

# PIRKEI AVOS



## ETHICS *of the* FATHERS

CHAPTER 1

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THE RABBIS' MORAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL  
*and* PHILOSOPHICAL INSTRUCTION  
*for* HUMAN PERFECTION

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*Rabbi Israel Chait*

A STUDENT'S TRANSCRIPTIONS *of the* 1980'S LECTURES

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YESHIVA B'NEI TORAH

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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	5
1:1 THE MESORAH .....	9
1:2 ON WHAT THE WORLD STANDS .....	32
1:3 REWARD .....	48
1:4 TRANSITIONING TO A TORAH LIFE.....	65
1:5 OWNERSHIP, STATUS AND INSTINCTS .....	68
1:6 PRESUMPTUOUSNESS AND THOUGHT .....	87
1:7 SOCIAL INFLUENCE.....	104
1:8 JUDGES, TRUTH AND COURTS .....	113
1:9 INADEQUACIES.....	117
1:10 INFANTILE REGRESSION .....	118
1:11 EDUCATORS' PITFALLS .....	135
1:12 AHARON'S PERFECTIONS.....	139
1:13 FAME, KNOWLEDGE, AND HONOR.....	145
1:14 INSTINCTS, KNOWLEDGE, SELF-IMAGE, REPENTANCE, AND PERFECTION.....	162
1:15 KNOWLEDGE, THE GOOD, AND CONFORMITY .....	183
1:16 HALACHA AND RULINGS.....	193
1:17 SPEECH AND PERFECTION .....	232
1:18 ON WHAT THE WORLD STANDS .....	289



## INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Israel Chait lectured extensively on Ethics of the Fathers—*Pirkei Avos*—throughout the 1980s. Each Sunday morning at Yeshiva B'nei Torah in Far Rockaway, N.Y., Rabbi Chait shared brilliant psychological and philosophical insights into the rabbis' writings. He paused during one lecture and expressed this sentiment:

*One must have a tremendous appreciation for the rabbis for the great kindness they showed us in explaining Avos and what "perfection" is on an in-depth level, on every point. Avos is an unbelievable tractate.*

We in turn express our gratitude to Rabbi Chait as he explained the Rishonim to us during those many years. Rabbi Chait enlightened us with endless Torah marvels, posing questions on Maimonides, Rabbeinu Yona and Rashi, and with his answers, he unveiled the depth of these rabbis' commentaries. Rabbi Chait's explanations struck his students with a deepened reverence for Torah. He patiently entertained our many questions.

In these lectures, the reader will find great appreciation for the Torah's depth and design, and wisdom of psychology, philosophy, morality, human character and human

perfection, thereby growing in his and her love for the Creator. The reader will admire the rabbis' ability to write concisely, yet encapsulate voluminous concepts and ideals.

Rabbi Chait gave 130 lectures: each one was 1.5 hours. The lectures were recently transcribed verbatim from the original audio and edited. Thus, the style of this book is a record of live classes. If certain topics were reintroduced or elaborated in later lectures, liberty has been taken to join those ideas with their original mention. As live lectures address students' questions and digress to various topics, themes within one lecture switch accordingly. Additionally, Rabbi Chait's treatment of a single mishnah spanned many weeks. Therefore, at times, new topics appear to be introduced midstream, when in fact, the new topic might indicate a week's gap in that lecture when a new perspective was introduced. Regardless, each lecture and mishna has been recorded comprehensively. Each section and paragraph imparts coherent and novel ideas and should be studied independent of succeeding sections, or related, when warranted.

The sources which Rabbi Chait cited were researched and added in-line, and not as footnotes. For some sources, the full text has been included when deemed appropriate, although that text was not cited fully in the actual lectures.

Each lecture contains numerous vital lessons. To absorb those many concepts, a patient read and review are highly recommended.

Rabbi Chait's lectures on Pirkei Avos are a must read for any person seeking to lead a perfected Torah life.



## 1:1 THE MESORAH

MOSHE RECEIVED THE TORAH FROM SINAI AND TRANSMITTED IT TO JOSHUA, AND JOSHUA TO THE ELDERS, AND THE ELDERS TO THE PROPHETS, AND THE PROPHETS TRANSMITTED IT TO THE MEN OF THE GREAT ASSEMBLY. THEY SAID THREE THINGS: BE DELIBERATE IN JUDGMENT, ESTABLISH MANY DISCIPLES, AND MAKE A FENCE AROUND THE TORAH.

Rashi comments:

*Moshe received the Torah from Sinai: And he taught it to all of Israel as it is stated, "And Moshe wrote this song [the Torah] on that day and he taught it to the children of Israel." And why is it stated that he [Moshe] transmitted it to Joshua and not to Elazar and Phineas, and not to the seventy elders who prophesied in the camp? For he did not desire to transmit the Torah except to one who killed himself from his youth in the tents of wisdom and acquired a good name for himself in the world, and this was Joshua, as it is stated, "Joshua the son of Nun, the lad, did not leave from the midst of the tent" [and even though it is written regarding Phineas, "the Torah of the truth was in his mouth."]*

The Mishna states that Moshe transmitted the Torah to Joshua alone. However, Rashi implies that Moshe did

in fact transmit the Torah to Elazar and Phineas, and to the seventy elders. This is deduced from Rashi's words: "And why was it stated that Moshe transmitted the Torah to Joshua but not to Elazar and Pinchas, and not to the seventy elders who prophesied in the camp?" Rashi should have said, "And why did Moshe transmit it to Joshua ...?" omitting the word "stated." Meaning, it was "stated" that Moshe transmitted the Torah to Joshua alone, but in fact, Moshe also transmitted the Torah to Elazar and Pinchas, and the seventy elders. However, the Mishna implies that only Joshua received the transmission. This implication in Rashi appears to contradict the Mishna which states that Joshua alone received the transmission.

In the beginning of the introduction to his Mishna Torah (Yad Hachazaka) Maimonides teaches there is more to this matter:

*Even though the Oral Law was not written, Moshe taught it all in his court to the seventy elders. And Elazar, Pinchas, and Joshua—all three—received it from Moshe.*

What about the seventy elders; why are they excluded from those who "received" the Torah? Here we see a difference between Maimonides and Rashi. Rashi indicates

Moshe “transmitted” the Torah to the seventy elders. Maimonides states Moshe “taught” it (melamed) to the seventy elders.

Maimonides continues:

*And to Joshua, who was the student of Moshe Rabbeinu, Moshe transmitted the Oral Law and commanded him on it.*

“Commanded” refers to an appointment:

*So Moshe commanded on them to Elazar the priest, and to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the heads of the fathers' houses of the tribes of the children of Israel. (Numbers 32:28)*

Joshua was commanded on the Oral Law. But nonetheless, all three—Elazar, Pinchas, and Joshua—received the transmission. Thus, there is a difference between “receiving” the Oral law, and being “appointed” on it.

The Rav (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik) taught that Achiya Hashiloni received the Torah from King David. But as he already heard it from Moshe, why did he have to relearn it again from King David? Why could he not simply be appointed by King David? This was because when he was young, he was not yet fit to be appointed on it as a ba'al hamesorah, a Torah authority. The mesorah—the transmis-

sion—has a precise process. One must receive his learning from an appointed transmitter, a mikabel. Thus, the Torah Achiya learned from Moshe was not fit for him to transmit as a ba'al hamesorah, for he did not receive it in that capacity. It was then necessary that he learn all his Torah again in the capacity of an appointee. That which Achiya relearned from King David was now endowed with the quality of mesorah, transmission.

Elazar, Pinchas, and Joshua all possessed Torah that was endowed in this manner. In turn, they too could endow others with that quality of transmission. But Joshua differed; he was “appointed” over the Oral Law. This means he alone had the final word over the content of the Oral Law.

Rabbeinu Yona clarifies two elements of the mesorah. One is that after the conclusion of the Gemara, no new laws could be added or subtracted. Thus, when the Gemara was passed on to the gaonim, although the content was closed from any changes, “interpretation” was open to successors in the chain of transmission.

Maimonides lists the forty generations of the transmission. He then says as follows:

*Moshe Rabbeinu received the Torah from God's mouth. We find that all (forty generations) received the Torah from Hashem, God of Israel.*

By stressing that they all received the Torah from God, Maimonides teaches us who the transmitter really is. Who appointed Rava the last of the transmitters from the Gemara, as a ba'al hamesorah? It was God. When God gave Moshe the Torah, He gave him Torah content, plus the system of transmission. Each ba'al hamesorah received authorization over the Torah, plus the authorization to appoint succeeding ba'alei hamesorah. Thus, each ba'al hamesorah has the quality of being appointed by God. Therefore, Maimonides too has this appointment.

Returning to the original point, Moshe wanted to appoint Joshua alone as the one in charge of the mesorah.

*There are three types of Torah deniers:*  
*1. One who says the Torah is not from God, denying even one verse or one letter makes him a denier. 2. One who says the Torah came from Moshe's own thoughts is a Torah denier. This also applies to Torah explanation, that is the Oral Law. 3. One who contradicts Torah teachers, like Tzadok and Baysos (Maimonides, Hilchos Teshuva 3:8).*

Concerning heretics (kofer b'Torah), the Rav questioned the difference between one who rejects the explanations and one who rejects the teachers. One who denies the explanations, denies the actual Oral Law. But one who rejects

the Torah's teachers may accept the Oral Law. However, why is one who rejects a teacher considered a denier of Torah? This reflects on the point that all teachers are considered as appointed by God. Since each teacher possesses a status as a "Torah appointee of God," rejecting him renders one a Torah denier. For example, if one suggests Shammai ruled a certain way because he was generally more strict, and Hillel ruled leniently because he was more relaxed, this is a case of rejecting a Torah teacher. For in explaining Hillel or Shammai's rulings as based on anything other than intellect, one mars these sages.

What was the reason for Moshe's preference to transmit the Torah only to Joshua bin Nun? Rashi explains that Joshua "killed himself from his youth in the tents of wisdom, and acquired a good name in the world."

What is "killing" one's self? Death means removing one's self from physical desires. True Torah study and teaching requires this. It is insufficient that one's involvement in Torah be the same as his involvement in any other subject. That is not the mitzvah of Talmud Torah. The depth and precision of Torah requires full devotion to unlock its brilliance. Otherwise one does not penetrate its core. The removal from one's desires is vital to such devotion and is termed "death."

In his introduction to his commentary on the Mishna,

Maimonides says “Moshe Rabbeinu did not die.” When an ordinary man dies, part of his energies attached to other areas cease. All that remains is one’s wisdom. But this did not occur to Moshe; all his energies were directed toward Torah. He suffered no change upon his death. This can be termed as “Moshe not dying.”

*Joshua killed himself from his youth in the tents of wisdom, and acquired a good name in the world.*

Are these two separate matters, or are they somehow related? Rashi says the stress is on the word “youth”—others may have been attached to learning Torah too, but Joshua was so from an early age. The Torah also mentions that Joshua ministered before Moshe from an early age (Num. 11:28).

King Solomon writes:

*Rejoice young man, in your youth; and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth, and walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment (Kobeles 11:9).*

One understanding is that this is a sarcastic message, as if to say, “Go ahead, do what you want, but God will even-

tually judge you for all your wrongdoings.” But two verses later King Solomon writes:

*Remember then your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no pleasure in them” (ibid 12:1).*

People think of youth as a time when man is full of vigor, the optimum time to engage the physical. And when strength wanes in older age, one can get involved in learning. But King Solomon says otherwise. Anything one wishes to perfect must commence in youth when one expresses his main thrust in life. In proportion to one’s perfection in youth, will be his perfection in later years. Talmud Kid-dushin echoes this point: “I got married at sixteen, but had I married at fourteen I would have spit in the Satan’s face [I would have conquered my drives].” If man does not perfect himself in his youth, he will have suffered permanent damage. Man’s energies attach themselves at youth, and no matter how hard he corrects himself later, these routes of energies remain. There is a permanent taint. The Gemara also says:

*Whomever does not wed by age twenty, all his days are lived in sin. In sin? No, but in the thought of sin.*

Since his mind has been shaped in a certain way, he will always suffer for not having perfected himself earlier.

On Hillel's statement "Don't trust in yourself until the day of death," (Avos 2:5) Talmud Berachos 29a comments, according to one view, that if one was a righteous person all his life, he need not worry about this advice. He can in fact trust that he will never sin. Per the taint of imperfection remaining all of one's life, how do we understand this following statement: "Where a person who repents stands, even totally righteous men cannot stand?" This would imply that despite a sinful youth, one can make amends.

In terms of distancing one's self from sin, the man who repents is further away. For he had tasted sin and removed himself from it. But in terms of the psyche's makeup, this person retains an energy flow toward his youthful attachments. The taint remains. But one who perfected himself from youth is on a higher level. Therefore, a person who was a tzaddik (righteous person) all his days, need not worry. He can trust in himself, per one view.

From his youth, Joshua possessed the quality of perfection and the quality of acquiring a good name in the world. But of what consequence is a good name? People speak lashon hara against gedolim (great rabbis) and ruin their names. Does this mean the gedolim are bad people? If so, we might say Maimonides was not a good person since

people maligned him.

At the end of his Guide (Moreh Hanevuchim) Maimonides says the highest level man attains is where he relates to others based solely on his love of God. He does not act based on emotions or personal involvement. He does not engage in petty emotions as others do. When man acts based on emotions he is constantly embroiled in conflict. He loses his good name. But one who relates to others based on an objective plane never suffers criticism. People sense such a person is operating on a high level, so he maintains a good name. Of course, if a person is maligned because he lives properly, and the jealousy from others evokes their ridicule, there is nothing such a person can do about that. We are discussing not that case, but the name one earns based on his actions toward others..

Acquiring a good name in the world shows two things: It reflects that the person is operating on the highest level, and it shows the extent of his conduct. Since he is on a high level, he is interested in helping others. At the end of His Guide, Maimonides says that he performs loving kindness.

Now, to be worthy of being a ba'al hamesorah, there are two requirements. Being entrusted with the Oral Law one is under serious pressure at various times. He must make important decisions. He cannot be subject to any weakness. And weakness is expressed in two ways. First is in

the underlying channels his energies take. If other emotions are involved, there is a danger that under pressure he will decide a matter not based on objective truth, but on his emotions. He will err. Therefore he must perfect himself from youth. This type of person has channeled all his energies toward Torah. There are no inroads to urges. His decisions will be perfect. Second, his energies are being deposited in the reservoir of ahavas Hashem (love of God). His acquisition of a good name reveals that he engages in loving kindness.

Talmud Berachos 29a says that Shmuel Hakaton skipped the V'Lamalshinim prayer (the prayer that seeks the end to all sinners) in Shmoneh Esray. If one errs in this prayer, or skips it, we suspect he is a sinner. His error or omission is interpreted as an expressed wish not to curse himself. Therefore, the rabbis sought to remove Shmuel, suspecting he was a heretic. But they found grounds to defend him as he was the author of that prayer. The Gemara then asks, "Perhaps he reverted to a bad life?" They answered that he was a tzaddik all his days, and there was no fear he would sin.

Rashi says as follows: "Joshua was a lad, and did not leave the tent [of wisdom]." This tells us the nature of his perfection. And although regarding Pinchas we read, "Torah's truth was in his mouth," this means he was a recipient

of Torah. But he was not like Joshua who “killed himself from youth” and “never left the tent.” They were two distinct men. Appointment over the Oral Law is based on the perfection of the man, not the Torah he possessed. Joshua surpassed Pinchas in this respect.

Rashi continues that Moshe did not desire to transmit the mesorah to the seventy elders in his days, but to the elders that rebuked and judged the Jews after Joshua. Why did Moshe reject the seventy elders? Rashi is bothered over this rejection, since the elders were recipients of Moshe’s knowledge. But the answer is as we said, that perfected man seeks loving kindness, and the elders in Joshua’s days sought to correct the Jews’ behaviors. Therefore, Moshe desired them to be the ba’alei hamesorah, over others.

This brings us to another question. All the items in this first Mishna are the ideas of these individual sages, not mesorah issues. You would think that this introduction of Moshe transmitting to Joshua, and he to the elders, etc., should be the introduction to Talmud Berachos, which is the Oral Law. What is this transmission introduction doing here?

The most perfected individuals in each generation were the ba’alei hamesorah. So when we discuss perfection, which is the theme of Pirkei Avos, we read about the transmission. The sages cited in Pirkei Avos were geniuses in ethical perfection.

Rashi then describes the chain of the mesorah:

*These elders transmitted the Torah to the elders of each generation, like Asniel, and Asniel to Ebud and the other judges afterwards until we reached the prophecy of Eli the priest and Shmuel HaRamasi. The Prophets passed it to the Men of the Great Assembly, who in turn passed it to each other. And the Men of the Great Assembly were Zerubabel, Nechemia, Sharya, Raalya, Mordechai, and Bilshan, who were in the days of Ezra in the building of the second Temple. And why were they called the Men of the Great Assembly? As explained in Talmud Yuma chapter “Ba Lo” 23, they were a great and sanctified assembly who returned the crown to its origin [as in ancient days] as Moshe said, “The God, great, powerful, and awesome.” When Yirmyahu and Daniel came, they omitted “powerful and awesome.” But the Men of the Great Assembly returned these terms, for they said, “It is due to God’s great power, for without it how can one nation [Israel] survive among many nations?”*

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi asked, “Why is their name, ‘Men of the Great Assembly’”? It was not because there were many men, or men greater than the prophets. But because of something they did. Moshe said, “The God who is great,

powerful and awesome.” When Yirmiyahu came, he said that strangers are rejoicing in the Temple. Where is God’s awesomeness? Therefore, Yirmiyahu removed the term “awesome” from prayer. Daniel came, and gentiles were enslaving God’s children. “Where is God’s power?” Daniel asked. Daniel thereby omitted “powerful” from prayer. But the Men of the Great Assembly returned these terms, for they said, “It is due to God’s great power, for without it, how can one nation [Israel] survive among many nations?” So, they returned these terms to prayer.

But how did Yirmiyahu and Daniel remove words that Moshe established? Rebbe Eliezer said they knew God loves truth. It would be a lie to recite God’s traits of awesomeness and power, as they were not evident in those generations. What then was the Gemara’s initial thought (hava amina) in the question of how Yirmiyahu and Daniel could omit these terms? Did the Gemara suggest one can recite lies? That’s impossible.

“Great, powerful, and awesome” are adjectives in relation to God. These adjectives can be true, but need not be manifest all the time. Thus, there is no falsehood in reciting them, even when they are not manifest, since we are referring to God’s traits, not what is evident at this moment. Why then did Yirmiyahu and Daniel omit “powerful” and “awesome?” They did so because when a person prays and

recites terms about God, these terms must be characteristics he can see. If he cannot see them he doesn't state these terms sincerely, and this is a lie. And as God hates lies, these men removed these terms from prayer.

One cannot refer to God as powerful, as a "gibor." A gibor is one who causes another to surrender. But a cause of surrender applies only when there is some contest; a relationship of talents. Therefore, this term cannot be applied to God, since there is no contest between God and another being. The rabbis say God is "called" gibor, but not that He "is" a gibor. We only use this word as a metaphor, which in our terms reflects a certain perfection. Similarly, we "call" God merciful and gracious, but not in the same sense as we identify a person by these traits.

The Men of the Great Assembly disagreed with Daniel and Yirmiyahu and returned these terms to our prayer. They viewed "gibor" as referring to causing certain forces to surrender. Sometimes the enemy is external, and sometimes it is internal. The Gemara says that it's usually the internal enemy that is more significant. King Solomon taught, "Greater is one who conquers his desires, than one who conquers a city" (Proverbs 16:32). The Men of the Great Assembly said God conquered His drive to punish the Jews, and protected them even while they were among many other nations who could have harmed us. Thus, the

term gibor—powerful—was reinstated in prayer.

What about the term awesome? Awesomeness can be measured in terms of magnitude or its quality. An example of magnitude is the splitting of the Yam Suf. An example of quality would be if one causes a small light to glow, with no energy supply. Here, the magnitude is not so great, but it is nonetheless quite an awesome feat. The Men of the Great Assembly said this quality, too, was evident. And they were correct. But Daniel and Yirmiyahu did not accept this reasoning for maintaining “powerful” and “awesome” in prayer. They said that when man praises God in prayer, it must be because God makes Himself manifest through the traits one lauds. Praise must be about that which you experience. In those generations, man did not experience God’s power or awesomeness. The terms “great, powerful, and awesome” generate a relationship between the one praying and God. Moshe incorporated these terms into prayer, as they are necessary components of this relationship. When the Men of the Great Assembly returned these terms to prayer, they reinstated the relationship between the Jews and God, explaining why they were called “great” men.

*[The Men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, establish many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah.*

Rabbeinu Yona says “deliberate in judgment” refers to three matters: Morim hora’as (teaching rulings) is one who teaches abstract halachos, like hilchos Shabbos. Poskim hora’as means ruling on a shaila, a question. And poskin es hadin refers to settling a monetary dispute between two people. Rabbeinu Yona comments:

*Do not rely on your initial thoughts, but apply great patience, because the man who is quick to give a ruling is called a sinner, and even though he plans on telling the truth, this is not considered an accidental sin, but it’s close to an intentional sin. For he did not say in this heart, “Those who are hasty do not understand knowledge” because everyone makes mistakes [said as an excuse]. And this is what the rabbis of blessed memory said, “Be very careful in your learning, because an error in learning is considered an intentional sin.” And on this matter King Solomon said, peace be upon him, “I’ve seen the man who is wise in his own eyes; [but] a fool has more hope than him” (Proverbs 26:12). And like the rabbis said, “One who is arrogant of heart in giving a ruling is a fool—evil and arrogant.”*

Maimonides says this too: “One who is arrogant in giving a ruling is a fool because he is not living in reality; he is a rasha (evil person) because he knows he is not ready

to rule but doesn't care; and he is arrogant ... obviously."

Rabbeinu Yona continues:

*Therefore, the man who gives rulings should be deliberate in a matter and let his thoughts sour and take time to let the matter ferment, as it is stated, "Let the judgment sour," because through the fermenting process and the patience he will add more reason on top of his reasoning and add more argumentation on top of his argumentation until he judges a true judgment to its utmost truth, because the second thought that man arrives at, he will come to see matters that he did not see in his first thought and in this manner Asaf said, "When my heart sours, my counsel becomes sharper" (Psalms 73:21).*

Rabbeinu Yona is very harsh toward this person, and in the end, makes him out to be very arrogant.

One might wonder, what's the measure of time one must wait when deliberating a judgement?

The Torah commands man not to hide his eyes from saving the animal of his enemy. We understand that this targets man's conquest of his drives, for he is more reluctant to help his enemy than his friend. But why is this conquest expressed specifically in the vein of saving an enemy's animal?

This law is found in parshas Mishpatim. There are two elements in this parsha: sustaining society and personal perfection. This is why parshas Mishpatim follows the Asseres Hadibros, the Ten Commandments. Mishpatim focusses on perfection. This case concerns the animal of one's enemy, because in such a case, man must rise above his emotions and live objectively. This is true justice, and therefore, it is found in Mishpatim. Returning a lost object to your neighbor out of friendship is not acting out of justice. True justice is when you act not out of your emotions, but out of your love for justice. A case concerning one penny must be as important as a case concerning one million dollars. We also find that the rabbis would review their own emotions before they entered a case, to ensure they did not err.

