorah!" Everyone fought to carry the Aron because that had the greatest reward.

(There is an analogous incident cited in the second chapter of Tractate Yoma. The Kohanim were running up the ramp of the Mizbayach to see who would be the first to have a certain mitzvah. In the course of the competition, Kohanim were literally pushed off the ramp and injured by the fall.)

These fights to see who would carry the Aron led to improper behavior. The Divine Presence of G-d was angered by this attitude and smote members of this family. They were literally being killed off by Heavenly punishment. Therefore, Hashem told Moshe and Aharon to intervene and supervise the transporting of the Mishkan's Klay Hakodesh ("You carry the Aron today, you carry the Shulchon today, you carry the Mizbayach Hazhav today, etc.") so that the entire family of Kehas is not wiped out.

The Mesillas Yesharim asks, "What is really happening here?" The entire family of Kehas was "acting for the sake of Heaven." They wanted to carry the Aron! They sought to invoke the *midas Chassidus* (striving for the most pious behavior possible) for which people are supposed to receive great reward. However, someone must ask himself -- Is this worth it? In order to achieve the reward of carrying the Aron, should major fights break out between brothers and cousins? Is that what Divine Service is all about?

This is what the Mesillas Yesharim means by *mishkal haChassidus* -- the weighing of factors and considerations to determine whether this is the time and place and way to act with extreme piety. The Ramchal says that if someone really wants to be a truly pious individual, he must weigh all the results and ramifications that will come about from his "pious acts" to evaluate carefully whether or not they are as righteous and praiseworthy as he thinks they are. Sometimes abstaining from initiating "acts of piety" may bring about greater sanctification of Hashem's Name and find greater Divine Favor than implementing those actions. If so, forgo the piety. Under those circumstances, it is better to abstain than to "act piously".

The classic example of this is the following: Two people in the same shul have *Yahrtzeit*. They both want to *daven* for the *Amud*. Why do they want to *daven* for the *Amud*? It is because they want to say *Kaddish* -- they want to make a *Kiddush Hashem* [Sanctification of the Divine Name]. How many times do we see people fight over the *Amud*, fight over the right to lead *Mussaf*, or fight over the

right to get *Maftir*? This is a classic example of what the *Mesillas Yesharim* means in speaking about *mishkal haChassidus*. A person must always weigh whether this is an appropriate time and place to act as a "*chosid*." Consider the ramifications.

The *Mesillas Yesharim* then refers to a Mishna in Tractate Brochos [10b]: There is a dispute between Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai regarding how a person should read *Shma*. Beis Shammai says that the nighttime recitation of *Shma* must be said lying down and the daytime recitation must be said standing up, as it is written "when you lie down and when you arise." Beis Hillel argue. They say you can recite *Shma* in whatever position you desire.

The Gemara says that Rabbi Tarfon acted in a strict fashion like Beis Shammai and read the nighttime *Shma* while lying down. Bandits attacked him while he was lying down and reciting *Shma* and he almost lost his life. The Sages told him that he was deserving of losing his life for abandoning the normative opinion of Beis Hillel and ruling like the more stringent opinion of Beis Shammai.

The *Mesillas Yesharim* notes the incongruity of this Talmudic statement. Since a person who lies down for *Shma* also fulfills his obligation of reciting *Shma* according to Beis Hillel, why should he be deserving of death for following the more exacting standard of Beis Shammai? The *Mesillas Yesharim* answers that the period in which this incident took place was an era when it was not yet firmly established that in a dispute between Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai, the halacha universally follows Beis Hillel. The Rabbis wanted to establish this normative principle. It was essential for the integrity of all future halachic practice that it be clearly known that the halacha follows Beis Hillel. By accommodating the position of Beis Shammai, Rabbi Tarfon undermined what the Sages were trying to establish for all future generations.

When a person thinks he is being extra pious and more meticulous and precise in his practice of religious ritual, it can sometimes produce very negative ramifications. This is why the Talmud comments that Rabbi Tarfon was potentially deserving of death. The *Mesillas Yesharim* concludes that the results and derivatives of a person's zeal to be *machmir* [stringent] can be destructive.

This theme of weighing the pros and cons of piety (*mishkal haChassidus*) was one of the basic tenets of the *mussar* movement. This was a prime doctrine that Rav Yisrael Salanter [1809-1883] would try to teach his disciples. Students of the *mussar* movement and Lithuanian Yeshivos that taught *mussar* would hear this idea discussed over and over and over again: A person constantly needs to make a reckoning of what he is doing and what the results of those actions will be.

There are two classic stories told about Rav Yisrael Salanter that illustrate this principle. One winter, Rav Yisrael Salanter was present at a place when the people got up to wash *netilas yadayim* before a meal. Remember that in those days there was no plumbing and no running water. All the water came from a well.

The person in line to wash his hands ahead of Rav Yisrael Salanter took the cup and washed his

hands up to his wrists, as *halacha* recommends as the preferred method of washing. Rav Yisrael Salanter took the cup and washed his hands only to the joints of his fingers, which is considered only a "*bdieved*" [non-optimal] means of fulfilling the requirement for hand washing. A person watching what transpired was very surprised. He asked the famous Rabbi, "How is it that the great teacher is so lenient when it comes to the mitzvah of washing one's hands?" Rav Yisrael explained: "Someone has to *schlep* this water from the well to the washing station. The weather outside is cold and icy and it is slippery outside. It is worth relying on an opinion that is less pious and less demanding when the result of insisting on the stricter opinion will cause someone else to suffer." This is a prime example of the "*mishkal haChassidus*" at work.