Thus, the Mishna teaches us to be careful in judgement, for it is here that man expresses his highest perfection. Man must be on guard to prevent his emotions from entering his assessment. Perfection is thereby defined as one who thinks and acts with reason, unaffected by his feelings.

As stated, Mishpatim follows the Asseres Hadibros, wherein we learn the laws of the slave. This is a case where you have someone who is under your hand, whom you could oppress. Mishpatim also prohibits favoring the poor in judgement. There are many laws between man and his

fellow. But what is so vital about justice?

Man can follow the laws in a crooked manner, where he wishes God to see him following his Commandments and hopes God rewards him for this. However, everything this man is doing is for materialism. But where do you see a person's perfection? It is in monetary matters. And we see that the area where man deviates from honesty and virtue, too, is in monetary matters. This explains the verse, "And you should fear your Lord, I am God," in connection with these laws. One must act objectively, unaffected by personal gain.

The Gemara cites a case where a man was in the middle of his prayers, and therefore he couldn't respond to a customer. The customer did not know of this and assumed the silence was because he was holding out for a higher price. The customer kept raising his offer. Once the man finished his prayers, he told the customer he would accept the first offer, forgoing greater profit for himself. The man who prayed had already accepted in his heart that first offer. Although the customer did not know this, the man who was praying demonstrated true perfection. He could have requested the last, highest offer from the customer. But he did not. He followed truth: He accepted the first offer and did not succumb to desires for wealth.

But there's more to justice. Justice is between man and

his fellow. Now, there are two matters concerning justice. First of all, without justice, the world cannot exist. But secondly, justice encompasses more than sustaining the world. There is man's personal perfection. Most of man's emotions are wrapped up in his relationships with others. In Mishpatim 23:4, we read, "When you meet with the ox or donkey of your enemy wandering, certainly return it to him." Thus, justice addresses the perfection demonstrated in one who does not act based on feelings or pettiness, but on objective truths.

#### MAKE A FENCE AROUND THE TORAH

Rashi says God instructs man to "make a guard around My guard" in order and that you don't come to violate a Torah prohibition. But this makes matters worse, since the rabbis who create guards are forming new opportunities to violate the Torah. This is because when one violates the rabbis, he is transgressing the verse "...do not violate what they [the rabbis] tell you, right or left (Deut. 17:11)." The Rav taught that the chiyuv (obligation) to keep a mitzvah Dirabannan is equal to the chiyuv to keep a mitzvah Dio-raissa.

But there's a difference between the structure of the Dirabannans and the structure of the Dioraissas. Dioraissas are structured conceptually. For instance, one cannot cut vegetation on Shabbos. There's a specific conceptual definition of kotzair (cutting). Another example is the prohibition of cooking milk and meat together. According to Dioraissa, if one would cook them over a hot springs, he would not violate "cooking." The Torah defines cooking as including fire and hot springs are not considered fire. Again, if an animal dies and it had not been milked, you can take the milk out of the utter, make cheese with it, and cook that cheese with meat. Such milk does not have the Torah definition of "milk." However, since many people are not conceptual thinkers, and they do not distinguish between a hot spring and a fire regarding the definition of cooking, the rabbis formulated Dirabannan laws based on the frame of reference of the average person to prevent violations of Dioraissas. We see the frame of reference regarding Dirabannans is different than Dioraissas.

This concept is the mitzvah of creating fences around the Torah's laws. If one perceives that his generation isn't conceptual enough to observe the Torah properly, the rabbis must spell out the laws in their own terms. Otherwise they will violate the Dioraissa. But with the rabbis' elaborated terms, the people will fully understand what is pro-

hibited and will not violate the Dioraissa.

If one is not concerned about the Torah, then more laws developed by the rabbis create more opportunities to sin. But regarding such a Torah follower, Dirabannans prevent Torah (Dioraissa) violations.

But we asked above, “Won’t additional Dirabannan laws create new opportunities for people to sin?” Taryag (613) mitzvos is a system of perfection, and God worked out this system for man’s optimal perfection. Taryag offers man the perfect system. Violating a Dirabannan is not a light matter, but it’s not the same as violating a Dioraissa. Regarding the latter, perfection is compromised. In terms of the chiyuv, a Jew must observe both with equal obligation. But the perfection one achieves is not through Dirabannans, but the Dioraissa system. Thus, the rabbis created fences around Dioraissas, like prohibiting poultry cooked with milk. Although poultry is not meat, the rabbis saw in their generation that people did not distinguish poultry from meat. Allowing the continued permission to cook poultry and milk, one might then err and cook milk and meat. To prevent this, the rabbis prohibited cooking poultry and milk. This Dirabannan law safeguarded the Dioraissa of cooking milk and meat.

But does one not violate a Dioraissa when he violates a Dirabannan, as we said above? Deuteronomy 17:11 com-

mands man—by Dioraissa law—to follow the Dirabannans. Thus, violating a Dirabannan is in fact a violation of a Dioraissa.

It was explained that this law to follow the rabbis is reflexive. It is unlike all other taryag mitzvos. It is a command to follow all commands. Therefore, its violation (violating a Dirabannan) does not compromise the perfection attained by observing all the other 612 commandments.

## 1:2 ON WHAT THE WORLD STANDS

SHIMON THE RIGHTEOUS WAS FROM THE REMNANTS OF THE GREAT ASSEMBLY. HE WOULD SAY, “ON THREE THINGS THE WORLD STANDS: ON THE TORAH, ON THE SERVICE, AND ON ACTS OF LOVING-KINDNESS.”

What is the precise reason that the world stands on these three matters? And what is meant by “the world stands?” Why not make it four matters and include Shabbos? Or five matters and include bris milah. Or say, the world stands on one thing: mitzvos.

To clarify, “Torah” means Torah study and “service” refers to sacrifices; kindness is clear.

Maimonides uses peculiar phraseology here. He says Torah refers to chochma, wisdom. Then he jumps to kindness, which he says is “ma’alas hamiddos,” universally good character. Then he goes back to sacrifice, where he says, “it is the observance of the mitzvos: that is sacrifice.” How are mitzvos limited to sacrifice? Parenthetically, sacrifice exists today in the form of tefilah (prayer).

What more is needed once man possesses wisdom and has perfected his character ... what more does sacrifice accomplish?

Rashi understands kindness as one who lends money to a poor person. This surpasses tzedakah (charity). For the poor person is not embarrassed (as he would be regarding a free handout). Additionally, kindness applies to both the poor and the rich. For a rich man can have needs like anyone else, to which our response is equally “kindness.” A rich man may not have financial needs, but he may have emotional needs. Unlike tzedakah, kindness applies to the living as well as to the dead; it applies to one’s wealth and to his bodily actions. The rabbis teach similarly, “Greater is kindness than charity.”

But we question Rashi: Isn’t tzedakah a subcategory of kindness? Of course, the category (kindness) surpasses its

subcategory, it's more encompassing. What type of comparison is this?

Before explaining how these three elements sustain the world as a formula, we must understand the elements individually.

To understand the "world," we must understand man. For the world is nothing more than multiple people. And by understanding man's makeup, we can then understand why sustaining society requires these three elements.

The Mishna means that man would be destroyed were it not for these three elements. That is the meaning of "the world stands." In other words, without these elements, the world would fall apart. Man's inherent nature is destructive. Somehow these three elements restrain man's destructive forces.

What is Torah? It refers not simply to factual or practical knowledge. Rather, the actual pursuit of wisdom redirects man's psychological energies toward wisdom and away from his aggressive drives. Thereby, wisdom reduces destruction in the world.

Another aspect is that unlike physical objects, where one's acquisition depletes those of another, causing conflict, as there are limited entities, wisdom does not detract from others when it is shared. In fact, it engenders more insight, as one chocham (wise man) increases the knowl-

edge of another.

What about kindness? What is it? And what is the difference between kindness and charity? Maimonides discusses this at the end of his Guide (book III, chap. LIII):

*In our Commentary on the Sayings of the Fathers (chap. v. 7) we have explained the expression chessed as denoting an excess [in some moral quality]. It is especially used regarding extraordinary kindness. Loving-kindness is practiced in two ways: First, we show kindness to those who have no claim whatever upon us; second, we are kind to those to whom it is due in a greater measure than is due to them.*

What is Maimonides' theory of kindness, chessed? It is an "excess of a certain moral quality."

Maimonides then defines tzedakah, typically explained as charity:

*The term tzedakah is derived from tzedek, "righteousness." It denotes the act of giving every one his due, and of showing kindness to every being according to what it deserves. In Scripture, however, the expression tzedakah is not used in the first sense, and does not apply to the payment of what we owe to others. When we therefore give the hired laborer his wages, or pay a debt, we do not perform an act of tzedakah. But*

*we do perform an act of tzedakah when we fulfil those duties toward our fellow men, which our moral conscience imposes upon us, e.g., when we heal the wound of the sufferer.*

What is the difference between doing chessed to a friend and giving tzedakah to a poor person? Maimonides says that the excess of a moral quality is chessed. If I reciprocate a meal a friend gave me, and I overextend that reciprocation, that is chessed. Tzedakah is different. I have no relationship with that person. But I help him as I perceive his right to exist. His situation is not tolerable, therefore, I sustain him. Tzedakah is a response to what my moral conscience says I must do for another. But regarding chessed, I am not reciprocating my friend's meal due to my conscience. My relationship evokes a manner of the appropriate treatment of a friend. He is not in an intolerable state. He is my friend and I wish to do more for him.

Understanding this distinction, one might think tzedakah is a greater act than chessed. But Rashi states that it is greater to give a loan to a poor man—chessed—than to give him tzedakah. Why is the poor man embarrassed when he receives tzedakah, but not when he is given a loan? When one loans to another, it is due to their existing relationship. The recipient is flattered that the relationship is expressed in

this manner. But when a man becomes impoverished to an extent that demands a stranger give him tzedakah, the poor man is embarrassed, for he knows the other person cannot tolerate his impoverished state. That is embarrassing.

Man can express goodness toward others in two ways: tzedakah and chessed. Why does the world depend more on chessed than on tzedakah? One reason is that tzedakah is limited to money and poor people, while chessed is performed through money or one's action, and to both the rich and the poor. Chessed is more prevalent, making it more important. More people are affected. Secondly, there is a detraction in tzedakah: The poor man is embarrassed, which mitigates the possibility of a relationship between the one who gives and the one who receives. There is less social order when fewer relationships exist.

Why then do we learn that teshuvah, tefilah, and tzedakah (not chessed) avert our decree? This is actually not a contradiction. In terms of personal perfection, tzedakah expresses a person's objective relationship to justice. His emotions are not involved. Whereas, an act of chessed to a friend has emotional motivation. In terms of sustaining the world, chessed surpasses tzedakah. But in terms of personal perfection, tzedakah is a far greater demonstration of one's attachment to truth and the objective good.

What is service, sacrifice? Rashi explains service as the

work performed in the Temple. Maimonides says service is “observing mitzvos of the Torah, they are the sacrifices.” So, which is it? Is service the observance of mitzvos, or is service sacrifices? It is an odd formulation. Let’s hold this question, and examine sacrifice. Ramban discusses sacrifice in Leviticus 1:9.

*And Maimonides says in his Guide for the Perplexed (book 3, chapter 46), the reason for sacrifices is because the Egyptians and the Chaldeans, in whose lands the Jews had dwelled from times past, used to worship cattle and sheep. For the Egyptians worshiped the sheep, and the Chaldeans worshipped demons that appeared to them in the form of goats, and the people of India until today do not slaughter cattle. Because of this we are commanded to slaughter these three species to the honored God, to make known that the matter that is at the core of the sin, the very act that is considered by the heathen as the greatest crime, is the means of approaching God and obtaining His pardon for our sins. In this manner, evil principles, the diseases of the human soul, are cured by other principles, which are diametrically opposite. These are Maimonides’ words, and he spoke at length but they are empty. And there is a great question on degrading the table of God and making it repulsive by saying that sacrifice is only to remove incorrect ideas from the hearts of the wicked*

*people and fools of the world. Whereas the Torah says that sacrifices are a “pleasant aroma to God” [a positive, not merely a removal of a negative]. And according to the foolishness of the Egyptians, their sickness will not be healed through this practice, rather it will increase pain because the thought of these aforementioned evil people was to worship the constellation of the sheep and the constellation of the ox that in their thinking they believe to have power. And therefore they do not eat them as an honor of their power and their principles. But if one will sacrifice them to the honored God, this will honor these gods and raise them, and even they behave this way, as it stays in Leviticus 17:7 “you should no longer sacrifice your sacrifices to the goats...” And those who made the Golden Calf sacrificed to it. And Maimonides mentioned they sacrificed to the moon on all New Moons, and to the sun when it rose in the constellation, known to them in the books.*

*And this disease would be better healed by our eating them to satisfaction[?], which is prohibited to them and disgusting in their eyes and something they never did. Note, when Noah exited the ark with his three sons there were no Chaldeans in the world or Egyptians who sacrificed, and God said it was good in his eyes, and he said about this (Gen. 8:21) “and He smelled the sweet savor,” and because of that He said in His heart that He would*

*never again smite the land because of man. And Abel also brought the first flock from his sheep and from the fatty animals and God turned to it. But yet there was no element of idolatry in the world...*

*...And God forbid that there should be no benefit and desire in God, but merely the removal of idolatry from the knowledge of fools. And it is more fitting to listen to the reason that is stated regarding sacrifice. For on account that the actions of men are completed in his thought and his speech and his actions, God commanded that when man sins he should bring sacrifice and place hands on it corresponding to his actions, and confess with his lips corresponding to his speech, and burn with fire the innards and kidneys for they are the vessels of thought and desire; and the knees correspond to the hands and legs of man that do his work. And he should sprinkle the blood on the altar corresponding to his blood, and his soul in order that man should think when doing all this that he sinned to God with his body and soul, and he is fit to pour out his own blood and burn his own body were it not for the kindness of the Creator that accepts an exchange. And this sacrifice atones that its blood is in place of man's blood, its soul is in place of man's soul, its main limbs are in place of man's limbs...*

What is Ramban's definition of sacrifice? It is teshuvah (repentance): "Its blood instead of man's blood, its soul instead of man's soul..." Teshuvah is accomplished via an identification between man and the animal. When people go to a slaughterhouse they are very disturbed because they identify with the animal. The pity shown for the animal is because of human identification. Through sacrifice, man realizes his sin: the slaughter should be of himself. This brings about his repentance and atonement. Part of the process of teshuvah is the recognition of the severity of one's sin. If this recognition is lacking, teshuvah is incomplete.

We now understand why sacrifice is one of the 3 essential elements for sustaining the world. Sacrifice demonstrates man's capacity to repent. If individual man followed a path of destruction, society would be destroyed. For society is not a new phenomenon of a "herd mentality," where, as some wrongly think, a new behavior develops. But society is merely the plurality of the individual human condition. Individual man has destructive tendencies; society shares this in greater quantity. There is no new trait required to doom civilization—man's inherent design contains the faculty to destroy himself. Therefore, if man is in a situation where he abstains from teshuvah, others too will duplicate this identical human behavior until society self-destructs. Had it not been for man's ability to stop in his

tracks, repent, and cease from such behaviors, he would destroy himself and society.

Today, sacrifice is expressed through our prayers and the karbanos recited each morning. We learn that if, for example, a person's home caught fire on Shabbos, and he forgot himself and violated Shabbos to save his valuables, he should fast for forty days, (provided this was accidental, [shogaig] and not an intentional [mazid] violation). He should also give eighteen coins to tzedakah. This was the minimal amount required to buy an animal for a sacrifice. This represents bringing a karban chatas, a sin offering. He should also learn through the laws of sacrificing the chatas, rendering him as one who actually sacrificed. This is based on the verse, "and with our lips we pay for the sacrifice" (Hosea 14:3). Thus, we are not bereft of this sacrifice, despite the absence of the Temple. Although we do not have the benefit of the act of sacrifice, which would bring out the awareness to a greater degree, karbanos exist today. This is the understanding of avodah (sacrifice), according to Rashi and Ramban.

Can we answer Ramban's question on Maimonides? Again, Maimonides taught as follows:

*For the Egyptians worshiped the sheep, and the Chaldeans worshipped demons that appeared to them in the form of goats, and the people of India until today do not slaughter cattle. Because of this, we are commanded to slaughter these three species to the honored God, to make known that the matter that is at the core of the sin, the very act that is considered by the heathen as the greatest crime, is the means of approaching God, and obtaining His pardon for our sins. In this manner, evil principles, the diseases of the human soul, are cured by other principles, which are diametrically opposite (Guide, book III, chap. 46).*

Maimonides says that God employed sacrifice to eradicate idolatry. Since man could not suddenly abandon that to which he grew familiar while in Egypt (Guide, book III, chap. 32), namely animal worship, God employed sacrifice, but redirected it toward Himself. Ramban held that using animals in worship would in fact sustain the same views of the idolaters, defeating the purpose of eradicating idolatry.

However, Maimonides seems contradictory. He first says (III:32) that man cannot be weaned off animal service, and that's why God employed it. But then he says (III:46) that emotion must be broken.

Maimonides is saying the object of worship required

a change, from primitive idolatry to reality, which is the worship of God. But a drastic change would be impossible. The method to redirect man toward God was to develop a highly structured system of Temple worship guided by many laws that are rational, not emotional. And by restricting sacrifice to the kohanim, the priests alone, man again is safeguarded from uncontrolled religious expression, maintaining man on a path of intelligent worship and not primitive fantasy. There is a danger that man can project idolatrous emotions onto God just like he projected emotions onto idols. Maimonides states that Yirmiyahu criticized the Jews' sacrifices for not fulfilling their objective. It was for this reason that the Temple was destroyed. As the Jews became idolatrous, not properly sacrificing to God, the Temple became harmful.

We can now answer Ramban's question on Maimonides. Since Temple required tremendous knowledge of kadshim, sanctified items, there was no expression of human fantasy. It is only with unrestrained religious expression that Ramban would be correct. But Maimonides' view is that the highly structured system of Temple restrains all of man's primitive outlets. Under these laws, sacrifice inhibits idolatrous emotion. Had the Torah not included sheep in the Temple, that species would have retained its idolatrous nature. But once sheep were included in a rational system

of sacrifice, guided by many laws, there was no longer the ability to attach primitive emotion to it.

How do we understand Maimonides in III:32, where he says the Jews could not make a sudden break from animals? He does not mean the same emotions were carried to the Temple. Yes, the sacrificial “act” was retained, but now it was conformed to the logical system of the Temple, thereby breaking the emotional element.

What is Maimonides’ definition of avodah stated above, “observing Torah’s mitzvos, which are sacrifices?” Maimonides held that all mitzvos direct man to recognize God. However, karban is the most effective way to reach this goal. It is the most direct method to eradicate the belief in false gods.

The world cannot stand unless man sheds his primitive nature. All other mitzvos target this goal, but it is best achieved through karbanos, sacrifice.

How could Maimonides suggest that sacrifice targets the removal of the Egyptian and Chaldean idolatry, when during Abel’s and Noah’s lifetimes, these people had not yet come into existence?

One could differentiate between the Temple’s institution of sacrifice, and the individual sacrifices of Abel and Noah. Maimonides held the Temple as an institution targeting the abolishment of idolatry. The question of why individuals

sacrificed before the Temple is a different issue—their sacrifices pose no question to Maimonides' theory.

What then is Maimonides' formulation of Torah, sacrifice, and kindness? He holds that Torah is the purpose of the world, sacrifice represents mitzvos, which are a means to perfect the intellect, and kindness is societal harmony.

Now, when we say the world stands on these three things, this does not mean that the relationship is identical in all three cases. The world's existence depends on the three matters, but not precisely in the same way. For example, Torah is the world's purpose. Thus, if Torah is not pursued, the world's purpose ceases to exist. Sacrifice is different: It is not the world's purpose, but rather, a necessary means for man's perfection. Kindness too is not the purpose of the world: It is the perfection of society. Man lives individually, and in groups. Sacrifice perfects the individual, while kindness provides the vital harmonious backdrop for a functional society.

Ramban agrees with Torah's place in this set. But his view of sacrifice is that it is teshuvah, repentance. Repentance is man's ability to cease his destructive behavior, to reflect, and to repent. And he agrees with the role of kindness. (The fact that we answered Ramban's questions on Maimonides must not be construed as a rejection of Ramban. In fact, Ramban provides many proofs for his theory,

viz., blood in place of blood, soul in place of soul, etc.)

Curiously, Maimonides does not include teshuvah in his set like Ramban does. How might he explain this? (And, no, teshuvah would not be included under the second element “mitzvos.”) The vitality of these three matters refers to their predominant philosophic universals. Kindness, for example, is not simply counted here as a third “mitzvah.” But rather, as a third philosophic universal, explaining its essentiality for the world.

Maimonides can answer that within sacrifice, where man perfects himself and all his emotions, he accomplishes the same goal as teshuvah.

Why does Ramban single-out teshuvah? Teshuvah is defined as a person accepting his flaws; he must say “I have sinned.” This conflicts with his most powerful emotion, his ego. Therefore, Ramban maintains that without the breakdown of the ego, the world cannot exist. Ramban is more psychologically-focused: He requires the life of Torah, the breakdown of the ego, and societal structure. Maimonides holds a more philosophical approach: knowledge, practical application through the sublimation of the instincts, and societal structure.

## 1:3 REWARD

ANTIGONOS, MAN OF SOKHO, RECEIVED FROM SHIMON THE RIGHTEOUS. HE WOULD SAY, “DO NOT BE AS SERVANTS WHO ARE SERVING THE MASTER TO RECEIVE A REWARD, RATHER BE AS SERVANTS WHO ARE SERVING THE MASTER NOT TO RECEIVE A REWARD; AND MAY THE FEAR OF HEAVEN BE UPON YOU.”

Maimonides distinguishes reward (pras) from payment (schar). Reward is applicable to one who has no claim on you; regardless, you give them a gift, for example, you ask your child to do a favor, and in exchange, you will give him money. But a worker is owed payment by law. Why is Maimonides so intent on clarifying that this does not refer to reward?

In Shema Yisrael, we are told that following the Torah elongates life. The Torah also teaches that honoring parents elongates life. This suggests that one’s motivation should be for a reward, thereby contradicting this mishna. What difference is longevity from any other reward?

To clarify, “payment” is the lawful reciprocation by one who benefitted from another. As such, this relationship cannot exist regarding God, for man cannot benefit God. For example, it is inappropriate to claim a lawful payment from God for following His Torah. This is because God is

the Creator; He created man and can destroy man. Similarly, man can create a chair and destroy it. In terms of God's perfection—not justice—it would be imperfect of the Creator to make a being dependent on food, but not create that food. In contrast, regarding justice, God does not operate within the system of human morality, that He is obligated to work within our laws. Therefore, our mishna cannot discuss payment, schar. It discusses reward, pras.

Maimonides says: Do not serve God seeking a reward, and serve Him like a servant, serving Him from love. Thus, man can either act for a reward that is external to the action or out of “love” of the act, where the act itself is rewarding. An example of the latter is following a doctor's prescription to improve one's health. But Maimonides says to serve God with no expectation of any benefit, similar to this latter example of health. The servant should not seek any benefit whatsoever. Why then does the servant act? It is due to the love of the master.

Antigonos teaches that man should serve God with no expectations. However, man acts based on motivation. It is impossible for man to follow Antigonos' advice at the very outset. The lowest level [of motivation] is seeking an extraneous good from God. Next, is to act for the benefit derived from the act itself. And the highest level is to act with no desire for benefit, but purely for the act itself. However, no

one can start at this last level of ahavas Hashem, love of God. Einstein said, “Thought starts out as a means for an end. But the result is that it becomes an end in itself.” What Einstein means is that although one starts out with a need, and that’s why he started thinking, he eventually starts enjoying thought itself. But a person cannot start thinking for the sake of the enjoyment of thought, for he is not yet motivated to think.

The same applies here: One cannot start with perfection. This explains why Maimonides made two statements. First, we are warned not to serve God for a reward. That’s not even a starting point. Where then can we start? He says to start at the second level, where we act to benefit from that act, like happiness, and not for the sake of an external reward. But in that process, he forgets about himself. The activity enraptures him. This is what we mean by serving God out of love. The person enjoys the act with no thought of any other consideration, reward, or motivation. Love is where the self is unimportant. This explains why the Torah says Moshe was the humblest of men. As he reached the highest knowledge of God that is humanly possible, he was most enraptured with that enjoyment, and thereby, viewed himself as nothing. The greater the love of God, the less energy exists to flow toward the self. King Solomon expressed this: “... For I am sick with love” (Song of Songs

2:5). The king equated his love of God with a love affair, since all his energies were bound up in that love of God.

Antigonos felt that serving God for reward is a low, infantile state.

AND MAY THE FEAR OF HEAVEN BE UPON YOU.

Rashi says the fear of Heaven should be upon you “since there’s no reward for mitzvos in this world, as the Torah says, “that I command you today”—today to perform them, and not today to take reward. Antigonos was addressing a certain group of people who saw evil befalling them or other Torah followers. They lost their fear of Heaven, for they concluded that God is not concerned with man, and there is no reward for mitzvos. “Look what evil befalls righteous people,” they lamented. They eventually became kofrim (heretics). Thus, Rashi explains, to remedy this false opinion, man must maintain his fear of Heaven and not judge matters based on earthly disappointments.

Kiddushin 39b cites a case where a father asked his son to climb to the roof, shoo away the mother bird, and bring down the eggs. The Torah states that both mitzvos elongate life. Yet, the son fell and died as he was returning from

carrying out his father's request. Achare saw this and rejected the Torah. But he misunderstood what long life and length of days meant: They both refer to the next world. This story echoes Rashi's lesson: Reward for mitzvos is not in this world. One who is motivated to follow the Torah for an earthly reward has the wrong motivation and lives outside of reality. But the perfected man, whose motivation is his love of Torah study, is unaffected by events, for such events do not mitigate his joy of Torah study.

A question arises: Is not saying there is no reward for mitzvah akin to saying there is no Divine Providence, i.e., performing a mitzvah is outside the sphere of God's recognition?

There is no doubt that the Torah promises providence for following God. God provides for a person to have the best situation for fulfilling the Torah. Antigonus rejects a different matter: enjoyment in this world as reward for performing mitzvos. It is incorrect to question God upon seeing a righteous person who is poor. Poverty may not at all affect his adherence to God. A more defensible question concerns situations where calamities remove man from following the Torah. But poverty may be quite helpful to redirect a man to a good life, or remove another good person from becoming too enthralled with wealth, threatening to divert him from the Torah. Antigonus teaches us not to

evaluate one's situation as a reflection on his state of perfection. There is no physical enjoyment in this world that is a payment for a good deed.

Therefore, one must not perform a mitzvah with the expectation of reward or avoidance of harm. In other words, the true goodness that man earns in following God cannot be translated into earthly terms. True reward cannot take place in this world. This was the error of Iyov, who questioned God's justice when he lost his physical pleasures. He felt all his mitzvos should have shielded him from worldly harm.

Man is driven to Iyov's philosophy because the senses are very convincing. To resist overestimating the physical world as the best life, one must engage in wisdom and develop an appreciation for the theoretical world, the world of ideas.

Maimonides offers a different explanation:

*This means one must serve God from love. Nonetheless, one is not exempt from possessing fear of Heaven. And it states, if you worship God based on love, do not abandon [serving Him] from fear.*

Serving God from love means one is not concerned with the physical world. Serving God from fear means he must

be afraid. He must serve God from both attitudes. But this is a contradiction. How can one's service be based on both? Maimonides also states the following:

*A lover does not forget any matter he was commanded upon. And the one who is fearful will not violate a prohibition. For man's fear is a great part of the negative commands; certainly, laws that are statutes [chukim].*

How does fear—and not love—play a role in man's abstention from negative commands? Cannot man equally abstain based on his love for God? And the opposite is equally true: Cannot man's love for God cause him to abstain from violating prohibitions? What is Maimonides' point?

In his Mishnah Torah, Maimonides formulates the love and fear of God as one activity:

*And what is the path to the loving Him and fearing Him? (Yesodei Hatorah 2:2).*

A single path leads to both. Although man makes one performance, he fulfills loving and fearing God. This is due to two *mitzvot*, obligations, which differentiate a single act into two expressions: love and fear. But in Avos, love and fear of God appear as two discreet actions. How

do we resolve this contradiction?

We must note a distinction in Maimonides' treatment of love of God. In Hilchos Teshuvah 10:2, Maimonides describes one who serves God from love as a rare phenomenon, "and not every wise person will attain this." While in 10:5, he writes, "One who serves God to receive reward or avoid punishments is not lishma [for its own sake]." Later in 10:5 he prescribes the method of starting ignorant persons on the path to loving God with the initial motivation of fear and receiving reward, "until their knowledge increases and they attain greater wisdom, slowly revealing [to them] fundamentals, until they grasp God and serve Him from love." The problem is obvious. If "not every wise man will attain this," how can ignorant people attain love of God?

The difference is that 10:2 describes one whose personality has altered. His experience in uncovering the Torah's wonders has transformed his attitude, where all his energies drive him to seek greater wisdom, to know God. He is, as King Solomon describes, "sick with love." In 10:5, he describes a different person, one who has merely exchanged his motivation from fear to love. But after a session in Torah study, his energies return to the mundane; he is not "preoccupied" with wisdom.

The Torah alters the psychodynamics of the person described in 10:2 to one who cannot pull himself away from

the Torah. Maimonides describes him as follows:

*And what is the love that is fitting for one to love God? It is a great, excessive, powerful love to the point that his soul is tied to the love of God, and he finds himself preoccupied with it always as one who is love-sick, where his mind does not veer from his love for that woman and he thinks of her always, whether he sits or stands, or eats and drinks. More than this should be the love of God in the hearts of His lovers, preoccupied always, as we are commanded, “[love your God] with all your heart and with all your soul... (ibid 10:3).*

How is this level attained?

*It is a known matter that one does not bind the love of God in his heart until he is engaged in it regularly as is due, and he abandons all worldly matters except for God... (ibid 10:6).*

There are two very different matters: the ma’aseh (act) of loving God, and the state of loving God. All people can perform the act, which is law 10:5. But the state of being bound up in the love of God, “Not all wise men can attain it” (ibid 10:2). These two expressions are not merely quantitatively different, they are qualitatively disparate.

How does this apply to Maimonides’ words in Avos?

Most people do not alter their psyches to grow “sick with the love of God.” They are not obsessed always with loving God, but revert to other areas of life. Therefore, they must engage the fear of God, which is applicable when not intensely loving God. The state of fearing God refers to one who is in conflict: It is not his love of God that draws him to serve God, but the fear of engaging in other matters, matters he truly wishes he could engage. Therefore, man must perfect himself in two capacities: If he is still drawn to other matters as most people are, he must engage his fear of God to shield himself from partaking in poor behaviors. But the greater person, one completely bound up with God, does not serve God from fear, but from love. He is drawn solely to God’s wisdom and His commands.

Maimonides’ statement in the Guide fits well with this idea: The purpose of all commands, negative or positive, is to fear God. The commands train a person to abstain from engaging his emotions. Man’s natural flow of energy is directed away from knowing God through His Torah. The only case where the flow of energy is constant, with no conflict and only pleasure, is in the study of Torah and nature, based solely on one’s intellectual appreciation for these matters.

We previously asked: How does fear—and not love—play a role in man’s abstention from negative commands?

Cannot man equally abstain based on his love for God? And the opposite is equally true: Cannot man's fear for God cause him to fulfill positive commands? (Ramban has the same idea in parshas Yisro, Exod. 20:9, regarding the command "Remember the Sabbath day and make it holy." He states that love is greater than fear, as a positive command surpasses a negative command, the violation of which meets with more severe punishment, since the crime is greater and one reaches a lower level. Ramban uses this principle to explain why a positive command defers a negative command, and why violating a negative command is met with malkus—whipping—unlike a failure to fulfill a positive command, wherein one is not whipped. The latter is not as corrupt.)

Arriving at a positive result cannot be accomplished through a negative. For example, if one seeks to foster a positive relationship, the avoidance of harmful actions does not contribute to the relationship, for it does not act on the relationship. Rather, it is a restraint from engaging negative actions. During that restraint, nothing is posited regarding the relationship. A relationship is a positive thing, not the avoidance of something. If one wishes to relate to basketball, to play basketball, he cannot do so by abstention. The relationship to basketball requires a positive engagement. But does not ensuring the ball isn't lost neces-

sary for basketball? This is true, but such guarding of the ball is not inherently part of the relationship to the sport. It merely sets up a situation wherein basketball can take place. It is external to the positive activity of basketball.

Perfection—a relationship with God—is achieved only through positive actions, for it is a positive matter. Therefore, man restraining himself from harmful activities, following the negative commands, is not part of one's relationship with God. It is necessary, but avoidance—a negative—is unrelated to the positive relationship with God. In contrast, love of God is when one is involved with the activity itself. Therefore, when man is not involved in the positive activity of loving God through Torah and natural studies or performing positive commands, he must follow the negative commands that create the backdrop for his return to loving God. This explains why love is greater than fear: Fear is the state where man must avoid caving-in to his desires, but love of God is the actual relationship. Thus, no negative command partakes of human perfection, a positive matter.

Notwithstanding this idea, a positive command can also be preparatory, and not be the relationship of loving God. For example, wearing tefillin or tzitzis reminds us of God's kindness. But these positive commands do not conform to Maimonides' formulation of loving God—the relation-

ship—which is the engagement in study. However, if Torah was comprised solely of negative command, perfection would never be realized, for as perfection is a positive activity, the path to it must include positive commands. Unlike negative commands, which are passive, participation in positive activities contains the quality that can inspire another positive activity: perfection. Although a given positive command itself is not perfection, it channels man's energies in a positive flow toward perfection. However, negative commands do just the opposite: they restrain human expression, halting man's energy flow.

Ramban's ideas stated above are now more clear. Since a positive command is closer to and enables perfection, it defers a negative command. And one violating a negative command receives greater punishment than one abstaining from fulfilling a positive command. In the latter case, man's energies were suspended, not flowing toward any action. But when violating a negative command, man's energies attach themselves to what is evil. This greater corruption meets with greater Torah punishment.

Cannot man abstain based on his love for God, and can't his fear cause him to fulfill positive commands? The answer is that we are not assessing man's motivation, but the nature of each action. Fulfilling a negative command is passive; there is no flow of energy, no positive action, and

no increase in perfection.

Maimonides states: Negative commands pave the way toward fearing God. Man serves God in two ways. One is the preferred state of loving God. But, as he says, not all wise men are worthy. Thus, most people operate based on fear of God—self-control. Maimonides adds, “Negative commands pave the way toward fearing God, certainly regarding statutes, [chukim].” This is because unlike more comprehensible mitzvos like not stealing, a statute, like wearing tefillin, offers little meaning. Thereby, man is left without pleasing explanations to attract his obedience, and his emotions require even more coercion than comprehensible negative commands.

Avos d’Rav Nasan, Maimonides, and Rashi cite a case of two students, Tzadok and Baysos. This indicates the story is germane to understanding our mishna, for our rabbis don’t simply cite stories. Tzadok and Baysos misinterpreted our mishna (serve God not for reward) to mean there is no reward at all, i.e., follow the commands with no thought of personal benefit. This seems to be a worthy attitude, no different from one who follows God lishma, for its own sake. Why then were Tzadok and Baysos wrong? Furthermore, why does Maimonides say this view will cause discord? We also question why Tzadok and Baysos went one additional step and rejected the Torah.

Tzadok and Baysos made one error: They could not accept Torah and mitzvos lishma. They could not perceive any worth in following the Torah unless they received another good as payment. Shall a worker labor without pay? They could not accept the actual good of a Torah life as a non-physical reward.

Avos d’Rav Nasan states that Tzadok and Baysos steeped themselves in physical luxuries, proving that what they valued as true was the physical.

Why did Maimonides state that this incorrect philosophy disperses groups and certainly cannot group those dispersed? “There is honesty among thieves.” Bands of robbers stay together provided they follow a code that they don’t steal from each other. But once Tzadok and Baysos immersed themselves in seeking out physical pleasures, they would do so even from those who might join them. It is unattractive to join a group who will take what is yours to satisfy their lusts. This also disperses any group.

Now that Tzadok and Baysos saw that their philosophy was unappealing, and that the Torah was too widely accepted, they masqueraded their philosophy under the guise of Torah to attract others. They verbally supported the Written Torah, but denounced the Oral Law as it interfered with their hedonism. Accepting the Written law, they could reinterpret it to fit in with their lifestyle.

What motivated Tzadok and Baysos to elevate their personal desires into a system to attract others? It's possible they desired leadership, ego. Another possibility was fear: As they veered from accepted Jewish practice, they did not wish to live in hiding. This explains why Conservative Judaism exists. These Jews would be condemned for simply walking away from accepted Jewish values but then they would feel guilty. Creating a new "Judaism" provides violators with the illusion that they still are Jewish. It calms their fears and defends their position.

Maimonides mentions two reasons for Tzadok's and Baysos' deviations: "All this they did to exempt themselves from all the received obligations, decrees, and rulings." But Maimonides also says they had wished to start a movement. Which one was it?

It was both. But if this is so, it nonsensical to say a decisive factor is both A and B. The answer is that the intention was not clear to either one of them. Only when a person clearly knows his motives can we say he contradicts himself regarding which reason truly motivated him. Maimonides implies that Tzadok and Baysos were not thinkers. They did not clarify their motives. Most people operate this way; they may be motivated more by five poor reasons than by one good one. They are not thinkers and they become overwhelmed by the plurality of arguments.

They fool themselves into thinking that if many people say something or if there are many arguments in one direction, that determines a proper course. However, a thinker decides a course of action based on one good reason alone.

Maimonides also said that Tzadok and Baysos saw that they could not reject the Written Law, as it was widely accepted. But how do we know this since they never admitted this. What forced Maimonides to suggest their support of the Written Law was merely a charade?

Maimonides maintains that it is impossible to accept the Written Law without the Oral Law. (Owing to the Written Law's need for clarification on so many topics, one must admit that clarification was transmitted too in the form of the Oral Law.) Therefore, Tzadok and Baysos must have been lying about their acceptance of the Written Law; they did so for personal motives.

Why did Rashi and Maimonides cite this incident concerning Tzadok and Baysos? There are four possible relationships to Torah and mitzvos. We cited three: One seeks an external reward; one derives some benefit intrinsic in the mitzvah; one does so out of pure enjoyment of the act and for no other benefit. The fourth possibility is outright rejection of Torah and mitzvos. Tzadok and Baysos portrayed this last possibility. Three possibilities exist under a theistic lifestyle, and one possibility under an atheistic

lifestyle.

Regarding reward and punishment, there are also four possibilities: Hedonism is the value and no reward exists; hedonism is valued with the expectation of a greater materialistic reward; self-improvement is the value with no desire for compensation; the value is engaging the activity for its own sake.

## 1:4 TRANSITIONING TO A TORAH LIFE

YOSE BEN YOEZER, MAN OF TSREIDA, AND YOSE BEN YOCHANAN, MAN OF JERUSALEM, RECEIVED FROM THEM. YOSE BEN YOEZER MAN OF TSREIDA SAYS, “MAY YOUR HOUSE BE A MEETING HOUSE FOR SAGES, BECOME DIRTY IN THE DUST OF THEIR FEET, AND DRINK THEIR WORDS THIRSTILY.”

On the first item, “May your house be a meeting house for sages,” Rashi comments, “To learn there.” For what purpose should a house function in this manner? Let us define what a house is: It is the center of man’s entertain-

ment, the place of his leisure. Yose ben Yoezer teaches that one's leisure time should be spent observing how the sages partake in Torah study.

However, how does one attached to a materialistic life abandon that life and transform into the personality described above? To him, reality is the physical enjoyments, the material world. To the wise man, reality is the ideas behind the material world. Additionally, the mishna suggests that the person must have some recognition of true Torah values. Otherwise, he won't be able to heed this advice. But as he is not yet living this life, he has not yet acquired this recognition. We appreciate this person's difficulty in changing.

To change, he must first detach from all current pleasures, which are then replaced by the Torah. But as he is yet unaware of what the Torah is, only knowing that the sages represent it, he converts the center of his material existence into a place to engage the rabbis in their study.

**BECOME DIRTY IN THE DUST OF THEIR FEET.**

Man makes his home a gathering place for the sages, and they frequent his home, and he now becomes attached

to the person of these wise men. He soon recognizes their importance, which in turn depletes his self-worth, “sitting in the dust of their feet.” Rashi states that he ministers to them. The depletion of his ego embodies the highest attachment to another person.

How does he further advance to recognize ideas? People value wisdom and thought over all else, and once he is attached to the sages, he becomes attached to thought via their example. Rabbeinu Yona says this is the meaning of the last item, “drink their words thirstily.” He recognizes that every word the sages say possess infinite value. Rabbeinu Yona continues, “If a person is satisfied, even honey is distasteful. But to one who is hungry, even that which is bitter tastes sweet,” i.e., after one learns Torah based on a superego emotion, he is “satisfied,” for he operates from the mindset of learning to fulfill his obligation. Even if he now hears an enjoyable idea, it will be bitter to him, as his interest is not the pursuit of pleasurable thought, but unloading his burdensome obligation.

In contrast, once the person in our example attends to the learning of the sages in his home, “Even if he hears a thought that contains no apparent reasoning, it will be sweet in his mouth and he will be gladdened by it. For he knows it is truth, since his rabbi said it,” says Rabbeinu Yona. At this point, the person cannot differentiate be-

tween truth and falsehood. His recognition of the truth is via the person of the sage; he places infinite worth on his every word.

Ultimately, this person will perceive the Torah's wisdom, becoming attached to it based on his love of those ideas. He will no longer require the sages as a vehicle of attachment. The rabbis say, "[The verse] 'God you shall fear,'—this is to include wise men." Through the sages one becomes attached to God and Torah wisdom.

## 1:5 OWNERSHIP, STATUS AND INSTINCTS

YOSE BEN YOCHANAN, MAN OF JERUSALEM, SAYS, "MAY YOUR HOME BE OPEN WIDE, MAY THE POOR BE MEMBERS OF YOUR HOUSEHOLD, AND DO NOT INCREASE CONVERSATION WITH A WOMAN." THEY STATED [THIS IN CONNECTION] WITH HIS WIFE, ALL THE MORE SO WITH THE WIFE OF HIS FRIEND. FROM THIS, THE SAGES SAID, "ANY TIME THAT A MAN INCREASES CONVERSATION WITH A WOMAN, HE CAUSES EVIL TO HIMSELF AND NEGLECTS WORDS OF TORAH; AND, IN HIS END, HE INHERITS GEHENAM."

On the words “May your home be open wide,” Rashi comments, “Open on four sides to invite [to enter] travelers.” Rashi quotes the Gemara, “And he [Yoav] established his house in the desert.” But was he truly in the desert? (Yoav was King David’s captain; he was not poor that he should live this way.) The Gemara clarifies, “His house was ‘like’ a desert,” open on all four sides. Avraham too kept his tent open on all four sides.

True charity is where the owner or donor (ba'al) is removed; one gives without seeking the appreciation of the recipient. He forgoes that ego satisfaction, giving purely to address the poor man’s needs. A one-door home forces the poor man to confront the owner, whereby, the owner enjoys feelings of benevolence, and the poor man is humbled. In contrast, the owner properly forfeits ego satisfaction in a house opened in all four directions, also allowing the poor man to enter without confrontation, where he retains a higher level of dignity.

Typically, the wealthier one is, the more fences, walls, and guards he establishes. Judaism is just the opposite. Yoav was a captain in the Jewish army, yet he set up his home so that anyone could walk in freely without confrontation.

MAY THE POOR BE MEMBERS OF YOUR HOUSE-  
HOLD.

Rashi teaches as follows: “Do not increase servants and maidservants to serve you, but bring poor people in their place and you will receive reward through them.” The reward refers to fulfilling the mitzvah of tzedakah. Maimonides teaches similarly. Is the virtue here that you kill two birds with one stone: hiring workers and giving tzedakah in the process? Furthermore, if the poor person can perform equally as a servant, it would be evil not to hire him. We are referring to a situation where the poor man is not as adept as the servant. If so, what compels one to suffer through a poor man’s inadequate level of work?

In the case where the poor man’s level of work is on par with the servant, we should choose the poor man and forgo the sophistication of a professional butler or servant. Here, the rabbis identified a trait of sophistication. Man enjoys professional service, what we call “class.” The rabbis teach that man should not seek sophistication, but what is it?

A person has animalistic drives, and senses this. This is disturbing, so he develops sophistication, etiquette: how to hold a fork, how to arrange table settings. Eating utensils place a distance between man and his food. Sophistication is an attempt to deny his animalistic instincts. Instead of

grabbing his steak with his hands like an animal, he uses utensils. But one must not go to extremes and lack decency; *derech erez* is a proper tempering of the opposite raw animalistic extreme.

What did the rabbis recommend instead? Chessed, kindness. But replacing sophistication with kindness suggests the two have a relationship. What is the connection? The elite of society travel in luxurious cars, live in mansions, and socialize with a select few on par with their wealth. This is based on a false assessment of peoples' worth. Torah rejects all forms of fallacy. Hiring unsophisticated, poor people directly opposes this false value. It also directs one toward reality: helping the needy. Maimonides says the rabbis would have despised those who hired servants over poor people.

The first statement refers to possessions: one's home is a primary expression. An open home strips one of his sense of ownership. Shmitta, the Sabbatical year, during which one cannot express ownership over his fields, helps man realize that ownership is a fallacy. The second statement concerns how one feels about the self: ego. By hiring poor people instead of professional maids, one expresses identification between himself and that poor person. However, if one heeds the advice of only one of these statements, he retains a damaging sense of importance. One can open his

home but also hire servants, and one can hire the poor but not open his home. In either case, he retains a false sense of importance. Thus, one must follow both pieces of advice.

At the end of his Guide (book III, chap. LIV), Maimonides says man reaches his highest level when he performs loving-kindness. Man's identification with others generates this love. Once man conquers his ego and materialism, he would experience this tendency toward kindness due to this identification. Some claim Maimonides did not write this last portion of the Guide, which praises kindness over all else, since he always praises intellectual perfection as man's greatest perfection. But if we understand kindness as a natural result of intellectual perfection, there is no contradiction. Avraham is famous for his kindness to others. His intellectual perfection brought him to this expression toward others, and is perfectly in line with this point. And we see that due to his identification with others, he sought to teach others about God. Avraham too recognized wisdom as the greatest good.