In another famous story, Rav Yisrael Salanter was away from home for Shabbos and he was invited to the home of a student for the Friday night meal. Prior to accepting the invitation, Rav Yisrael asked his student how he conducted his Shabbos meal on Friday evening. The disciple assured his teacher that it was a beautiful *Seudas Shabbos*. "We have *zemiros* and *divrei Torah*. The meal lasts for two or three hours and we reach great spiritual heights." Rav Yisrael requested, "This week please do it differently for me: We should eat as quickly as we can. After we finish the meal and everything is cleared away from the table and cleaned up, then we will sing *zemiros* and say *divrei Torah*." That is what they did.

When Rav Yisrael finished the meal, he walked into the kitchen where there was a Jewish worker. He complemented her and told her how much he enjoyed the food. The worker said, "I wish you would come every Shabbos. Every week I am sitting here in the kitchen, the head of the house is sitting there at the table harmonizing "*Kol Mekadesh Shvii k'rauee lo*" (one of the opening Sabbath *zemiros* praising one who properly observes the Sabbath) and I need to sit in the kitchen, tired from the entire week of working. By the time I get home, it is so late and my family must wait up for me." Here again, the "*mishkal haChassidus*" is at play. What does the Master of the Universe want from us?

Rav Pam ([1913-2001] the Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivta Torah VoDaath in New York), who was himself a great *Baal Mussar* used to always talk about this. He also gave several examples. He describes the scenario of someone who is at a wedding. It is already "the second dance," eleven-thirty at night. Everybody wants to go home. The parents want to go home, the in-laws want to go home, and the *Chosson* and *Kallah* certainly want to go home. The band is all played out, but the young yeshiva students still want to dance more. Why? They claim they want to be *mesameach Chosson v'Kallah* [bring joy to the groom and the bride]. However, they are doing this "*mitzvah*" at someone else's expense, not to mention the overtime fees the band will need to be paid. Put simply, let people go home already. It is late! You want to dance, ostensibly to have the *mitzvah* of gladdening the *Chosson* and *Kallah* (granting you the benefit of the doubt) -- in the meantime, you are harming people. Your "*mitzvah*" does not survive the test of "*mishkal haChassidus*" (considerations of proper piety), and possibly not even the test of good judgement.

Finally, I remember an event commemorating the 100th Yahrtzeit of Rav Yisrael Salanter. Rav Ruderman ([1900-1987] Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel Yeshiva in Baltimore, MD) was still alive. Rav Ruderman learned in Slabodka (a *mussar* Yeshiva) and named Ner **Yisrael** after Rav **Yisrael** Salanter. The Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Yisrael wanted to impress his students with the personality of Rav Yisrael Salanter on the latter's 100th Yahrtzeit so he told the following story.

He said he remembered as a little child in Daŭhinava, Russia (now in Belarus), the village where he was born, a certain *Hoshanna Rabbah*. By *Mussaf* on *Hoshanna Rabbah*, the *Chazan* traditionally wears a *kittel* (as is worn on Yom Kippur). Lo and behold, there was no *kittel* in the shul. Someone went over to the *Gabbai* [sexton] and let him have it. "How could you be so negligent? Today is *Hoshanna Rabbah*. It is a day of judgement. Our fates are being sealed!" He gave him the whole business, with shouting, yelling, and abusive humiliation. The red-faced *Gabbai* ran home to get the *kittel*.

The Rosh Yeshiva paused to ponder. "One can *daven mussaf* without a *kittel*. What is better? What does the *Ribono shel Olam* want? Does He prefer we should daven with a *kittel* at the expense of humiliating someone or dealing respectfully with a person even if we have to *daven* without a *kittel*?"

This is the "*mishkal haChassidus*". A person always needs to judge what he is doing. What does the *Ribono shel Olam* want? What brings Him greater pleasure? What is a bigger *Kiddush HaShem*? A person must always carefully weigh whether now is the proper time and place to be pious, at the expense perhaps of someone else.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Bamidbar is provided below:

- 013 Yerushalayim in Halacha
- 058 Going Up To Yerushalayim for Yom Tov: Does it Apply Today?
- 101 Teaching Torah to Women
- 147 Sefiras HaOmer, Shavuos & the International Dateline
- 194 Can One Charge for Teaching Torah?
- 240 An Early Start for Shavuos?
- 284 Birchas HaTorah
- 330 Sefer Rus and Its Halachic Implications

- 374 Bathing On Shabbos and Yom Tov
- 418 Shavuos Issues--Late Maariv--Learning All Night
- 462 May A Child Carry A Sefer On Shabbos
- 506 Shavuos: Two Days, She'cheyanu & Other Issues
- 550 Opening Cans on Shabbos & Yom Tov
- 594 Omer Davar B'Sheim Omro - Giving Proper Credit
- 638 Eruv and the Big City
- 682 Carrying on Yom Tov
- 726 Returning Pidyon Haben Money
- 770 Let Them Eat Cheesecake
- 814 Oy, The Eruv is Down, Now What?
- 858 Ms. Cohen for A Pidyon Habein?
- 902 Dancing on Yom Tov
- 946 The Beautiful Poem of Akdomus
- 989 The Mitzva of Talmud Torah - How Much - How Little?
- 1033 Conning Someone Out of A Mitzva
- 1077 Can A Father Give Son His Position (Rabbi/Chazan) While Still Alive?
- 1120 The Zohar vs Talmud Bavli: Whom Do We Pasken Like?
- 1162 Yahrtzeit/Yizkor Candles on Yom Tov – Is There A Problem?
- 1206 What Bracha on Cheesecake? Is It BH or BSD? And other Shavuos Issues
- 1250 Erev Shavuos on Shabbos
- 1294 When Should Women Light Candles for Shavuos?

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