Hate exists only because of ego. But if man conquers his ego, he will naturally be kind to others because he identifies with them.

DO NOT INCREASE CONVERSATION WITH A  
WOMAN.

This does not mean that one should not to talk to a woman. It refers to limiting a certain “type” of dialogue. Maimonides explains the advice for the two genders not to speak at length as such: “Do not engage [in] discussions about sexual or romantic matters.”

Unkelos comments on “and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7) by saying that man became a “speaking spirit.” Regarding instinctual expression, man differs from animal. Animals act out their instincts. Man expresses instincts primarily through speech and fantasy, a sublimated form. Watching a film or movie also allows man to engage his instincts. Thus, man engages his instincts to a far greater degree through speech than through action. Lashon hara—evil speech—is a sublimated form of murder: character assassination. And romantic discussion is a sublimation of sexual activity. Sexuality is a powerful drive, which explains why so many people discuss it and write about it; it permeates the media and is used in advertising.

Maimonides teaches that man should not engage in this sublimated form of sexuality. Man does so as he differs from animals. Animals engage the very instinct. But due to man’s complex nature, and his need for entertainment, he

sublimates his instinctual expression through speech and other modes.

However, man must satisfy his instincts, so wherein lies the harm? Speech is frustrating; the instinct is engaged, but not satisfied in full form, leaving man unfulfilled. The more man speaks, the closer he draws to the actual act. The advice above is not to completely remove one's self from this speech, but that overindulging is harmful. As man must satisfy his instincts, he must talk to a woman. But if he talks too much, he excites his instincts and will require greater satisfaction. This will lead man to overindulging in sexual activity, not the highest form of human life.

#### HE NEGLECTS WORDS OF TORAH.

Maimonides says that if one engages in futile speech, he will waste time that could have been used in Torah study. This is obvious. Rabbeinu Yona comments: "For Torah thoughts and its speech are not set in front of his eyes while his heart is turned toward a woman, for the heart cannot focus simultaneously on thoughts of sexuality and Torah." Rabbeinu Yona teaches that instinctual expression prevents intelligent thought. When one directs his energies

towards his instincts, there is no energy that can be directed toward wisdom, for both pursuits draw energy from the same source. And the opposite is also true: Engagement in wisdom drains energies from the instincts.

THEY STATED [THIS IN CONNECTION] WITH HIS  
WIFE; EVEN MORE SO WITH THE WIFE OF HIS  
FRIEND.

Maimonides wrote the following to his son, “Let temptation chase you, don’t chase temptation.” He meant that when the urge arouses naturally, cater to it as needed. But don’t excite it. The power of the instincts is far greater than we are aware, for it partakes of the unconscious.

In relation to one’s wife, who is permitted, one must guard oneself from instinctual discussion. For once instincts are aroused, there is more desire than can be satisfied by one’s wife alone. One point is that exciting the instincts—not merely responding to them naturally—drives the need further. A second point is how fantasy fuels the fire: When overindulging sexual conversation with a friend’s wife, one excites fantasy, since she is forbidden. This throws a person into fantasy, unlike when he talks with his wife. Fantasy is unlimited in nature, and therefore cannot be sat-

isfied. It propels a person to seek satisfaction in prohibited ways, and increases his energy flow toward instincts and away from Torah. Satisfaction knows no bounds and can ruin one's life.

People today are dissatisfied with their marriages because they expect marriage to satisfy all their sexual fantasies. But if one does not contain his drives, and excites them, marriage alone cannot offer satisfaction to the extent of human fantasy.

#### IN HIS END, HE INHERITS GEHENAM.

Until this point we've described philosophical imperfection. "Inheriting Gehenam" means the violator progresses to completely break the system, which is lawful (halachic) imperfection. Maimonides says such speech will lead to rebellion, warranting a punishment. Sexual satisfaction that commences with speech has no bounds.

This statement sounds a bit extreme. Do we not find those overstepping these bounds of speech, but not sinning? Thus, our mishna is not describing what occurs. It's discussing the instinct. If one does not heed Maimonides' advice to only "respond" to temptation as needed, but instead

excites his instincts, the desires will build and drive the need for greater satisfaction. Inheriting Gehenam means the instincts drive man so far that he will rebel against the Torah. Talmud Kiddushin 30b states:

*God says to the Jews, "I created the instincts [yetzer hara] and I created the Torah as a remedy. If you engage in Torah, you will not fall into [the yetzer hara's] hands," as it says, "If you do good, will you not be forgiven?" (Gen. 4:7) And if you don't engage in Torah you will be handed over to [the yetzer hara's] hands, as it says, "At the door sin waits" (ibid). The instincts always try to subjugate man, as it says, "To you the instincts cleave" (ibid). But if you desire, you can rule the instincts, as it says, "And you can rule over it" (ibid). The rabbis taught, "The yetzer hara is quite bad, for even its Creator called it evil, as it says, "For the inclination of man is evil from youth" (Gen. 8:21).*

*Rav Yitzchak said, "Man's instincts renew each day, as it says, 'It is only evil all day'" (Gen. 6:5). And Rav Shimon ben Levi said, "Man's instincts overpower him every day and seek his death, as it says, 'The wicked looks for the righteous and seeks his death' (Psalms 37:32). Were it not that God assisted man, he could not conquer his drives, as it says, 'God did not strengthen him into his hand'" (ibid 37:33).*

We recognize the yetzer hara's existence; the rabbis are not sharing an obvious truth. Their statements convey the power of the underlying psychological forces in our everyday lives, of which we are unaware. The rabbis possessed this knowledge long before the modern psychological revolution.

*It was learned in the house of Rav Yishmael, "My son, if you meet this despicable one [the yetzer hara], drag it to the house of study. If it is a stone, it will split apart; if steel, it will melt, as it says, 'Is not My word like as fire?' says the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces (Jer. 23:29)?" (Tal. Kiddushin 32a).*

Rav Yishmael says the only recommendation to fight the sexual drive is to engage man's higher element. As Rabeinu Yona taught, engaging sexual instincts and Torah study cannot coexist. When the urges are aroused, engaging in Torah study will drain one's energies. If one is always engaged in study, he will not be aroused. But man is not always engaged in Torah study, and in this case, this last statement recommends that one reengage in Torah study.

Two discoveries were recently made in two different fields, but they share a common denominator. One field is

psychology, the other is physics. In physics, a stone was thought to be a quiet, dormant entity. However, it was discovered that it contains immense energies. If one could release those energies, they would contain enough forces to raise the Earth several times its distance out of orbit. It is due to the equally powerful counter forces that those energies are not released.

Psychology discovered that a quiet person also contains tremendous forces. Here too, the counter forces keep the others energies restrained. Our rabbis derived these truths from the Torah.

The Gemara teaches, the greater the person, the greater is his yetzer hara. One reason is that the greatness of a person is due to the great energies he possesses, but directs them toward Torah. A second reason is that when one excels at wisdom, he leaves the mediocrity of most of society. Thereby, he loses the emotional shackles that restrain most others and has greater energies to propel him even higher in his Torah studies.

If a person directs his energies toward a sinful life, he can redirect them toward Torah and become a great Torah mind. When Rav Yochanan saw Reish Lakish leap across the Jordan River, he told him he should use that strength for Torah. Reish Lakish accepted the Torah, but then he could no longer leap across the Jordan. The implication is

that once he rechanneled his energies toward wisdom, he could no longer make use of them in the physical realm.

When we say the instincts renew each day, it means man can never make a permanent change to his instincts. Unless he is constantly channeling his energies to wisdom, they will assert themselves to gain satisfaction in the physical realm.

MAY YOUR HOME BE OPEN WIDE, MAY THE  
 POOR BE MEMBERS OF YOUR HOUSEHOLD AND  
 DO NOT INCREASE CONVERSATION WITH A  
 WOMAN.

Why are these three elements grouped together? It is because these are man's three instinctual expressions. Man is driven by ego satisfaction and lusts. Man must remove his yearning for ego satisfaction through his possessions by opening up his home, and through the self by hiring the poor instead of servants, and he must restrain his lusts by not overindulging sexual speech.

Rabbeinu Yona quotes King Solomon:

*And I found more bitter than death the  
 woman, whose heart is snares and nets,*

*and her hands as bands; whomever pleases  
God, shall escape from her; but the sinner  
shall be taken by her (Kobeles 7:26)*

Rabbeinu Yona teaches, “She is worse than death, for death removes man from this world, but the woman will destroy his soul for eternity. Man sees what his heart desires, but not his latter end.”

Man is attracted to the present to a far greater degree than he is to the future. Plato says that most people suffer from nearsightedness. They give greater reality to the here and now, even though the future is just as real. One jeopardizes his future based on the power of his immediate emotions. When the future arrives, one realizes it is not as anticipated—one who prefers sleep over work will end up hungry.

There are two ways man is trapped by his instincts. The first is typically, when a person is instinctually unsatisfied, he seeks gratification. Secondly, when man is not searching, but he is presented with circumstances or events, “whose hearts is snares and nets.” This is followed by “her hands are as bands.” Rabbeinu Yona says he is now jailed with no hope for release, meaning there are states of mind where one has no free will. The emotions can be that overpowering. “Whomever pleases God shall escape from her,

but the sinner shall be taken by her” means man must use all his energies to prevent his capture. But once caught, his choice is gone. He is trapped by the instincts.

A question is raised from Joseph. His master’s wife seduced him daily, and one day he was about to give in to his desire for her. Per Rabbeinu Yona quoting King Solomon, Joseph should have been trapped and he should have sinned. Why didn’t he? The rabbis say he saw the image of his father in his mind. This made it possible for him to exert his free will.

I digress for a moment to address perfection. We do not say if one’s neuroses cause him to study every encyclopedia, that this is preferred over a free-choice decision to learn. Similarly, if, while one was hospitalized for a year, and instead of playing on his baseball team became a scholar, such scholarship is not preferred over a free-choice decision. For if he was healed, he would start playing baseball again. Thus, neither person perfected their values, they simply switched activities due to circumstance. Judaism does not prefer one to be neurotic or hospitalized. Christianity differs, suggesting one pluck out his eye rather than use his eye to sin. Christianity’s philosophy is that the action is the evil and preventing the action is the good. Judaism says man must not change his body or his circumstance, but must engage knowledge and wisdom to

change his value system. Maimonides teaches that we cannot harm our bodies, for our complete health is required to fully serve God. Therefore, one cannot harm himself, as Christianity suggests—for example, locking one’s self in a box so he cannot sin—for this thwarts perfection or one’s value. Doing so does not change or perfect man. In support, a Nazirite who abstained from wine must bring a sin offering for afflicting himself. But if illness or other afflictions befall a person, and he uses them to perfect his values, this is a good thing and this is what is meant by accepting yesurin, afflictions. Joseph thought of his father when he was about to sin, making good use of his guilt.

The philosophers argued whether man’s instincts can completely overcome his mind. In other words, can a person with total knowledge succumb to his emotions? Aristotle maintained that even with knowledge, emotions can overpower man’s choices. But, at the moment of being overcome, man will justify his act and become ignorant of his previous knowledge.

Emotions can overpower one’s choices, but it is interesting that one cannot operate without the mind. Therefore, the emotions must block out the mind so that certain truths are not perceived at that moment. Emotions are more powerful than the mind, and they can cause man to lose knowledge. That is King Solomon’s lesson: “She binds his

hands” means that once drawn into the emotion, one can be the greatest chocham (wise man), but at that moment he is not the greatest chocham for he abandoned his intellect. The only defense is to engage his mind before the madness of those emotions traps him. Knowledge can prevent sin, but only in one who is totally perfected. How does this work?

When one seeks pleasure, he identifies that pleasure as a good value. Man cannot perform an act if he is convinced it is harmful. Therefore, man must justify his errors and sins as he transgresses. Now, is this justification part of the enjoyment of the sin? Meaning, must the enjoyment include a sense of “right” in order that man enjoys what he perceives as the “good?” Or, is justification merely to remove the conflict between his knowledge of the error and the desire to partake?

Man does not seek pleasure as an end; ultimately, he seeks happiness. He may err about what will provide that happiness, but man does not simply seek pleasure. Justification is not to simply remove conflict, but it provides man with the sense that he will be happy.

If one is perfected, his pleasures will be defined by his mind, so that his pleasures are rooted in reality and in accord with the Torah. For example, a drug addict is not perfected, as his emotions crave sensations over health. A per-

fectured person follows reality, which tells him not to take drugs for this reason. Therefore, a perfected person will never succumb to the appeal others have for drugs, since what appeals to him is only that which is in perfect alignment with reality. Perhaps this is Socrates' meaning that evil is performed by he who is ignorant.

This is Judaism's goal: Man is to attach his psychic energies to reality, valuing only that which is truly good and in line with God's will. This would cure Plato's nearsightedness, since intelligence decides what is good, not the present over the future.

Rashi discusses not talking too much with one's wife. He states if one had an argument with his friend, he must not share this with his wife, for she will then argue with the friend's wife, leading to greater strife. Rashi is on the same plane as Maimonides; he says most emotions are sublimated through speech. But unlike Maimonides, who discussed speech as sublimation of a desire, Rashi describes a different type of speech: self-justification. One might be tempted to share with his wife or his friend an argument he had with another, but the mishna warns man not to do so. The motivation to share this stems from the guilt he senses about his actions. He desires to assuage this guilt by hearing a supportive response from an "objective" observer. This unconditional support is one of the main functions of friend-

ship. But such conversations are harmful, for the man might be quite wrong, and gaining unconditional support from a friend or his wife will blind him from correcting himself. The rabbis chose the example of wife, since the marriage partner, over all other relationships, is to provide unconditional support. Eve regretted eating of the forbidden fruit. To assuage her guilt, she gave her husband some of that fruit.

In contrast to sinful speech, King Solomon says, “A worry in man’s heart [should be] spoken...” (Koheles 12:25). Since one is troubled, he should voice his concern to others, who have no emotional bias. Perhaps they can clarify the matter for the troubled individual and advise him accordingly. This is a constructive type of speech. But Eve was not seeking to correct a matter. She sought support for her sin.

As the instincts sublimate their expression through verbal activity, both sages teach that perfection is detected through speech. The perfected individual is on guard to curb such instinctual gratification. Rashi addresses the conscience (guilt/conscience) while Maimonides discusses lusts/id. Both parts of the psyche are addressed, as speech expresses both emotional faculties.

## 1:6 PRESUMPTUOUSNESS AND THOUGHT

JOSHUA BEN PERACHIAH AND NITAI OF ARBEL RECEIVED FROM THEM. JOSHUA BEN PERACHIAH SAID, “MAKE FOR YOURSELF A MENTOR, ACQUIRE FOR YOURSELF A FRIEND, AND JUDGE EVERY PERSON FAVORABLY.”

Regarding the advice “Make for yourself a mentor,” Rashi explains that one should learn facts, and not rely on reason, *svara*. However, this advice seems to conflict with the Talmudic statement, “Why do I need a verse [to support a view], reason dictates this to be true!” We rely on reason just as we rely on facts. In his letters, Maimonides says, “Only to a fool is fact more real than theory.” To a theoretician, a theory is more real than a fact. Of course, one must obtain all the facts before he can theorize.

The ancients erred by not sufficiently experimenting with their theories. By nature, man is presumptuous; he assumes the next step in each area will follow his theory. He might have a solid theory based on his facts, but then he suggests further theories without facts. Science has shown that every time man takes such shaky leaps, he has been wrong. Man is incapable of knowing the results, however reasonable he is.

The cause of this error is overconfidence. Once man has

become learned in each area, he feels sure of himself as a person. This is Rashi's lesson: Without facts, conjecture is worthless. Maimonides praised Aristotle as the most objective analyzer. But Maimonides critiqued Aristotle's theory of an eternal universe as conjecture.

Maimonides explains the statement "Make for yourself a mentor":

*Even if he is not fit to be your teacher, nonetheless, place him as your teacher, until you imagine he teaches you. And because of this you will succeed to learn wisdom. For man cannot learn independently, as well as learning from others. For learning alone is good, but by learning from others, he will succeed in greater measure.*

What psychological mechanism does Maimonides suggest here? Maimonides shared Rashi's observation: Man is presumptuous. Furthermore, he cannot critique his own theories. Therefore, the solution is to engage in a dialogue where he assigns his theory to someone else. Imagining the theory is that of one's learning partner, one can then objectively analyze the theory's value. Maimonides writes in his "Machala ha'Enushis" (Human Disease) that it is impossible for man to overcome his self-overestimation.

According to Maimonides, the stress is on "make" in

“Make for yourself a mentor.” That is, fabricate that person into your mentor, even though he is not your mentor. But do so to remove the subjectivism and overestimation of your own theories. Concerning your own theories, think, “How would I feel about this theory if it were my friend’s theory?” One can do so while alone, but in the company of another there is greater reality to attributing the theory to someone else.

ACQUIRE FOR YOURSELF A FRIEND.

Rashi comments: “Some say [friend refers to] books, and some say a literal friend, since two are better than one (Koheles 4:9). And it also says, ‘A sword against the diviners, that they be made fools of!’” (Jer. 50:36). The Gemara teaches that one who learns alone, even one who has a great mind, not only fails to arrive at truths, but says foolish things. What causes such errors?

What is the debate between books and a literal friend? If access to fresh ideas alone removes one from his own subjective thoughts, then books suffice to provide these additional opinions. But if the thinking process itself requires objectivity, then only a literal friend can provide

this. Books are insufficient.

We derive that no mind—however great—is protected from oversight. When one has a learning partner, the input of contrary views helps balance his ideas against contrasting views. One cannot attain much independently. A friend helps avoid oversights and improves the thought process. For this reason, King Solomon commenced *Koheles* referring to himself as King David’s son. He also named himself and his book “*Koheles*,” meaning a group. His intent was to convey to the reader that his ideas were not merely his own but that he benefitted from his father’s teachings, and he also engaged other minds as a sounding board to test the validity of his ideas. Thereby, King Solomon offers much value in *Koheles*.

Maimonides says the language of “acquire” a friend is significant. Rabbeinu Yona says if you can’t find a friend freely, “Spend money to acquire one and sell your possessions to find a good friend, or smooth-talk a person into being your friend, and tolerate him.” Both sages use the language of “acquire.” What is the purpose of this type of friendship, where you must pay someone to befriend you, and you must tolerate him if he embarrasses you? Rabbeinu Yona quotes Proverbs to support this idea: “One who forgoes sin finds love...” (Prov. 17:9).

As we will soon explain, this idea is vital, and is a lost

art. Because we live an emotional and not an analytical life, the idea to “acquire a friend” has escaped us. People inherently need to justify their lifestyle as proper. They befriend those whom they feel will show unconditional support. A most powerful need is one’s self-image, and this drives one to lie [about who he is and what he values]. Thus, both we and our friends bend reality to protect our self-image.

We notice that even among friends, there is an undercurrent of hostility. One friend will explain this by pointing out the other’s character flaw. People identify character defects in others to maintain a pristine self-image, feeling they are bereft of that defect. In this fabricated framework, one travels through life maintaining an untarnished self-image. However, an objective observer will not detect much difference between the accuser and the accused. Both have flaws, but the accuser feels the target of his aggression is somehow inferior to himself, thereby raising himself in this distortion. Part of the problem is that the accuser exaggerates the other person’s flaw and minimizes his own defects; he maximizes his own good acts and minimizes those of the other person. In this manner, most people live in their own bubble of “reality,” preserving a perfect self-image.

Pirkei Avos asks that we do not live such a shallow existence, where a person remains firm in his own emotional

framework, judging himself as right and all others who deviate as wrong. Man's likes and dislikes are based on his emotions, they are accidents of his circumstances and personality, just as another person's emotional framework is comprised of his circumstances and personality. There is no right or wrong. Thus, judging others for not matching one's own framework is not realistic. To exist in reality, man must follow more universal views. How so?

Maimonides teaches that one must recognize the other person's framework. Neither one person nor the other is more justified in his personal preferences. Maimonides states that when forging a friendship, one must not base it on his subjective values, but on a friend's values, for he too operates in this manner. But if both people insist on a relationship based on their own frameworks, the relationship will not sustain itself. Only when one party forgoes his own preferences, allowing the other to maintain his comfort zone, will a relationship endure. Thus, we are advised to use even money to sustain such a relationship if the other person expects gifts as signs of friendship.

Appreciating that psychological preferences are not man's essence helps us accept another person's framework. This understanding loosens our grip on favoring our own framework and accepting someone else's preferences.

Generally, friendships are forged based on nothing more

than shared likes and dislikes, a shared framework. That is a “natural” friendship, but not the friendship Maimonides depicts. Maimonides’ friendship is far deeper. For man’s essence is not within that framework, which is a mere accidental and psychological manifestation. The soul does not lay in this psychological portion of man. If you see the person’s essence—his soul—is good and beneficial to be-friending, then chase after such a person, accept his frame-work, and operate within his framework. The mitzvah of chessed—kindness—asks that we do the same, and cater to the person’s emotions. Thus, when giving tzedakah, one must not merely give money, but we must commiserate with the poor individual, within his or her framework. Additionally, if one sought a loan to buy a car, and you refused as you didn’t think that was the best use of the money, this violates a Torah prohibition. It is not our business to determine the correctness of another person’s needs, but only to respond to the obligation to make loans. We see again how the Torah asks us to cater to others within their own frameworks.

Maimonides teaches to never take revenge. For if one lives within the proper framework, he realizes nothing is worth retaliation. Material goods do not affect one’s perfection. If one was robbed, he must not view this as consequential to a Torah life. The perfected person values God’s

wisdom and Torah alone.

Joseph is a prime example. His brothers sold him to a caravan, where he was ultimately sold to Egypt. He suffered in prison for many years. When the brothers were reunited with Joseph years later, they feared Joseph would retaliate. The reason for their fear was rooted in the fabricated categories of “friends and enemies.” From youth, a person relies on parents and then upon others to provide for himself. In his mind, man forms categories of friends and enemies. As man values wealth and material goods, his category of “friends” includes those who help him to attain material goods. “Enemies” are those who deprive such material. However, this is not a perfected framework or value system.

Jacob taught Joseph the Torah he learned from Shem and Ever. This was metaphysical knowledge. Joseph excelled over his brothers in this knowledge and did not live with these categories of friends and enemies. Therefore, Joseph sought no retaliation, since “God considered it a good ... to sustain a large nation” (Gen. 50:20). God arranged Joseph’s sale to Egypt to provide for the Jews during the famine. Joseph lived based on a conviction that God manages all man’s affairs. His brothers’ harmful intent in selling Joseph was irrelevant. Joseph told the brothers they did in fact intend him harm, but that he does not operate in

that petty framework but in God's objective framework. In such a framework, the "me" is absent. Joseph appreciated God's plan and had no concern about himself. Joseph's perfection—what is each man's perfection—is the internal attachment to God's values. No one can affect your perfection but yourself. Such a person cares nothing for material gain, fame, or other pursuits, as they are all meaningless. Thus, retaliation is never warranted, since no one can affect one's perfection.

It would then seem that avoiding revenge is unattainable for most. How then can Torah—given to us all—mandate such an act? The reason is that although not on that level, through abstaining from revenge, society will at least recognize the perfected state.

Maimonides quotes Aristotle: "You are your own friend" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 9:4). Only a good man can have a friend. Why? Unless one recognizes his soul, obtains truths, and then follows those truths in action, his soul is disengaged. Any relationship he has cannot be an involvement of his true self. Thus, a wicked person seeks escape from his soul, leaving him incapable of enjoying someone else's true essence. But if one realizes his soul, and lives in accord with wisdom and seeks perfection, his relationships with others will be true relationships, and he will find true happiness. Real friendship is an extension

of one's appreciation for his own soul, and it is applied to others who share this perfected value. Man is naturally drawn to others who embody a perfected lifestyle. He appreciates them, as they reflect his own self-appreciation. King David eulogized Jonathan saying, "...more wondrous was your love for me than the love for women" (II Samuel 1:26). King David loved Jonathan, for he saw in Jonathan the same harmony and perfection that King David himself had.

Aristotle also writes, "There are three types of friends: One who seeks personal benefit [like business partnerships]; one who seeks pleasure [like a confidant or the typical female and male relationship]; and finally, friendship for a high purpose, such as two people who engage in intellectual study" (ibid 8:3.1). The first friendship type appears questionable; why is this considered a friendship? They befriend each other merely for monetary gain. This critique applies to the third type as well, regardless of the higher purpose they both seek. Maimonides adds to this third type: "Both seek that the good should be attained by both parties." While this is true, why does Maimonides limit this to the third type? The first type of friendship also shares this view. Why omit this sentiment from the first type?

Friendship is a certain mutuality between two individu-

als. One mutuality is the shared interest. But we can also classify friendship in terms of the partners, how much participation exists. On this second classification, like Aristotle, Maimonides teaches there are three levels. One dimension of life is man's external needs: a business relationship. This is the lowest level of friendship, as man's external needs are not part of "man." A second level, more closely-tied to man's nature, is an emotional relationship, like marriage. However, the essence of man is his soul, his perfection. Therefore, only in the pursuit of knowledge and perfection, when the soul is engaged, is man participating in the highest type of friendship. And when one values a friendship for the pursuit of perfection, the other considerations, like a lack of monetary gain or psychological enjoyment of personalities, will not affect that friendship.

To summarize, friendship can be produced through three mechanisms: utility (business relationship), pleasure (marriage), and perfection (like King David and Jonathan, who valued each other's perfection). The first two relationships are dependent. When one friend no longer provides utility or pleasure for the other, the relationship ceases to exist. However, a friendship based on the pursuit of truth will always endure, since virtues remain unchanged. What is good for man is an absolute truth. Therefore, one friend moving away does not reduce the friendship, since both

friends still appreciate the other's virtues.

Another point is the relationship framework. Insofar as man befriends another person for utility or pleasure, man's essence is not appreciated. The basis of the friendship in either case is for utility or pleasure; the person is merely a vehicle to provide that utility or pleasure. In such relationships, the utility or pleasure framework limits the reach of the friendship. In other words, as man does not seek anything further than utility or pleasure, he will never engage the friend's essence, for he is not seeking it. Only in relationships based on mutual appreciation for another person's perfection, does the very relationship concern the essence of the friend. Thereby, this relationship is the only true relationship, for only in this relationship is one engaging the essence of man. Additionally, a friendship based on the appreciation of the friend's love of truth generates a qualitatively better relationship than a utilitarian or pleasure-based friendship. For when man's essence is engaged, he senses a satisfaction of the greatest degree. His mind is active and his values register such a friendship as true goodness. Thereby, man achieves optimal satisfaction. But when man's essence is disengaged in all other friendships, such satisfaction is absent.

It comes out in the end that only two people on the same level can share the highest level of friendship. For if A ex-

cels over B in the attachment to the true good, A will not be able to identify much goodness in B, or befriend B. And B cannot identify—and befriend—A, since B’s lower level limits him from identifying his own soul, thereby preventing him from identifying it in A.

#### JUDGE EVERY PERSON AS MERITORIOUS.

On the surface, this means that we are to attribute human actions to proper motivations. Maimonides elaborates: This applies to a stranger. If one sees another who is known to be righteous, but his actions appear improper, we should strive to interpret his act as proper. For it is a more remote chance that a good man commits evil. The inverse is equally true regarding an evil man. If we witness a wicked person suddenly being charitable, we should assume there is more than meets the eye, and that he has devious intentions. Thus, we must not judge an individual based on an isolated instance. King Solomon teaches, “Though an enemy be fair-spoken, do not trust him, for seven abominations are in his mind” (Prov. 26:25). We are to assume an evil man remains evil, and an ostensibly good act emanates from his same evil inclinations.

Rashi teaches that unless we are certain, we must assume any person's act is meritorious. And we are to do so in order that God judges us favorably. But this equation is not sensible, for our judgment is without certainty. But God knows with 100 percent accuracy if we are evil or good. Per Maimonides, we also question the following: Why judge strangers favorably? Why do we not simply suspend judgment? To be clear, "Judge every person as meritorious" does not mean we must trust a person with our lives or with our wealth. Reason demands we first learn more about the person. The rabbis teach, "Respect and suspect" even the learned people. After all, we are all human.

Rashi and Maimonides disagree, for Rashi says we judge favorably until we know with certainty. While Maimonides says, we judge based on reputation, even though we are uncertain.

A Talmudic story is apropos. A man worked for three years without payment. He continued to request his pay, but his employer gave various reasons why he could not pay him, and the worker accepted his stories as truthful. Typically, one who works that long without rightful compensation will become enraged, rendering him unable to judge his employer with any objectivity. Yet this worker suspended that hatred and judged his employer favorably. The lesson is that if we can find an alternative explanation

for circumstances, we must not resort to judgment based on our subjective emotional leanings. The worker needed his pay, but his perfection was in his suspension of all emotion and his judging his employer based on an objective analysis. “Perhaps the employer is truthful,” felt the worker. Thus, there was no basis to accuse the employer of lying to avoid paying his wages.

Why will God judge a person favorably, if he judges other that way? This worker was on a higher level than most people, who tend to act emotionally. This worker’s intellect remained uncontaminated from emotional bias. God’s judgment is always according to the person’s level. Maimonides explains in his Guide that a person operating on a low level does not have much Divine providence, hashgachah. But this worker operated on a high level, and thereby earned God’s providence.

King Solomon writes, “The righteous one observes the house of the wicked man; he subverts the wicked to their ruin” (Prov. 21:12). The righteous man observes, but does not allow his emotions to take over. Rabbeinu Yona says, “And he knows and recognizes and understands the evil of his deeds, even more than most people understand. They know but don’t place on their heart.” The righteous man knows the evil person wishes only to appear as having good motives, since the righteous man uses knowledge in

his assessment. This strengthens our question concerning the advice to judge others favorable when we are ignorant of them.

Unconsciously, man stereotypes others and forces them into previously known personalities. This is of course unjust. The rabbis say it is a pious trait to judge others favorably in order to foster peace. Therefore, since we cannot escape judging others, and since we naturally stereotype others, we should invoke a good image in our assessment of others. Instead of allowing our egos to select a poorer image, we can also engage our intellects, and when we don't have grounds to condemn another, we must judge him favorably and relate to him based on a positive stereotype. Since we must judge others, and we can stereotype a person for good or for bad, we should follow the principle of fostering harmony in society and invoke the favorable interpretation of one's deeds. Maimonides teaches that when a talmud chocham—wise man—speaks with others, he should do so calmly, but also not too softly like those displaying arrogant airs. Speaking calmly will attract others to his personality, again to promote harmony, but also to give a good reputation to wisdom and its teachers. “Though an enemy be fair-spoken, do not trust him, for seven abominations are in his mind” (Prov. 26:25). However, when we know a person is evil, we don't reject

rationality, but label his acts as evil. Since we are subject to forgiveness and condemnation, we might forgive a wicked person and condemn a righteous man when apparent actions might imply deviation in their personalities. Therefore, we are taught that we must gauge the full spectrum of human motivation with complete rationality, ascribing good motives to righteous people and evil motives to evil people, even when our emotions say otherwise.

Two mishnas after this one (Avos 1:8) teaches one to view litigants as wicked before the verdict, and to view them as righteous after the verdict is rendered. For if the judge leans toward a favorable stereotype prior to the verdict, he may overlook damaging evidence and corrupt his ruling. But after the verdict, stereotyping both litigants as wicked no longer plays a role. Then the judge must view the litigants as righteous. This illustrates this point of engaging reason to invoke the appropriate stereotypes.

## 1:7 SOCIAL INFLUENCE

NITAI OF ARBEL SAYS: “DISTANCE [YOURSELF] FROM A BAD NEIGHBOR, DO NOT BEFRIEND AN EVILDOER, AND DO NOT DESPAIR OF PUNISHMENT.”

Rabbeinu Yona says, “Just as when seeking a new home one investigates its comforts, one must also investigate the neighbors.” Rabbeinu Yona teaches the difference between a wise man—a chocham—and a typical person. The latter seeks to satisfy his instincts alone: “Will I be comfortable in this new home?” But the chocham is equally concerned with his perfection: “How will my soul be affected by my new neighbors?”

Maimonides discusses this topic in Hilchos Dayos 6:1:

*It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior. Therefore, he should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to learn from their deeds. Conversely, he should keep away from the wicked, who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds.*

When Maimonides warns against learning the ways of the wicked person, he is referring to acquiring their values and habits via association, not in making an intellectual study. We learn that mere association with the wicked will lead to identification with them, which generates imitation.

Interesting too is Maimonides' definition of the wicked man as one who "walks in darkness." Defining the wicked man not as a murderer or the like, but as an ignorant person, Maimonides defines the evil man as one who harms his own soul, not others. Ignorance leads one to poor and destructive choices. Maimonides adds:

*Also, if one lives in a city whose habits are evil and the men do not walk upright, travel to a city of righteous people who follow a good path.*

Society influences man. This applies greatly to youths. For as they are developing their value systems, they adopt what is familiar and shared by others. Maimonides continues:

*If all the places with which he is familiar and of which he bears reports follow improper paths, as in our times, or if he is unable to move to a place where the patterns of behavior are proper because of [the presence of] bands of raiding troops,*

*or for health reasons, he should remain alone in seclusion as it is stated, "Let him sit alone and be silent" (Eichah 3:28).*

*If they are wicked and sinful and do not allow him to reside there unless he mingles with them and follows their evil behavior, he should go out to caves, thickets, and deserts and not follow the paths of sinners, as stated, "Who will give me a lodging place for wayfarers, in the desert" (Jeremiah 9:1).*

Maimonides offers two suggestions. He first suggests seclusion, a reduction of interaction with society as far as possible. An example would be to remove television or a computer from one's home, for these devices import destructive influences. What is Torah's idea of "Let him sit alone and be silent" (Eichah 3:28)? This implies a certain state of mind, not a geographical isolation. Maimonides words are "remain alone in seclusion." But if one is alone, is he not in seclusion? The second term "seclusion" adds to the first. Living alone refers to geographical isolation; seclusion refers to one's mental state. Man must break all identification with his corrupt society. Otherwise, any identification will lead to adopting society's immorality. Thereby, Maimonides teaches that man identifies on three levels: 1. He identifies as himself; 2. He identifies with oth-

er people; 3. He identifies with society. Regarding society, man must respond; he either identifies or he isolates himself. If one's society is corrupt, and man does not seclude himself from it, he is being influenced by it. Failure to feel alone from society means one identifies with it.

But if one's society will not tolerate an individual's choice to live upright, there is no alternative but to leave his town. As one's perfection cannot be compromised, he should suffer a life in a desolate region with social frustration rather than live among the wicked, who will impose their corruption upon him.

Tangentially, Maimonides discusses related ideas in chapter five of his Eight Chapters. He says man should have one purpose in life, and that is to understand God. When man strives to engage in this pursuit, both his actions and his speech will be reduced: "For one who intends on this life, will not cover his walls with gold or care what he wears." Gold and clothing are items of worth relative to others; the man pursuing God's wisdom is not concerned with them. Maimonides says very few people attain this level, which is just below prophecy.

Now, although speech would be minimized, the wise men, after exhausting themselves in Torah study, would joke around. Meaning, they did not speak lightheartedly all day like most others. But they would employ a joke as

a means of alleviating their exhaustion. Average people respond impulsively to their instincts; their speech is uncontrolled. But wise men control their speech; they use it as a tool to vent when necessary. They are not slaves to their emotions where speech is uncontrolled. The difference between a wise man and others is not the quantity of his speech, but how he views himself and manages his speech, and all his actions.

This tangent relates to our mishna's advice to distance one's self from a wicked neighbor. The Torah first asks man to recognize his need to identify with others. Then, he must gauge with whom he associates: "Who will influence me toward the good or the bad?" At times, isolation must be employed to preserve one's life of Torah and perfection. The impulsive need for a social life must not overcome one's intellectual assessment that he must isolate himself from his corrupt friends, neighbors, or society. It is vital that man not leave such decisions to the subconscious: We must be conscious of such considerations and make deliberate choices and take deliberate actions to preserve our Torah lifestyle.

DO NOT BEFRIEND AN EVILDOER.

Rabbeinu Yona says that if you join an evil person in business, for example, and the evil person sins but you do not, you are still punished for his sins. When man sins by himself, he violates on one occasion. However, by assisting an evil person, one enables that evil person to sustain a life of sin. This is worse than sinning by one's self.

Maimonides states that "Do not befriend an evildoer" refers to not learning from his actions. Rabbeinu Yona's explanation that this advice adds to the first advice of distancing from evil neighbors is clear. But Maimonides' explanation appears repetitive.

Maimonides means that there are two means of identifying with others. Distancing one's self from an evil neighbor addresses a "situation" of identification. Not joining with an evil person in business, for example, prevents identification in "actions." We need to break both means of identifications: our situations where identification can occur, and activities between ourselves and the evil person where we can identify with his actions and become evil ourselves.

## DO NOT DESPAIR OF PUNISHMENT.

Rashi says man must not feel secure about his wealth. King Solomon says, “Happy is the man who is fearful at all times...” (Prov. 28:14). Man must equally not despair from salvation: “Is God’s hand too short?” (Num. 11:23).

Man is ruled by his emotions, and when he sees a wealthy person, he says to himself, “He’s got it made.” Man also feels doomed when he has troubles. He imagines that other people’s statuses—whether of success or failure—are fixed. But these statuses have nothing to do with reality; they are mere psychological fantasies. Why does man create these statuses? Human insecurity is uneasy. Man attempts to cure his uneasiness by positing trends, which offer a mood of stability. Even if the trend is a failure, man gains some satisfaction by getting a handle on where he is. Man creates these statuses about himself and others in order that his life, which is in flux, can attach itself to some defined state.

However, Rashi teaches that such states are not real, and although wealthy today, a man can suffer a heart attack tomorrow, or lose his wealth. And a man who is impoverished today might finally get his big break in business that afternoon.

The story of David and Goliath illustrates this point. For

forty days and nights, Goliath went up and back on the battle lines challenging the Jewish army to present a soldier who could take him down. David was young and of small stature, yet he did not fear Goliath's size. David understood that size might be just one factor, but it in no way determines reality. Even a small germ could have killed a giant like Goliath. The Jewish army suffered from the imagined impregnable image of Goliath. And that assessment was soon to be shattered by a young man who was too small to carry armor on his body. David's greatness was that he didn't fear his imagination, as others did. He analyzed reality and knew that, like any man, Goliath could be killed.

“Do not despair of punishment,” in Maimonides' opinion, warns against assuming punishments are meted-out only in the afterlife. It also warns against thinking God won't punish immediately.

Maimonides addresses the value system of compensation. One might forfeit indulging the pleasures while alive, only to receive an imagined better good in the afterlife. Such a person does not abstain based on knowledge of the harm of engaging in pleasures, but due to a desire for a greater pleasure. This person truly desires and values the physical pleasures, therefore he finds pain in abstaining. He further projects a fantasy onto the afterlife, assuming the reward for his mitzvos is some tangible thing related to

physical pleasures. Thus, “Do not despair of punishment” means don’t think there isn’t some harm here, but recognize the harm, and abstain due to the reality of the damage the soul suffers through sin. Abstaining for a reward later ignores the reality of sin’s harm.

It is notable that the Torah refers to punishments for sin in this world. This is because a deterrent operates in man’s framework, and a punishment on Earth is more real to man than a protracted and more abstract threat that awaits him later. This follows the idea of immediate punishment.

In summary, there are three pieces of advice. “Distance [yourself] from a bad neighbor” addresses the internal world. Man is urged not to overestimate himself, ignoring the real harmful effects of identifying with a bad neighbor. “Do not befriend an evildoer” asks man to recognize his desires—the external world—where he teams with evil people to obtain those desires. Now, only once man has mastered these two areas can he be advised “Do not despair of punishment.” Man requires knowledge of both the internal and external worlds to assess reward and punishment, as punishment is a response to distortions in those two worlds.

Additionally, if man does not address the internal and external worlds before assessing his soul, and reward and punishment, he will not have the necessary energies to do

so, for the energies are still flowing toward the internal and external worlds. Thus, the mishna's order complies with human nature, asking man to first master his energy flow, and only then, assess reward and punishment.

## 1:8 JUDGES, TRUTH AND COURTS

YEHUDA BEN TABAI AND SHIMON BEN SHETACH RECEIVED FROM THEM. YEHUDA BEN TABAI SAYS, "DO NOT MAKE YOURSELF LIKE THE JUDGES' ADVISERS; AND WHEN THE LITIGANTS ARE BEFORE YOU, THEY SHOULD BE LIKE EVIL-DOERS IN YOUR EYES; AND WHEN THEY ARE EXCUSED FROM BEFORE YOU, THEY SHOULD BE MERITORIOUS IN YOUR EYES—WHEN THEY HAVE ACCEPTED THE JUDGMENT."

Maimonides says "judges' advisers" are akin to lawyers who prepare a litigant with formulated responses to specific questions posed to him by the judge or by the opposing litigant's lawyer. Maimonides says one is not permitted to prepare the litigant, even though he knows the litigant was abused and is righteous and that the other litigant is a liar. Nonetheless, one must not prepare arguments or responses

for him that will be helpful. Obviously, we are perplexed at Maimonides words: What is improper about helping this litigant with prepared arguments?

Maimonides' message is that we must be allegiant to the system not to the individual. Litigants are to respond truthfully. But when one prepares rehearsed responses for a litigant, he is intent on the litigant's success, not the truth.

If a prospective litigant asks a judge how he would rule on a case the litigant is planning against another party, the judge may not answer him, for this equips the litigant with foreknowledge with which he can manipulate his arguments. The judge would be guilty of favoring this litigant and thus corrupting the system of adjudication. This is like the previous case where one advises a litigant on personal success as opposed to seeking justice through the system of the courts. The main point is that judges may not get personally involved with litigants. Courts may not be used to forge personal relationships. Judges must address both litigants, and not hold private conversations with them. In addition, a judge may not privately disclose to a litigant that he won the case. For even here, that private conversation displays a desire to earn merit with that litigant. There is no other reason for such conversation.

*And when the litigants are before you, they should be like evildoers in your eyes; and when they are excused from before you, they should be meritorious in your eyes, when they have accepted the judgment.*

We noted previously that at times, man must employ a psychological device to arrive at the good. Here, the good is truth. In order that judges apply earnest exactitude in their questioning and deliberations, they must view the litigants as evil and cross examine them thoroughly. This is achieved only when the judge is not harboring any favor toward the litigants. Viewing them as evil compels the judge to be thorough. Similarly, we are taught as follows in the next mishna (Avos 1:9):

*Shimon ben Shetach says, "Examine the witnesses thoroughly, but be careful with your words, lest from them they learn to lie."*

"Examine the witnesses thoroughly" teaches not to rely on personal satisfaction; Judges must go further than that and explore every possible question. "But be careful with your words, lest from them they learn to lie" is tied to the first statement. A judge is caught in a conflict: He needs to investigate through speech, but his very words can lead

the litigants or the witnesses. “Be careful with your words” addresses that concern, and “Examine the witnesses thoroughly” implores the judge to not allow that conflict to inhibit an extensive deliberation.

Once the litigants receive and accept the ruling, the judge is to view them as righteous, for their acceptance of the verdict displays their ability to change their position of defense, to acceptance. It is a pious trait—*middus chassidus*—to view the litigants in this positive light.

However, how does this advice regarding courts relate to Pirkei Avos? This advice is in regards to legalities and Sanhedrin, while Pirkei Avos is in regards to perfection.

This advice is truly about perfection. However, perfection is relegated to a specific personality type; a judge is a unique personality. Therefore, his perfections are of a different character than other personalities. Judges differ as they are engaged in judging others. They must seek ultimate objectivity in the face of subjective factors. That is, judges are faced with litigants who are subjective to their personal interests. Our mishna prescribes two steps a judge must take: 1. He must remove himself from relating to individuals on a subjective plane; 2. He must employ psychological devices to force his objectivity. The judge accomplishes the first matter by not relating to any litigant alone, and not advising him or even sharing with him

alone that he won the case. All one-on-one dialogues are intended for some personal relationship.

Even the greatest judge cannot be fully objective. He is human. Thus, he must engage certain devices to help him. The second matter of viewing litigants as wicked helps the judge exhaust all possible questions and scenarios, which will best-assist him in arriving at the truth.

## 1:9 INADEQUACIES

SHIMON BEN SHETACH SAYS, “EXAMINE THE WITNESSES THOROUGHLY, BUT BE CAREFUL WITH YOUR WORDS, LEST FROM THEM THEY LEARN TO LIE.”

As stated above, the judge is caught in turmoil. He must seek truths with ultimate objectivity, yet he is confronted with litigants immersed in subjective arguments. In addition to the influence of subjective individuals, the judge is confronted with ambivalence, as he must straddle a search for objective truth while engaging subjective arguments. This ambivalence impedes his clarity of thought. Avos

1:8 refers to the situation, while this mishna refers to the judge's very functioning; he must overcome his shortcomings. He must operate intermittently between his objective questioning, analysis and deliberation, and intermittent engagement of the litigants' subjective personalities and claims.

A judge must view his inadequacy. He is subject to influences, and he is very limited in examining all factors to arrive at the truth. When the rabbis say that a judge must view himself as having a sword at his neck, and other such statements, the message is that he is greatly inadequate.

## 1:10 INFANTILE REGRESSION

SHEMAYAH AND AVTALYON RECEIVED FROM THEM. SHEMAYAH SAYS, "LOVE WORK, HATE LORDSHIP, AND DO NOT BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE GOVERNMENT."

Rashi comments:

*One should demean his self-esteem publicly  
by skinning a carcass [a lowly act] rather*

*than refraining to maintain his ego. By toiling in such labor, he will not come to thievery to support himself. He should also not live through the charity basket (pushke of tzedakah). Thereby, he will live longer, as it is written, "The hater of gifts shall live" (Prov. 15:27).*

Rav Yosef was a wood carrier. He enjoyed the body warmth generated through his physical labor and even praised God for that. Other sages were water drawers and wood choppers. This teaches that the rabbis possessed a healthy outlook and did not shun menial labor. These sages negated the prestige of career titles like "CEO" valued by society. Most people are very concerned about peer approval. Even when impoverished, people won't take a "lowly" job, but would first resort to thievery. This is Rashi's message: "By toiling in such labor, he will not come to thievery to support himself." But before man is driven to steal, he will ruin his life and his marriage while mistakenly blaming his family to justify losing his home and vital necessities. In fact, he is to blame for his poverty and his problems; he is blind to his distortion of holding out for a more prestigious job.

Society places so much value on a career title that it robs man of the simplest enjoyments. If only man would rec-

ognize there are limited jobs, and at times he must take a menial job rather than succumb to living on the street. And this can be temporary: Man need not think a menial job is all he will ever have, which makes it harder for him to accept the job. Rav Yosef did not concern himself with imaginary prestige, rather he cared about what is real. The rabbis say we must live as though no one else exists. They mean we must not be concerned with prestige, which depends on others. Rav Yosef needed a salary so he worked at a menial job. He had his necessities covered and even found pleasure in feeling good through that exercise. Similarly, if one finds a carcass, he should not place imaginary prestige above his basic needs. Rather, he should ignore his peers' abuse, stoop to the ground, and skin the animal to provide for himself through the sale of the hide.

What is derived from “love” work as opposed to “do” work? Shemayah teaches that man must appreciate God’s system wherein He enabled man to perform labor and provide for his own needs. Man should literally love this reality. The reason many people cannot find this love is as noted previously: Man seeks prestige over his basic necessities. He prizes social status over feeding himself. Man must use Torah to educate himself away from such a hurtful value system, to free himself from living for others, and finally live for himself.

“THE HATER OF GIFTS SHALL LIVE” (PROV. 15:27).

Rashi says one who works enjoys longevity. This is attributed to the alleviation of stress. The dependent personality seeking charity is under a sustained mental stress to remain in good favor among others. But one who hates gifts lives independently; he can live as he chooses and his well-being generates longevity. “With the weariness of his hands he eats; happy is he, and he finds good” (Psalms 12:3). The rabbis teach, “Happy is he in this world, and he finds good in the next world.”

Certain situations, such as servitude, evoke the infantile state of dependency. If the slave does not wish to leave his master, we bore his ear, the ear that heard at Mt. Sinai, “You are My servants” (Lev. 25:55). The rabbis comment, “My servants, and not servants to servants [man].” One desirous of a slave lifestyle inhibits his relationship with God. Man must rely on God alone and avoid awakening the infantile state when we were all once dependent infants.

Maimonides states:

*Perfectly righteous men and men of deeds  
would not receive gifts from other men.  
Instead, they would trust in God, blessed  
be His name, and not in generous men.  
And it is stated, “One who hates gifts will  
live” (Proverbs 15:27).*

What is meant by “Trust in God...and not in generous men?” Why does trust in God exclude relying on human gifts? Why can’t a man pray to God to help him and hope that help comes in the form of a gift? It is because this relationship with God is merely another expression of the infantile dependent mentality. He is awaiting human support: a regression to the infantile state of childhood. People who truly trust in God recognize the reality God created: labor can yield a livelihood. This is the true “botayach b’Hashem,” one who truly trusts in God.

King Solomon writes, “One who mocks a poor man disgraces his Creator” (Proverbs 17:5). Why does the verse say “[He] disgraces the poor man’s Creator?” It should instead say, “[He] disgraces the One who made him poor.” Certain people have severe psychological handicaps. We must support such people. If we mock them we are mocking God, who created the world in such a way that these unfortunates do exist.

Maimonides also writes:

*Anyone who concludes that he should involve himself in Torah study without doing work, and derive his livelihood from charity, desecrates [God’s] name, dishonors the Torah, extinguishes the light of faith, brings evil upon himself, and forfeits*

*the life of the world to come, for it is forbidden to derive benefit from the words of Torah in this world (Hil. Talmud Torah 3:10).*

Maimonides teaches that although Torah study is important, by itself it is not perfection. One must work and not learn alone and force others to work to support him.

Rabbeinu Yona says man thinks he will attain happiness by avoiding work and engaging in a leisurely lifestyle. But this will in fact lead to destruction. Man can only enjoy relaxation if he works first. Meaning, relaxation is not a positive activity, but merely the absence of pain. If man attempts to relax without first exerting himself, it will lead to mental anguish and depression. Aristotle too says happiness is a positive activity, not a passive and inactive state. “Man was born to work” (Job 5:7). Rabbeinu Yona says happiness exists only with exertion.

People wonder why wealthy business men don’t retire. This is because retirement is inactivity and not exertion. Many people retire only to find they are unhappy. It is due to his current pain at work that man fools himself into thinking that he would enjoy retirement. And once he retires he soon finds unhappiness, since he is no longer active: A positive exertion of energy is essential to deriving satisfaction and happiness. Per Rabbeinu Yona, “work” re-

fers not to labor but to energetic activity. Man's search for happiness must be directed toward expenditure of energy and not passive relaxation. The latter leads to depression. Of course, if one is wealthy and no longer needs to work he should spend his time pursuing Torah and God's wisdom. It would then be wasteful to work for money he will never spend. Man's highest enjoyment is derived from energies he expends in knowledge.

#### HATE LORDSHIP.

Rashi explains that one must hate leadership because it buries leaders: Joseph died earlier than his brothers since he was a leader. This warning of an abbreviated life conveys the rabbis' concern that man enjoys this life. Torah doesn't mention the afterlife, as man's motivation must be to perform what is good in this life. If he does, then a natural result will be his survival into the next life. But living to inherit the next world must not be man's purpose, for then he is not truly engaging a Torah life for its own value.

What element in leadership is so stressful that it decreases one's years? Why can't a leader approach a life of politics just as a businessman leads a calm and cool business life?

The answer is that people feel they are experts in two areas: philosophy and religion. Man cannot avoid being a philosopher; he must defend his life as correct. Religion is no different. An honest man with little knowledge in these areas will defer his decisions to wiser men. But most people are driven by their emotions, explaining the heated debates we always hear in the spheres of religion, politics, and philosophy. Few people turn their mind's eye on their emotions, critiquing their errors and accepting fault. Thus, most people live in defense of their subjective emotional philosophies and religious choices. If they would admit they know nothing about philosophy and religion, they would be admitting to wasting their lives. Few can tolerate this admission.

As people are opinionated on these topics, leaders must contend with everyone's differing emotional views, which they stubbornly defend. This relentless contention with so many others buries the leader due to massive stress. Additionally, the leader must strategize how to bring about the good for society and present his political platform in a manner acceptable to the public. To do so, the leader must place himself in society's mental framework. This is challenging and stressful. In contrast, business leaders are respected, since employees do not feel compelled to be experts as they do when it comes to religious and philosophi-

cal life. Thus, the business leader has an easier life.

Therefore, we understand that despite the high position of leaders, they are in a dependent state. Leaders must continually be concerned that they are satisfying the public. They are always under the domination of society, and not only regarding political decisions—a leader’s personal life too is in the spotlight; this compounds his stress. We readily grasp the unyielding pressure that leaders endure, and why this shortens their lives. Similarly, one who lives on charity loses years due to his dependent state of mind.

Man’s life is best when he trusts in God. This is the true independent state, for he follows the natural system God created, where, with little effort, he is able to obtain all his needs. Nothing can compare to this psychological state, where man enjoys life as God intended. In such a state, man deals with created reality, the Source of reality, and no one else.

A leader’s pressure on all fronts ruins his life, and this is measured by a shorter lifespan. But the rabbis were not concerned whether man lived ten years longer or less; their focus was that one should enjoy life. A proof is derived from the blessing of the new month, where we ask for “long life; chaim aruchim.” How can we ask for long life when this blessing refers to only the current thirty-day period? The answer is that we are asking for a large capacity of life

in that month, what man derives from that time span. Mere existence is of no value, unless one derives goodness for his soul in that time.

We wonder how Pirkei Avos can suggest that no one should desire leadership. This would destroy the nation of Israel. What would have happened had Joseph or Moshe Rabbeinu refused leadership? However, we must endorse their decisions to lead. They sacrificed their lives to help the Jewish nation. At times, one must rise to the occasion to save others, even if this negatively impacts his life. Pirkei Avos speaks of the norm, not the rare or dire need.

Maimonides says power corrupts. Why does he not say that an egotistical man seeking to wield power is already corrupt? This is true of the egotistical leader. But Maimonides is not describing him, he is referring to a second type of leader driven by a need for acceptance. How does he become corrupt through leadership?

Leaders have competitors; they attack him and this damages his reputation. To regain mass appeal, a leader must cater to the public, who, in large, seek to satisfy their desires. The leader must compromise any good values and plans and replace them with promises that appeal to society's base instincts. This places the leader in conflict with his wish to follow a good path, not one of satisfying society's need for self-gratification. The leader experiences

conflict between pursuing what is right and catering to the people. Ultimately, a leader bent on leading, and not justice, will cave to the people and abandon his religious values in order to remove his conflict. Avshalom gained popularity by greeting litigants after their court rulings. Upon hearing the complaints of a disgruntled litigant, he would tell him that had he ruled on the case, he would have ruled in the litigant's favor. Avshalom's strategy ultimately attracted half the nation to his side.

In contrast, the perfected leader will never compromise on truth. Of course, this will often cost him his popularity and his position.

A second way this leader gains acceptance is through personal relationships. In these one-on-one meetings, the leader is showered with great respect. Feeling needed and praised, the leader gains deep satisfaction.

DO NOT BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE GOVERNMENT.

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter said all people would be corrupt had they no governors prohibiting them. Therefore, heads of state are corrupt for they have no one above them.

Politicians draw you in close only when they need you.

For example, Stalin elevated individuals to high posts in his government. When they got in his way, he had them killed. Once a leader praises politicians he needs, what can the leader do when those same politicians eventually voice views the leader doesn't agree with? The leader cannot contradict himself to remove them from their posts. Murder is the only solution. As an object of the leader's utility, once a politician no longer serves his purpose, or opposes him, he is disposed of.

The rabbis say "government" refers to monarchs or self-appointed governing bodies. Today's model would be the mafia.

How can we connect all three statements in our mishna? To review, we are told to 1. Love work; 2. Hate leadership; and 3. Avoid familiarity with government. Loving work tells us not to regress to the infantile dependent state. Attraction to leadership too has its source in early childhood; children are attracted to the authority roles parents represent. And avoiding connection with government or mafia is a combination: You are dependent as they direct your every move, but you also have great power backing you. The rabbis say, "Attach yourself to an important person and people will bow down to you." Thus, our mishna describes the most basic phenomenon that attracts a person from early youth.

However, if dependency and leadership must be avoided, do I not know that the combination too must be avoided? Why then have the third case? The answer is that this question applies to logic and math, but not to emotions. For example, if A is a certain harmful food, and B too is a harmful food, one need not be told not to eat the combination of A and B, because A and B retain their natures and identities in the combined state. But when emotions combine in a new way, people will not view this as a combination but a new phenomenon that they think has value. It may take much time to unravel the dynamics of this attitude to detect it is merely a combination of the harmful A and B ingredients. Thus, the rabbis also warned against the combination, lest people not detect it is a mere combination.

I. Samuel, Chapter 21 portrays an example of the last combination case. King Saul grew paranoid about David and sought to kill him. David fled to Nove, the city of the priests, and the people there assisted him. Doeg was aware of their assistance and informed on David to King Saul. In his paranoia and in retaliation for their support of David, King Saul urged Doeg to murder the entire population of the city—men, women, children, and animals—which he did. But why did Doeg, a wise man, commit such a heinous crime?

We learn that Doeg was an *av beis din*—head of the

courts. He learned Torah publicly, in front of the Temple. This reveals an aspect of his personality: He sought approval. Learning privately would not offer him this gratification. It was this same need for approval that motivated Doeg to comply with King Saul's wish, however evil it was. Doeg was both dependent, as he followed King Saul's request, but he also gained approval through association with King Saul. Maimonides teaches that we cannot place ourselves under this emotion of total loyalty, even to one as great as King Saul. We must relate to one thing, to the Source of reality: God.

The rabbis teach, "Whomever is merciful to the vicious person, will eventually be vicious to those deserving mercy." King Saul spared Agag, the Amalekite king whom God commanded he kill, thereby expressing King Saul's corruption. As King Saul possessed misguided emotional identification, he had no true attachment to justice. Thus, he could order the murder of the inhabitants of Nove.

Maimonides says by ignoring these pieces of advice, one forfeits his religious life and destroys society. For without work, one is forced to steal, making it impossible for him to face others who follow Torah. Desiring leadership, one corrupts his good values to maintain popularity, and leads society down the wrong path.

These two matters represent man's most basic natures.

Man's primary drive is to survive. Without work, man becomes impoverished, a state of mind that cripples his thinking and removes him from a religious life and from pursuing perfection. Equally powerful is man's drive to attain self-esteem. This has two expressions. One is public acceptance, a direct method where a leader placates the public to maintain his position and approval. Doeg embodies the second expression, an indirect method where one attaches himself to a leader (King Saul in this case) to gain his self-esteem.

Avos d'Rav Nasan (chap. 11) cites several of the sages' comments on our mishna:

*Just as the Torah was given in a covenant, so too work was given in a covenant, as it is stated, "Six days you shall do all your work, and the seventh day is Shabbat to the Lord, your God" (Exod. 20).*

*Rabbi Dostai said, "From where do we know if man did not work all six days, he would work all seven? If one rested on all the days of the week and did no work, and on Shabbat eve he had nothing to eat, he went and fell among the troops, and they caught him and held him with a collar and forced him to work on the Sabbath. All this, since he did not work all six days."*

*Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said, "Even Adam the first did not taste anything until he worked, as it says, 'And He put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and preserve it' (Gen. 2), and after that it says, 'Of all the trees of the garden shall you eat.'"*

*Rabbi Tarfon says, "Even the Holy One, Blessed is He, did not rest His Shechinah [presence] on Israel until they did work, as it is stated, "Make Me a sanctuary and I will dwell among them."*

Manual labor is not contrary to man's nature. In fact, it is complementary, for this is how God designed man to live. It is man's ego distortion that creates a disdain for labor. But as we stated earlier, Rav Yosef enjoyed work and its benefits. This is a healthy mindset. The Torah does not preach a work ethic, for if man has financial stability and need not labor, work is futile, and he should dedicate more hours to Torah.

The rabbis direct man to live in accordance with reality. Man feels enjoyment and satisfaction when he lives in harmony with the natural order, where he labors to provide his own food, clothing, and shelter.

Man is the only imperfect creation; all other creatures live perfectly in line with their natures. Man has many emotions pulling him in various directions. He must work

at following a proper lifestyle. Alexander the Great asked Diogenes if there was anything he could do for him, and Diogenes replied, “You are blocking my sunlight, please move away.” Alexander was disturbed by this. Why? Alexander’s value system was conquest. After each battle he felt that the next one would provide the ultimate state of satisfaction. But that satisfaction never came. His emotions pulled him to find happiness in some pursuit. Diogenes’ reply struck a chord with Alexander: Diogenes was satisfied with simple sunlight and was unimpressed with Alexander’s conquests. Alexander then sensed the fallacy in his own philosophy. King Solomon wrote, “...also the soul is not satisfied” (Koheles 6:7). Man tries many pursuits but never feels full. We also read, “The wicked are turbulent as the sea” (Isaiah 57:20). What Isaiah means is that those chasing lusts and fantasies—the wicked—never sense an inner peace, for they are not living in harmony with reality.

Once we understand the dissatisfaction following compulsory pursuits we can understand the satisfaction attained when following reality. Man’s soul is at peace. This enjoyment is what the rabbis highlight by saying “Love work.” Of course, if one can learn more and work less, that is his reality, and he should do so.

## 1:11 EDUCATORS' PITFALLS

AVTALYON SAYS, “SAGES, BE CAREFUL WITH YOUR WORDS, LEST YOU BECOME OBLIGATED IN AN OBLIGATION OF EXILE AND ARE EXILED TO THE PLACE OF EVIL WATERS, AND THE STUDENTS WHO FOLLOW AFTER YOU DRINK AND DIE, AND THUS THE NAME OF HEAVEN IS PROFANED.”

Rashi explains “care with words” refers to the urgency rabbis must take in preparing their teachings and rulings. For if a rabbi is careless, and wrongly rules on a matter that requires his exile, what follows ultimately profanes God’s name. For once the rabbi is exiled, he will only find inept students in that outlying region (presumably dwelling far from Torah centers because they lack skills or interest). Having associated with that rabbi, these students will appear as talmidei chochamim—wise students. But as they are in fact inept, they will not have earned God’s providence, and they will die young. This casts shame on the Torah. How so? It is due to the Torah’s many verses promising longevity to Torah followers:

*Longevity, and years of life and peace  
will be added to you (Prov. 3:2).*

*See I have placed before you today life  
and goodness (Deut. 30:15).*

*For it is your life and your length of days  
(Deut. 30:20).*

*It is a tree of life to those who seize it  
(Prov. 3:18).*

Upon the untimely deaths of ostensible Torah scholars, the masses will say that the Torah is false. While the Gemara says one's longevity, children, and livelihood are not due to one's merit (Moed Kattan 28a), we must take precautions not to cause others to blaspheme the Torah through negligent preparation of lectures and rulings. Many great rabbis and leaders died young. However, that is God's decision. What we discuss is man's cause of death, not God's. But why must we concern ourselves with the masses' incorrect interpretation of events? Those students who die young are inept, and are not under God's providence. Why must we care that the masses were ignorant of this fact and concluded erroneously? The answer is that a profanation of the Torah and of God's name does not depend on reality.

The Torah saw it proper to attract uninitiated people through appealing matters. And man's greatest desire is immortality. This explains all the verses cited before. Teachers must take diligent precaution from causing Torah profanation.

Avtalyon's message to the rabbis is that as Torah figures they have the capacity to create the greatest profanation. Therefore, they must take the utmost care to prevent such a profanation, even if it occurs indirectly. That is precisely why Avtalyon scripted the mishna as a lengthy chain of events. He wished to display that however remote the chance, teachers must preserve the Torah's pristine reputation.

Maimonides has a different understanding of this mishna. He understands "evil waters" as heresy. Per Maimonides, this mishna warns against speaking with any vagueness that will be subject to misinterpretation, where another might misinterpret the rabbi's words to support his heresy. He will then teach his own students this heresy, which will result in a profanation of God's name.

Why does Maimonides resort to such an extreme case? He could have interpreted this mishna in simpler terms: "Teachers, be careful with all speech." Why isolate heresy?

Torah teachers have a difficulty that others do not. They have an allegiance to the Torah system, while other teachers do not. Other teachers can share new ideas simply to teach and refine their thoughts. But a Torah teacher is concerned first with preserving the Torah so it survives untarnished for succeeding generations. When they are excited to share an insight, rabbis must be on guard that they do

not sacrifice Torah transmission, or worse, say something that can even vaguely endorse heresy.

The Gemara relates a case of two men. One was fluent in physics, the other in metaphysics. They agreed to teach each other their respective knowledge. The metaphysician said to the physics major, “Teach me physics.” The latter did so, and then asked the metaphysician to teach him, whereupon he refused, as he realized the physics major was not ready for metaphysical knowledge. It would have destroyed him, as the metaphysician understood the physics major was not operating with values that could tolerate certain truths. King Solomon taught, “Honey and milk, [keep] under your tongue...” (Song of Songs 4:11). This is our very point. That which is most precious should not be discussed.

“Sages, be careful with your words” refers not to sages in their capacity as great minds, but in their capacity as metaphysicians. They must be careful not to say anything that can allow a lesser mind, or a corrupt person, to twist words to violate Torah fundamentals.

## 1:12 AHARON'S PERFECTIONS

HILLEL AND SHAMMAI RECEIVED FROM THEM. HILLEL SAID, "BE OF THE DISCIPLES OF AHARON, LOVING PEACE AND PURSUING PEACE, LOVING PEOPLE AND BRINGING THEM CLOSER TO TORAH."

As one today cannot be a "disciple" of Aharon, this means to learn from his ideas.

Rashi cites two stories. The first one describes Aharon as a peacemaker. When he found two people in dispute, he would approach each one individually and tell him that the other wanted to make peace and wished for his friendship. This would cause the parties to approach each other and make peace. A second story concerns a man whom Aharon heard tell his wife, "You can no longer derive any pleasure from me until you spit in the eye of the high priest" (Aharon). Aharon approached the wife, who didn't know who Aharon was, and said, "I have an eye condition that requires spit to heal it." She complied, and her husband took her back. Again, Aharon made peace. For this reason, when Aharon passed away, the Torah says the "entire house" of Israel (implying both men and women) wept for Aharon for thirty days (Num. 20:29).

Rashi states that Aharon loved peace. However, why

did Rashi cite the following verse, which addresses God's relationship with man, and not a more appropriate verse reflecting Aharon's peacemaking between man and his fellow?

MY COVENANT WAS WITH HIM OF LIFE AND PEACE... (MALACHI 2:5.).

What is remarkable about the first story is that Aharon acted. Most people are not motivated to help others settle a dispute because they are bothered when they see others enjoying a close friendship, as they feel excluded by such a union. It's a blow to one's ego not to be enjoying that bond of friendship. But when one sees friends arguing, he no longer senses that competition for friendship with the other. He feels, "Since my friend is at odds with the other party, I can join my friend, and together, we can ridicule the other party, creating a bond between my friend and me." Another appeal of those in dispute is the enjoyment in venting aggression through ridicule. These subtle motivations explain why most people do not act like Aharon.

Aharon was always motivated to create peace. These stories are metaphors for how Aharon resolved conflict. But how did he overcome these same emotions we each pos-

sess? It is because Aharon was not personally involved. He lived on a higher level than others. He lived objectively.

Rabbeinu Yona says that in his heart Aharon loved truth and peace. What does truth have to do with this matter? Furthermore, the following verse (following the previous verse) refers to truth:

*The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and did turn many away from iniquity (Ibid. 2:6.).*

“Law of truth” means that man enjoys objective truths. This refers not to the object of Torah, but to the motivation of study. At the end of his Guide, Maimonides teaches that the perfected man is involved in acts of kindness, chessed. Without imperfection, man naturally performs kindness. This is due to man’s natural identification with others, but more so, man expresses his love of God by relating to His creations (man) in a kind manner. Aharon embodied this perfection.

The verse in Malachi describes a relationship between God and man. Rashi cites this verse about Aharon since Aharon’s level of love for God was expressed through his love for man.

The reason for Rashi's two stories is that each story alone does not teach about the other. The first story, where Aharon settled disputes, teaches that others who do not seek to end quarrels are passive in order to enjoy a vicarious divisiveness. By allowing others to continue arguing, friends enjoy vicarious aggressive satisfaction. The second case cites a man who made a ridiculous demand, and this was directed at Aharon. But since Aharon was not personally involved, he took no insult and did not care about subjugating himself to this man's stupidity. Aharon's single concern was peace; he did not allow personal feelings to enter his equation. Therefore, he allowed the woman to spit in his eye, as this would achieve peace.

A person might be able to act as Aharon in one case, but not the other. Therefore, both stories are recorded. Each story presents a unique challenge. Although one might succeed in overcoming personal feelings of vicarious divisiveness, he may not overcome his ego. The inverse is also true. Thus, both stories and lessons are essential.

Maimonides writes that when Aharon saw someone that was internally evil or saw someone sinning, he would talk to that person and befriend him. The man would become embarrassed and think, "If Aharon knew how evil I was, he wouldn't look at me or talk to me. But Aharon thinks I am a good person." This would drive the man to vindi-

cate Aharon's association with him and become Aharon's student. Rashi expands on being Aharon's disciple. Here, Maimonides records this story to expand on the second part of our mishna of loving others.

Why do people correct others? Sometimes it satisfies one's aggression—they can ridicule another. But Aharon did not act with aggression. He befriended sinners. Aharon understood that people are incentivized to improve based on positive motivations, not negative words, typically under the “altruistic” guise of rebuke. People are less likely to respond to negative input and more likely to respond to praise. Unlike Aharon, most people will resort to rebuke, as they can enjoy aggressiveness. “Don't hate your brother in your heart; certainly, rebuke your fellow and do not carry sin upon it” (Lev. 19:17). We are told not to rebuke in a manner where we “carry a sin,” because as we said, rebuke can cater to one's aggression when not performed for altruistic reasons. This verse applies primarily to friends but to anyone as well. If one wronged the other, the offended friend should approach the other and discuss the matter in order that hate is not buried in one's heart. Maimonides says to speak to one's friend in a calm way so the rebuke is successful.

Rashi teaches that shortly before his death Moshe rebuked the nation. He learned this from Jacob, who just be-

fore he died, rebuked Reuben. Jacob did this so Reuben would not leave Jacob and cleave to Esav. What is the purpose in one waiting until just before his death to offer rebuke? Before his death, the one offering rebuke will not be accused of doing so for aggressive reasons. He is dying and will soon not be around to enjoy the aggression. It must be that he offers rebukes in order to assist the recipient of the rebuke. Moshe's and Jacob's rebukes were well-received.

Tangentially, Moshe and Aharon played different roles. Moshe was the Torah transmitter and Aharon was the implementer. Therefore, Aharon is associated with peace, as peace deals with implementation, not transmission. One seeking perfection should copy Aharon's actions.

Ego is most destructive. Maimonides teaches that we are to be equidistant from all emotional poles in each spectrum, except for ego and anger. In these, we must remain at the opposite poles of humility and calmness. Aharon was concerned with establishing harmony. This is larger than the self, and thus, he abandoned ego. One perfects himself in such pursuits, and this is the mishna's message: "Be as a disciple of Aharon": learn from his ways. Astronomers too are concerned with what is larger than the self; they too appreciate man's small position in the universe. "And the man Moshe was humbler than any man on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). By contrast, Moshe's great knowledge

of God showed him how small man is.

“Be of the disciples of Aharon” asks us to appreciate Aharon’s implementation of the Torah system. He did so by forgoing any personal concern. God designed man to find enjoyment in pursuing what is external to ourselves. Aharon pursued harmony rather than his self-esteem. But the rasha, the wicked man, focusses on the self. Therefore, he conflicts with the natural order and has no psychological ease. “The wicked are turbulent as the sea” (Isaiah 57:20).

## 1:13 FAME, KNOWLEDGE, AND HONOR

HE WOULD SAY, “WITH INCREASED FAME [NAME], MAN LOSES FAME. AND ONE WHO DOES NOT INCREASE [KNOWLEDGE], CEASES [TO BE]. AND ONE WHO DOES NOT STUDY IS LIABLE TO DIE. AND ONE WHO MAKES USE OF THE CROWN [OF LEARNING] PASSES AWAY.”

Rashi says whomever rises to greatness, his end draws closer like Joseph, who died before his brothers. As discussed, stress decreases man’s years. Maimonides taught

that a quieter life elongates lifespans. To reiterate, the rabbis did not value longer lifespans. Rather, they valued the quality of life experienced by one who lives longer. However, his activities must be more conducive to peace and harmony.

But Rashi cites a verse that does not seem to support his point. Rashi's view is that greatness is a causative agent toward an early demise. It says in Proverbs: "Before downfall is greatness; before stumbling is arrogance" (Prov. 16:18). Per Rashi, the verse should have said, "After greatness comes downfall." This would indicate causation. The implication of Proverbs is otherwise: On the path to a downfall, one will experience greatness—meaning, the very factor that generates a rise in fame will also ruin the person.

Let's understand who experiences this. One who rises to fame must be one who chases it. This personality does not compromise in its quest to attain fame. If such a person is faced with a rational choice to abandon fame or to continue the chase for fame, he will opt for the latter. And irrational decisions usually end in ruin of some sort. The world operates in a certain way; violating those rules causes a downfall. However, on his path toward fame, he will experience it temporarily, but he will eventually slip up.

King Solomon's Proverbs teaches us not to be taken in

by such a person. Someone on the rise now could have a downfall later because of his corrupt philosophy. The king advises to be suspicious of famous personalities. “Before downfall is greatness” depicts the societal phenomenon. “Before stumbling is arrogance” depicts the personal cause.

But what is fame? This phenomenon is inherently contradictory. Man earns fame for some value he offers. However, if one desires only the fame, and to attain fame, he innovates something popular, that innovation per se is of no value to him. [People will not honor him when they learn he did not seek to help society with his innovation, but did so merely to grab the spotlight.] In fact, one who shuns fame increases his fame, for he demonstrates that he is not after the fame, but presents society with some value for the value itself. The public appreciates this and therefore praises the person for achieving something noteworthy. But one who chases fame exposes the absence of any desire to benefit society; he is perceived as arrogant, and his fame dies. Chasing fame forfeits it.

Rashi offers a second interpretation: “One who learns Torah only to be called ‘rabbi’ will lose his fame.” This man is not interested in truth, rather he seeks an audience. Therefore, he will speak on topics appealing to the masses. Audiences applaud teachings that do not go against their desires. By definition, this man is not offering any great

insights, but soothing words that endorse the masses' base lifestyles. The Gemara states, "Any rabbi loved by his congregants is not a good rabbi." This is the same idea: The rabbi is not correcting his congregants, which would cause them to be irritated by him.

Fifty years ago, there were several popular rabbis about whom we hear nothing today. They spoke on matters appealing to the masses and they became famous. But as they offered no content, they vanished.

"The memory of the righteous is blessed, and the fame of the wicked rots" (Prov. 10:7). During his life, the righteous man disturbs the masses: They strive toward hedonism, but they encounter the righteous man living properly, as God commanded. This threatens them and elevates their guilt. But once the righteous man dies, the masses reflect on the ideas he embodied. They recall him in good light, as his personality is no longer present to irk them. People do recognize perfection.

The wicked man has many friends. His lifestyle endorses the masses' base drives. But once gone, the masses reflect on his empty and valueless life.

A question was raised: Why can't a shrewd man seeking fame go through the motions of someone like Rav Moshe Feinstein: earn his fame and retain it, as Rav Moshe did?

Plato said people err due to shortsightedness. This

means people act impulsively, seeking immediate instinctual gratification. One who seeks fame will be confronted with a large audience. His drive for fame will propel him to act in the moment, as the people want. He will cater to their base drives. This means he will deviate from the path Rav Moshe would follow: admonishing those who are corrupt. This explains why such a shrewd ploy must fail.

AND ONE WHO DOES NOT INCREASE [KNOWLEDGE], CEASES [TO BE].

[Rabbi Chait digressed momentarily to share his sentiments.] “One must have a tremendous appreciation for the rabbis for the great kindness they showed us in explaining Avos and what perfection is on an in-depth level, on every point. Avos is an unbelievable tractate.”

Rabbeinu Yona says:

*A wise man who says the following should die: “I learned the Torah already. I’ve seen its ways and paths. Why shall I trouble spending more time, and what more will I learn?” Now that he ceased learning Torah, why should he live any longer?”*

*“And one who does not study is liable to die”—one who hasn’t learned at all is equated to animals, for why was he created in the world except to understand and teach that its ways are pleasant; and this one who does not involve himself in Torah all his days and remains firm in his evil, it is not fitting that he should live one day, and even one moment.*

Rabbeinu Yona refers to somebody not engaged in perfection as “wicked.”

One question is, why do we need to learn about two separate personalities? Once we know that a person who had some involvement in wisdom is liable to death when he stops learning, we then know that surely one who was never engaged in wisdom should die. A second question is: What is the precise distinction between these two personalities?

A factual distinction is that even though throughout his life, Personality A possessed the incorrect philosophy, he is worthy of death only when stops learning. It is the “condition” when he is not learning that he deserves death. In contrast, Personality B never deserves life. He is “inherently” worthless. A philosopher once said, “If a person does not fulfill his purpose, his existence equals his non-existence.” Man’s purpose is to appreciate God’s wisdom.

If he is not engaged in this pursuit, he doesn't deserve to live. Maimonides once received a message from a man who said he desired to learn from him, but possessed no knowledge of Hebrew. Maimonides responded, "You desire knowledge and therefore you are on the highest level. But a Torah scholar who no longer desires to learn, I have no use for him."

Let's examine these two personalities more closely. Personality B, who never engaged in wisdom, never deserved life. Why did Personality A initially deserve life? Does he value Torah? Yes, he does. However, his flaw is that he values Torah as an acquisition and not as a reality. Average people maintain this philosophy. For example, people study to obtain a PhD. This is today's mentality. The more letters one has after his name, the more honor he commands. Once, a philosopher was offered a prominent chair in a university. He declined, saying, "Accepting this position is against my philosophy. For I am not a man "with" knowledge of philosophy, I "live" philosophy." In contrast, the correct philosophy is where one views the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom as the only way to live.

We must then ask why Personality A, whose philosophy of knowledge was an acquisition and not a way of life, deserved life up to the point that he stopped learning? This is because we can't call learning worthless. People must learn

on their current level. This personality was approaching wisdom as a lifestyle. He was on a proper path and had to start from his own lower level. But he ended his pursuit before reaching the proper philosophy. Once he stopped learning, his life became worthless.

AND ONE WHO MAKES USE OF THE CROWN [OF  
LEARNING] PASSES AWAY.

Rashi teaches that one who associates with a Torah scholar to gain honor through that association and the utilization of his personality, dies at half his lifespan. This is because he removed the Torah scholar from engaging in loving and learning Torah. The Torah scholar must accommodate the person because he has communal obligations, but this forfeits his learning.

Rabbeinu Yona says this refers to using the crown of Torah and enjoying its honor. He uses it like a vessel to accomplish his needs. This person is consumed. It is stated likewise, “Don’t make Torah a crown to become great through it, nor use it as an axe to chop wood.” Maimonides says this refers to one who makes a living through Torah and receives a benefit from it.

The rabbis teach that a Torah scholar can utilize his

students, but he cannot utilize anybody else. But isn't the Torah scholar benefiting from Torah in this manner? The principle here is that the Torah cannot have a benefactor. The average man who services a Torah scholar will feel he has benefited the Torah. But a Torah scholar's students know that there is no benefactor to the Torah. The Torah is the benefactor. Therefore, the Torah scholar can gain use from his students, and no one aside from them.

The Gemara says an average person has the highest respect for a Torah scholar. But the moment that the Torah scholar gains benefit from the person, that person loses all respect for the Torah scholar, as he now feels that he is a benefactor to the Torah.

Maimonides explains this principle at length in Avos 4:5. He writes:

*After I had concluded not to speak on this command, as it is already explained, and it also will not be favorable to most, if not to all great Torah minds, I changed my mind not to concern myself with earlier or present scholars. That which is written, "Do not to make Torah like an axe or a shovel," means you cannot consider Torah a vessel or vehicle through which you earn a livelihood. It says, anyone who benefits in this world from the honor of Torah, forfeits the world to come. But people have erred in this statement, sup-*

*porting themselves with certain interpretations they didn't understand. But I will explain them. They established taxes on people to pay for schools and temples. They said it was fitting that the public should financially assist Torah scholars and their students and people whose entire lives are engaged in Torah study. But this is all a mistake. Not a single word of verification is found in the Torah or in any of the wise men's writings. If we examine the rabbis, we never find that they requested money from the public; not for the Exilarch, schools, judges, those who spread Torah, the great sages, or any Torah student.*

*Rather, we find in each generation and in all communities, people of the direst level of property and [people] at the height of wealth. And it would be forbidden for me to suspect that those generations weren't kind and generous and that they would not give charity. For if any poor man would extend his hand to accept charity, the wealthy people would fill his home with gold and fine jewels. But the poor man didn't want to accept [charity]; instead he satisfied himself with his work, whether he earned much or little. And he frowned upon the people's wealth. And you know Hillel was a woodchopper; he was the student of Shemayah and Avtalyon. Hillel was poverty-stricken. His students were compared to Moshe and Aharon. His lowest student was Rav Yochanan ben Zak-*

*kai. Had Hillel taught others they should support him, they would not have allowed him to continue being a woodchopper.*

*Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, about whom a prophetic voice (bas kol) said, "The entire world is supplied with food only by the merit of my son Chanina," who sustained himself week by week on just a small measure of carob. And he did not want people to financially assist him.*

*Karna was a great judge of Israel. He was a water drawer. When litigants asked him to judge a case, he asked them to replace him at his job, or pay him the wages he lost while judging their case. In those days, Jews were not vicious or indifferent to these great Torah sages. In those days, we do not find any Torah sage who ridiculed that generation for not making him wealthy, God forbid. These sages were great people who understood the truth, who believed in God and Moshe's Torah, through which man can receive the World to Come. And they would not receive money from others. They considered taking money a profanation of God's name in the eyes of the masses. This is because people will consider Torah a profession like any other profession to support oneself. This would degrade Torah in their eyes. Regarding anyone who does such a thing, they attributed to him the verse, "The word of God he degrades" (Num. 15:31).*

What is the degradation? A profession is performed for ulterior motives, whereas Torah cannot be engaged for any other purpose. The great sages considered it a travesty to engage Torah for financial means and not for the sake of study itself. And when Torah is studied without compensation, it creates a sanctification of God; there is no ulterior motive in this case. Despite their abject poverty, many sages engaged their lives in Torah study. Maimonides continues:

*Those people who argued on the truth and on Torah grew powerful and used literal interpretations of verses to take money from others, [who gave it] both willingly and by coercion. The Gemara cites cases of old and physically-impaired people who accepted money. Are they supposed to die and not accept that money? No, the Torah does not suggest this. But the Torah does not allow capable people to accept money.*

*Rav Yosef was a wood carrier. He would say, "Work is great as it warms the body." Instead of complaining, he found something good about menial labor. He praised God for enabling him to gain benefit from work.*

*Some confused fools cite Elisha to support their acceptance of charity in order to learn Torah. However, Elisha did not accept money from people; he didn't re-*

*quest it, and he certainly did not make it a statute. He only accepted a meal from his host. However, Samuel would never enter someone's home. [Thus, the situation of accepting a meal never arose.] Depending on one's level of perfection, he can choose to act as Elisha or as Samuel. [But Elisha's case forms no basis to request charity to study Torah, or to finance schools or temples. There is no comparison.] A Torah scholar must not attend affairs at all places, he must only engage in a meal if it's a mitzvah.*

*There is no need to talk further, but I will cite a story from the Gemara. Once, a man had a vineyard and thieves would rob his vines daily. Thereupon, the owner noticed he was missing grapes and this bothered him very much. The owner dried grapes into raisins, and some inevitably fell to the ground during this process. [The Torah permits fallen raisins to anyone, as the owner has no regard for them.] One day Rabbi Tarfon passed by this vineyard, saw the fallen raisins, and sat down to enjoy a few. The owner saw Rabbi Tarfon (whom he had never met face to face but knew by his fame). He thought he was the thief. The owner immediately jumped on Rabbi Tarfon, threw him into a sack, and carried him to the river to drown him. When Rabbi Tarfon realized what was going on, he screamed, "Woe to Rabbi Tarfon that this man killed him!" When the vineyard owner heard this, he dropped Rabbi Tarfon*

*and fled, as he thought he had committed a grave sin. The Gemara says that Rabbi Tarfon mourned that incident for the remainder of his life because he saved himself with the honor of Torah. [Rabbi Tarfon was wealthy and should have first resorted to paying off the thief to save his life.]*

*Another story is related guarding Rabbi Yebuda Hanassi. He too was wealthy. During the famine, Rabbi Yebuda Hanassi allowed any Torah scholar to eat from his food. Rav Yonasan ben Amram came to Rabbi Yebuda Hanassi, who did not recognize Rav Yonasan ben Amram. Rabbi Yebuda Hanassi asked him if he knew the Written Laws. He said, "No." He asked if he learned the Oral law. He said, "No." Rabbi Yebuda Hanassi asked, "Why should I support you?" Rav Yonasan ben Amram replied, "Feed me like a dog and a raven, just like God supports his creatures." So he fed him. Later on, Rabbi Yebuda regretted his decision to support an "ignoramus." They said to him, "Maybe that was your student Rav Yonasan who didn't want to utilize the honor of Torah when he could have avoided it and even through trickery." Rabbi Yebuda Hanassi investigated the matter and found that to be the case.*

*These two stories will quiet anyone of the other opinion.*

*However, what did the Torah permit for a Torah scholar? A businessman can take money from a Torah scholar, invest it, and give all the profits to the scholar. [In such a case, the businessman didn't become the benefactor to the Torah. The principle belonged to the Torah scholar.] One who performs such kindness earns a great reward in the Yeshiva shel Ma'alab, the heavenly yeshiva. As it is written, "For in the shade of wisdom is the shade of money" (Kobehes 7:12).*

*Also permissible for a Torah scholar is to sell his goods before all others at the open market. And he is to buy goods first as well. God established these [rules] for the Torah scholar just like priestly gifts and tithes for the Levite. These were permitted because businessmen do this for each other. Therefore, the Torah scholar should go first for he should be as valuable as a respectable citizen.*

*Also, the Torah removed from the Torah scholar all taxes and payments for military support and finances to fortify the city ... regardless if the Torah scholar is wealthy. Rav Yosef Halevi exempted Torah scholars from taxes, even though other citizens were poor. Similarly, the Torah exempts a priest from the half-shekel.*

Maimonides teaches that profanation of God's name operates on both the societal and the individual level. The societal level includes two forms: 1. It creates the impression that there can exist a Torah benefactor, and 2. It gives the idea that Torah is a "profession" where one can earn money like other professions.

On the individual level, the story of Rabbi Tarfon depicts how he forfeited the appreciation of Torah purely for itself. Rabbi Tarfon benefitted from his fame as a scholar. This plagued him all his remaining years. Rav Yonasan teaches how careful he was not to render Torah into a commodity. Although Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi was within his rights to make his offer, Rav Yonasan refused to use his status as a Torah scholar to earn anything. This would have destroyed him.

King Solomon wrote, "Better is he that is of lowly status and works as a servant than he who acts too important [to work] and lacks bread" (Prov. 12:9). There is a certain type of ego that expresses itself in the inability to work: "It's too low a job for me."

Maimonides' point in relating these stories teaches that the rabbis never felt work was degrading. These rabbis were authors of our Oral Law, yet they accepted menial labor that others would look down upon. The permissions given to the Torah scholar means he is not excluded from

work. But within the realm of the work, he is given benefits.

Levites, as an institution, don't work. But if a Torah scholar would be exempt from work, or could obtain monetary gain, that would cause the worst possible outcome of Torah exploitation. That would be a personal gain unlike the institution of the Levites. (Institutional society classes cannot be viewed as personal exploitation.)

The last halacha in Hilchos Zechiya Umatanna says as follows:

*The fully righteous people and men of deeds never accepted a gift from man. Rather, they trusted in God, blessed be His name, and not in princes, as it is written, "He who hates gifts lives" (Prov. 15:27).*

Maimonides stresses that these men trusted in God. The importance of this trait is that they wished not to get caught up in the psychological dependency on man. This breaks man's relationship with God and must be avoided. This is middus chassidus, over and above the law, but inherently there is nothing wrong with it. But if one is not subject to this pitfall of accepting help from his fellow man, like Yissachar accepting support from Zevulun, then there is no problem. But this was a case where Zevulun made an

offer to his brother, not one of Yissachar requesting support. Hillel too followed this practice; he wouldn't request or accept gifts.

Pirkei Avos offers amazing psychological insight. This explains why here in Avos we keep reading, "And he received from him..." time and again. This teaches that without the transmission, one rabbi from the other, all the way back to Sinai, the rabbis would not have made such insights. Without Torah transmission, it would take many generations to expand human knowledge to spot these many amazing insights into the human psyche.

## 1:14 INSTINCTS, KNOWLEDGE, SELF-IMAGE, REPENTANCE, AND PERFECTION

HE [HILLEL] USED TO SAY: "IF I AM NOT FOR MYSELF, WHO WILL BE FOR ME? AND WHEN I AM FOR MYSELF ALONE, WHAT AM I? AND IF NOT NOW, WHEN?"

Rabbeinu Yona says if a person himself is not the drive

behind his motivation to act, motivation from others will be but temporary. Pep talks help momentarily. But when man alone changes himself, this is lasting. Why is this so? Do we not find cases where a person changes his life because of input from others?

People act for one of two reasons. One sees a goal and acts to achieve it. Alternatively, imagined peer approval motivates man to obtain that approval. This second motivational type is temporary. Why? It is due only to a momentary identification with others that one abandons his true desires. But as a person followed his own desires before this momentary identification, he will return to himself after that identification wanes. Sigmund Freud said a resolution based on the superego is like a drunkard's resolution to stop drinking, which lasts only until the drunkard arrives at the next bar.

However, the question is raised from the story of Joseph, who refrained from approaching Potiphar's wife based on a superego emotion that came from following his father's teachings. Nonetheless, this was a permanent change in Joseph's makeup.

We must understand that man's self-image is a powerful force that prevents him from doing a lot of things, and in a permanent way. Most people don't refrain from evil based on their knowledge. They act or refrain from activ-

ity to maintain an acceptable self-image. When Joseph recalled his father's image, this helped him permanently cease his pursuit of his master's wife. That image of his father became part of his own self-image. Man's self-image is so powerful it can keep the id in check, even to the point of neuroses. This is the meaning behind, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" Rabbeinu Yona teaches that man's motivation must be part of himself and not an external influence that is sure to wane over time.

AND WHEN I AM FOR MYSELF ALONE,  
WHAT AM I?

This refers to the frustration inherent in the pursuit of perfection. Much effort is required to perfect oneself. And whatever advances one makes are minute. The notion that man can make big changes in himself is an ego fantasy. An honest person will admit that at the root of his motivation and accomplishments are base instincts. This is difficult to accept.

Hillel taught these lessons so that man would not strive based on false reasoning. When Hillel removed these false motivations, he replaced them with true motivation: There is no alternative. A more perfected life is more enjoyable

than the alternative. But it will not offer the satisfaction of supporting the self-image. Christianity caters to the self-image with its depiction of sainthood, purity, and other notions. This explains its great success for it appeals to man's self-image. But Judaism demands that man recognize the self-image lifestyle as false.

Why can't man change? Rabbeinu Yona explains "For man is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21) to mean that man is predominantly guided and controlled by unconscious instincts. Since man is under this control, when we think we have changed ourselves, we have simply swapped one instinctual drive for another. After our "change," we are still in that state of "evil from our youth." In terms of approaching truth and reality, we are just as distant from that goal as we were before the change. How then can man change at all? It is only through knowledge, of which man can obtain but a small amount. Compared to the instincts, that knowledge is obscured by a great ratio. However, knowledge has a certain strength that instincts do not have. Additionally, any headway knowledge makes is permanent.

So, what is more powerful: instincts or knowledge? It depends. If we discuss which one exerts greater force, it is the instincts. They are so powerful, they can completely block out the mind. But after the instincts subside, man can repent. And although the instincts are present even during

repentance, whatever progress man makes in repentance is permanent. Man clips off a small part of the instincts. But the sum total of change is very small. This is why in Judaism there are no perfect personalities. Even Moshe sinned. No human being can rise above his instinctual nature.

The reason why the change is permanent is because man desires what is good. And when man sees truth with 100 percent clarity, he will not deny it. Most people identify happiness with objects. But a Torah scholar can abandon objects when his mind tells him the object cannot provide happiness. He can change. But there is an inverse ratio: the more knowledge man attains of how the instincts work and how powerful they are, the less capable he feels of conquering them. Real perfection demands this level of humility.

Understanding this mishna requires many years of experience in working on one's perfection. This is a lengthy process where one who is on this path continues to see new "scenery" his entire life. His mind learns more and more and he changes himself over time. This person is very different from a typical person, who is motivated by his instincts. This mishna is based on the experiences encountered by people who pursue perfection. Therefore, it will take some time to fully appreciate Hillel's words.

## AND IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Rabbeinu Yona says, one should not say, “I am too busy today to change myself, I’ll do so tomorrow.” Why? Because maybe you won’t do so tomorrow. As perfection requires tremendous effort and all of one’s energies, shouldn’t one select a time when he can apply both to his best abilities? Thus, if tomorrow is an opportune time, why are we told not to wait? Additionally, what is meant by “maybe you won’t do so tomorrow?”

Rabbeinu Yona provides a different reason, namely, one cannot make up for a lost day. How does Rabbeinu Yona go against the rabbis who say, “Maybe you won’t do so tomorrow?”

People have inconsistent feelings about reality. While one may want to do a perfect job, he thinks, “Since I desire to do a perfect job, God will ensure I have the time to do this.” But this is not true. A person must face the stark reality and increase his chances at attaining perfection. “And David was intelligent in all his ways and God was with him” (I Sam. 18:14). King David lead a purely intelligent life.

Rabbeinu Yona teaches that people don’t want to recognize the stark cold reality in front of them, that they must work out their perfection within this reality. Instead,

people imagine there is some force guiding them toward perfection, since they have the proper intentions. It is this emotion that enables people to think, “When I have the opportunity, I’ll change.” This is a false emotion that disguises itself in a religious guise. But the stark reality is that it might never occur that the pieces will magically fall into place. (We hear this expressed so often today: “Everything happens for a reason,” and, “Things will work out in the end.”) When a person says to himself, “God will guide me,” how does he know this? Did God tell him so? Where is his guarantee? This is false.

The rabbis teach us to repent one day before our death. They also instruct us to divide our learning into thirds: one third in the Written Law, one third in the Oral Law, and one third in the Gemara. One should not say he will study the Written Law for 20 years, the Oral Law for the next 20 years, and the Gemara for the following 20 years. This is because he has no knowledge of what tomorrow may bring. Therefore, he should study each of the three topics every day. Similarly, one should repent every day since he does not know what tomorrow may bring. Stark reality demands that we live in the moment.

Rabbeinu Yona identifies this false security: “God will orchestrate a time for me to improve myself.” Man seeks the perfect situation to perfect himself, when he is calm

and has all of his energies. But that time may never arrive. Therefore, he must use the imperfect present. Man is obligated every day to perfect himself for he does not know if he will ever obtain that opportune situation for perfection.

King Solomon shares insight into the lazy man:

*I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding, and it was all grown over with thistles, the face thereof was covered with nettles, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. Then I beheld, and considered well; I saw, and received instruction. 'Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep' [said the lazy man]. So shall your poverty come as a runner, and your want as an armed man" (Prov. 24:30-34).*

The lazy man is irrational regarding his time expenditure. Minimal daily upkeep could have prevented the ultimate tremendous loss. The broken wall means that once one system breaks, other matters are negatively affected. Once the vineyard became overgrown, it also damaged the stone wall. This man who is void of understanding lost tremendous property because he was irrational. Rabbeinu Yona equates the vineyard to the soul.

King Solomon too is not concerned with a vineyard. This metaphor of the soul teaches that one who does not care for

himself, and lets himself go, will unleash wild instinctual forces that will lead to further instinctual freedom and self-destruction. Laziness plays a large role in man's undoing and in his failure to perfect himself.

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Another explanation is that if one does not perfect himself in his youth, it will be impossible to accomplish in old age, as King David says, "That our sons are as plants, grown in their youth" (Psalms 144:12). Youth is when one can train one's character, as one can bend a young, soft shoot. But as man ages, he becomes like a plant: stiff and not as susceptible to change.

King Solomon too addresses this point: "Train a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

Once older, wherein lies the difficulty to change? Once the psychic energy has made trends, it becomes difficult to change those routes. The mind will then always view those objects as sources of pleasure. The greatest difficulty in changing one's self is giving up the objects of happiness. This applies to the average person who seeks "objects" to

attain his happiness. This is the meaning of both verses.

But a wise man is not attached to objects: He seeks happiness, not objects. A perfected person is not fixed in his ways. He has seen how being open to new ideas provides happiness. And in his old age he is not stubborn. But the average person has experienced repeated disappointments. He has become traumatized into a pattern of thinking that he must resign himself to his fate. In youth man is open to opportunities. But in old age, the long string of disappointments inhibits any consideration for change or hopes for great happiness.

Judaism's philosophy is to pursue happiness in the world of thought. God designed man with great energies that find their full satisfaction when pursuing thought. A Torah scholar enjoys that youthful excitement all his years. King David writes, "They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and richness. To declare that the Lord is upright, my rock, in whom there is no flaw" (Psalms 92:14,15). The wise man, even in old age, attains his desire for satisfaction. He praises God saying, "In whom there is no flaw." Man can attain happiness his entire life. The lifestyle that leads to happiness is only through wisdom. The wise man enjoys pleasure and excitement every day.

In contrast, the businessman perpetually seeks advancement because of his dissatisfaction. Had he been happy, he

would not seek any change in his status. Man's desperation and yearning to be happy leads him to follow the illusion that success will translate into happiness. Gemara Sanhedrin states that they "Tied up the instinctual drives" and the entire world stopped. This means that man's fantasies and instincts keep him going. When man chases a fantasy, he believes its promise of happiness, regardless of his friend's warnings that what he chases is pure fantasy. Man's need for happiness is so great, he is forced to believe that unlike his friends, he is different and he will find happiness in the objects of his desire. The meaning of the Gemara is that once the fantasies are tied up, all that remains is reality, and reality tells man he won't find the fantasy pleasures he seeks. That is why the world stopped.

Seeking happiness from business also carries with it another frustration. As a professional is sought for his expertise in one area, he finds himself repeating the same activities year after monotonous year. The human need for change and variety reacts to this monotony with boredom and dissatisfaction. But a life focused on learning and thought yields novelty and change every day. Man finds a refreshing life and is never bored.

By nature, physical pursuits are limited. Even an inventor who experiences more change than an architect—whose drawings are primarily the same but in different

forms—spends weeks and months in similar activities until he finds a solution. Histories of inventors like Thomas Edison do not depict very happy lives.

But in the pursuit of wisdom there are numerous unique areas of exploration that provide man with the essential variety and novelty our emotions crave to find happiness. From the Gemara and the Mishna, to Chumash, Proverbs, Koheles, and halacha, one never tires. In fact, learning is an open system where a rebbe can prepare a shiur for three hours and deliver a totally different class. The students' questions and the rebbe's own creativity will change the course of the shiur many times, adding more variety.

When we study Pirkei Avos, we study the ultimate perfected state. This doesn't mean one must immediately abandon his business. One should leave his mind open to studying all possibilities. One must not fear studying a certain area, even though it is not in-line with his current level of perfection.

There are two considerations in selecting a livelihood. The first is not to seek a pleasurable profession. Meaning, don't get caught up in the illusion that you will find pleasure in the profession. This leads to dissatisfaction, as we have said. Rather, find a profession that is not distasteful, and that will not lead to dissatisfaction, so there will be no anticipation for pleasure that ends in frustration. The

second consideration it is to find a profession yielding the greatest return for the smallest amount of labor. This will offer the greatest amount of free time to pursue wisdom. If one must toil four hours a day at a job that doesn't offer much satisfaction, but he can look forward to eight hours a day of study, he will be a very happy person.

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Rabbeinu Yona explains why repentance in old age is not a true repentance: "In those advanced years, one's instinctual drives are weak; his lusts are not as sweet, and there is no desire for the pleasures of sin." Aristotle said, "The mark of youth is the search for pleasure; the mark of old age is the avoidance of pain." Rabbeinu Yona continues: "And this is the reason one repents, and on this matter it is stated, 'And remember your Creator in the days of your youth when the evil days have not yet come, and you reach the years when you say, I do not desire them'" (Koheles 12:1). In this verse, King Solomon discusses the elderly as living without enjoyments, although the desire for those enjoyments still exists. The old person lives on because he can't kill himself, but due to his physical weakness, he has

no pleasure. A person's psyche never ages, the need for enjoyment never wanes. Depression sets in since the need for satisfaction cannot be satisfied. The halacha (law) states that an elderly person, even the wisest man, cannot sit on a beis din (Jewish court). This is because his dissatisfaction leads to viciousness; he is no longer objective. Similarly, one who has no children cannot sit on a beis din, for he does not possess mercy, which is learned through having children. The bridge to identification with others is one's children, and identification is a requirement for a judge.

One might think that old age—the state when the pleasures are failing—is an optimum time for repentance. Why then does King Solomon teach that we must repent when we're younger?

Maimonides says the optimal time for complete repentance (teshuvah gemura) is when one is still in his full strength/desires, yet he refrains from sin. But if one refrains from sin in old age, at a time when he can no longer sin, although this is not complete repentance, it is nonetheless repentance. Perhaps Maimonides should not have written "at a time" when he can no longer sin, rather, "because he cannot do the sin." What does he mean by "at a time?"

King Solomon and Maimonides are teaching the same idea: Regardless of one's intentions, once one reaches a time where he cannot perform the sin, it's too late to re-

pent. Why is this so?

We must posit a relationship between one's physical well-being and his soul. For example, if one's brain suffers a severe blow, he can no longer perceive ideas. Thus, the soul operates at its optimum when the physical is unimpaired. This is during youth. But in old age, the body's weakness inhibits the soul from experiencing the good. In old age, man cannot partake of the good on the same level as a young man can. This is the distinction between repentance in old age as compared to repentance during youth. In as much as the soul is uninvolved, that is the measure of loss in performing the good, which includes repentance.

People have difficulty with the idea that in old age one can no longer perfect himself. This is due to the view that perfection is an ethical matter. But Judaism's view of perfection is in line with reality: Limited physical ability translates to limited perfection. In old age, man's psychological energies aren't powerful. He is lacking in his capacity to attach himself to the good. The time for repentance is during youth: "And remember your Creator in the days of your youth when the evil days have not yet come, and you reach the years when you say 'I do not desire them'" (Ibid.). One must remember God in his youth and attach himself to the proper life in order to avert the predicament in old-age where he no longer desires life. What King Solomon means

is that older people prefer death. However, if one follows Kings Solomon's advice and perfects himself in his youth, he will not reach the state of desiring death in old age. This is because perfected older people are not mournful over losing their physical vigor. For they had perfected themselves in youth and attached themselves to wisdom, which is unaffected by bodily weakness: "They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and richness. To declare that the Lord is upright, my rock, in whom there is no flaw" (Psalms 92:14,15).

All strides toward success require great energies, i.e., youthful vigor. While most people pursue success in financial, athletic, and other endeavors, a wise man/Torah scholar chooses to repent in his youth. He seeks perfection as his objective; to do so, one must harness his greatest energies, which are available only during youth. There is a deadline for repentance.

IF I AM NOT FOR ME, WHO WILL BE FOR ME?  
 AND WHEN I AM FOR MYSELF ALONE,  
 WHAT AM I?

Regarding the first statement, "If I am not for me, who will be for me?," Maimonides states, "All that man does

is purely due to his decisions alone. There is nothing else to which one can attribute his actions.” The second statement expresses the sentiment of not attaining his potential. What is the connection?

People enjoy the feeling that their life is guided by some force: “Everything happens for a reason,” and “All is bashert,” echo this feeling. Why do people delude themselves?

People are tremendously insecure. The Gemara says those who follow God based on fear are functioning on a very low level. These fears also drive people to inquire from a rebbe about direction in life. They lack the confidence to decide for themselves.

Man must know he can talk to God directly: “God is close to all who call Him, all who call Him in truth” (Psalms 145:18). We pray to no one else, and nothing else.

In our mishna, Hillel says that fate is a fantasy. The relationship between our two statements is as follows: Once a person confronts the reality that all depends on him alone, the very insecurity that drove him to believe in fate, also makes him feel, “What am I?” This is one of man’s most dreadful thoughts. Bashert, fate, rebbes, et al., are destructive, since the person feels other forces will guide his life. This convinces man to abandon decision-making. He will live without an intelligent plan, and he will ultimately fail.

## AND IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Man possesses two central fantasies: He feels he is guided by fate or destiny, and he feels immortal. Both are derived from the overestimation of the self. If one were realistic, he would arrive at two corresponding conclusions: He is the sole cause of change in his life, and he must change himself immediately. This mishna breaks down these two powerful fantasies.

In his Guide (book III, chap. XXXI) Maimonides discusses topics of this mishna:

*The philosophers have already explained how the bodily forces of man in his youth prevent the development of moral principles. In a greater measure this is the case as regards the purity of thought which man attains through the perfection of those ideas that lead him to an intense love of God. Man can by no means attain this so long as his bodily humours are hot. The more the forces of his body are weakened, and the fire of passion quenched, in the same measure does man's intellect increase in strength and light; his knowledge becomes purer, and he is happy with his knowledge. When this perfect man is stricken in age and is near death, his knowledge mightily increases, his joy in that knowledge grows greater, and his love for the object of his knowledge more*

*intense, and it is in this great delight that the soul separates from the body.*

*The intellect of these men remains then constantly in the same condition, since the obstacle is removed that at times has intervened between the intellect and the object of its action: it continues for ever in that great delight, which is not like bodily pleasure. We have explained this in our work, and others have explained it before us.*

This appears to contradict our previous point that old age doesn't allow for true perfection. For if in old-age one possesses greater intellect, should not his repentance and perfection be all that much greater?

The answer lies in the distinction between one who is subject to his passions, and one who follows his passions. The latter has consciously decided that following his passions is a good value. His soul then partakes of this corrupt lifestyle. Another way man's soul is involved in his passions is not by a sober selection, but through the powerful influence of the instincts during youth. In this case, the soul is in contradiction to the passions, but the passions overcome him.

Now, in directing the course of the soul toward the good life, this must be accomplished in youth. In old age, it is too difficult to change one's attachments. However, if in

youth the good has been established as the pursuit of wisdom, as one ages and his passions decrease, the soul grows stronger. Thus, when Maimonides says that in old age there is greater intellect, he means that once the good has been established (by pursuing wisdom in youth) and man is free from his passions, that good emerges to a greater degree. Ultimately, the soul finds its greatest form in death. Animals realize their prime in their youth, and death is a true end to their existence. Whereas man finds his ultimate state when he dies and the soul enjoys a purely metaphysical state attached to wisdom, uninhibited by the body and its passions. If man attaches himself to the good in youth, as he ages and the body weakens, his soul grows in this attachment to the good. Death is the highest level.

God designed man's life from youth through old age based on a precise overall plan. Any deviation will hurt man's chances for perfection. In youth, man's strength and vigor have advantages and disadvantages. In youth, man can make great breakthroughs, but tremendous energies are required, as Maimonides writes in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 7:1:

*It is [one] of the foundations of [our] faith that God conveys prophecy to man. Prophecy is bestowed only upon a very wise sage of a strong character, who is never over-*

*come by his natural inclinations in any regard. Instead, with his mind, he overcomes his natural inclinations at all times. He must [also] possess a very broad and accurate mental capacity. A person who is full of all these qualities and is physically sound [is fit for prophecy].*

Once man has achieved this prescription, the reduction of the passions is an advantage for him. God has designed life to be best suited for perfection. In youth, man possesses all the necessary characteristics to make strides toward perfection: God has given man vigor and strength during these years. Once man has conquered his passions in youth and has attached himself to a life pursuing wisdom, old age is a blessing.

“Knowledge” refers to two matters: the acquisition of ideas, and the soul’s state of valuing those ideas. The acquisition of ideas must be accomplished in youth. But for these ideas and truths to become part of man’s soul, man’s passions must be reduced. This will yield man’s highest state.

God designed man to go through a youthful period equipped with vigor to acquire the ideas, and then to pass into old age when the passions decrease and that wisdom is actualized to the highest degree. But if man passes through

his youth without acquiring wisdom and attaching himself to it, he cannot accomplish this in old age.

## 1:15 KNOWLEDGE, THE GOOD, AND CONFORMITY

SHAMMAI SAYS, “MAKE YOUR TORAH FIXED, SAY LITTLE AND DO MUCH, AND RECEIVE EVERY PERSON WITH A PLEASANT COUNTENANCE.”

Making Torah fixed means that one makes Torah the primary focus of his life. Rashi offers two opposing interrelations. He first says one should not set a time for Torah study, but the entire day should be set for Torah. He then says that one should set aside four or five parts of his day for Torah.

Rashi teaches that there are two levels. One level is where man recognizes the good, i.e., Torah. He is not automatically involved in learning, but he desires to acquire Torah wisdom. Rashi’s second level is where one must set fixed hours each day—“four or five parts,” as he writes. This will eventuate into learning the entire day, where Torah study

is “fixed”—his primary preoccupation. When one functions on this level, he might need to attend to his business, but in his mind, he is preoccupied with returning to his Torah study. To achieve this level, one must dedicate time each day. Suggesting four or five parts of each day means on this first level one must attain knowledge in all areas of Torah. It is a difficult process, so one must dedicate fixed hours each day. Once one has mastered all areas (Tanach, Mishna, Gemara, philosophy, halacha) his Torah learning becomes a spontaneous involvement. At this level, there is no more need for fixing times since he is always engaged.

Rabbeinu Yona cites Avos d’Rav Nasan:

*Whomever makes his Torah study the essence, and his work subordinate, he is made essential in the World to Come. But if he makes Torah subordinate and he makes his work the essence, even if he didn't sin, [as] he did not make Torah the essence, if he was fit to be in the World to Come, he will be secondary there.*

This means that all that remains in the World to Come is one’s attachment to Torah. If one’s essence in life is Torah, he will enjoy the highest level of existence in the World to Come. If, however, one’s whole life was attached to the physical, where work was his essence and Torah was

secondary, “He will be secondary in the World to Come” means he will not enjoy the World to Come to the greatest degree.

The rabbis teach, “If one learned Torah here but did not get all the answers, God will tell him the answers in the World to Come.” This means that in the World to Come one can gain knowledge. But the soul’s relationship to knowledge—one’s attachment to knowledge—takes place only through one’s actions while he is alive.

Maimonides says, “Make Torah the essence and all other pursuits should follow after it.” Ibn Tibbon learned this to mean that all other pursuits should support Torah. Maimonides adds, “If one is successful in the other pursuits, so be it. And if one is not successful, this is also fine.” Maimonides means that in all pursuits other than Torah, one must not feel disappointed if he is not successful, since all other pursuits were in fact never his true goal. All pursuits aside from Torah must be sought as a mere support for one’s Torah study. In the perfected life, there are no disappointments. One naturally engages in activities that will help him reach a higher level. And even if one sins, then he repents. But there is no place for disappointment. This is why Maimonides says, “If you succeed, so be it, but if you do not, this is inconsequential.” Disappointment reveals that the matter that one sought (other than Torah)

was the essence. Learning Torah is not goal-oriented. One learns to enjoy the experience, even a question. This is the proper relationship to Torah study.

SAY A LITTLE AND DO A LOT.

Avraham told the wayfarers he would prepare just a small amount of food. He did so in order that they would accept his hospitality. Had Avraham said he was going to prepare a large feast, the wayfarers would not accept his invitation, so as not to impose on him. Therefore, we ask, what type of proof can we derive from this case of Avraham “saying a little and doing a lot?” This was an exceptional case, not one from which we can make a general rule.

Rabbeinu Yona says when you wish to assure your friend you will help him, say a little but perform more than promised. This is derived from this case, where Avraham first said he would share just bread, but then prepared a large meal.

Rashi says that this applies only to areas of kindness and not to other areas like Torah study, where you pledge to learn a certain amount.

Maimonides says, “The wicked say a lot, but even

a little they don't do." An example is Ephron, who said much ("take it for free") but did nothing, accepting Avraham's full offer of payment for the Cave of the Patriarchs (Ma'aras Hamachpelah).

As we are discussing perfection and imperfection, what is the imperfection of the wicked person? It is clear: The wicked person we discuss (Ephron) is not one without a value system. The wicked man we describe has an ethical system, but it is only an apparent system. In contrast, the righteous man's ethical system is rooted in reality, where public opinion plays no role. The apparent ethical system of the wicked man is based on how others evaluate him. As the wicked man is drawn to please others, he is compelled to enunciate his intentions. Pleasing others demands that one presents in speech a plan that flatters himself.

Why does this apply only in the area of kindness? One attains public acclaim to the highest degree in matters where one person helps another; society views helping another human being as the greatest act. The wicked person says much but does little or nothing because he seeks to satisfy that emotion of garnering public acclaim. Once he publicly makes a pledge, and others believe him, he has already obtained his satisfaction. Now, in fulfilling his pledge, he finds very little satisfaction, which explains why the wicked person does nothing.

The righteous man operates within a different framework; the good is in one's actions, not in his speech. He has no enjoyment in discussing the matter. He speaks minimally and only if it's required to bring about the deed itself. Thus, the rabbis say that if one's speech is truly only to bring about the deed, he would speak very little and perform a lot. That's why the rabbis cited Avraham—he spoke only to bring about the deed and nothing else. If one's speech is only to bring about the deed, the deed will outweigh the speech by a great margin.

Rabbeinu Yona's second explanation refers to God's first redemption: Egypt. God described His planned redemption with only two words, but the actual redemption is described in many words. And as the prediction of future redemption fills volumes in the books of the prophets, how much more so will the actuality of that redemption fill even more pages? God too speaks with few words but does a lot.

Rabbeinu Yona says that one should seriously consider all the promises of the future redemption and know he will receive an amazing reward. Why should one think he will receive such a tremendous reward? Saadia Gaon said that a person can't fully know what the good is, but he should know what the nature of the good is, quantitatively.

Man possesses a fantastic untapped resource, which, if tapped, will improve his happiness unbelievably. The first

redemption from Egypt was an external conquest. The future redemption will be in internal conquest, where man achieves the utmost happiness by perfecting himself internally. That is why it says the day will come when one won't refer to God as the One who took us out of Egypt. This is because the future redemption will obscure the redemption of Egypt. One matter alone supersedes the miracles of Egypt: man's internal conquest and harnessing his resources where he finds his ultimate happiness in God's wisdom. Man will realize that all external conquests did not address his internal makeup, he was still imperfect. The current exile is one where our ideas are distorted by other religions. Therefore, Saadia Gaon says that the future redemption will be great, for man will be freed from fallacy and will finally experience truths. Saadia Gaon says that man should look forward to the future redemption. For as man's nature has been stifled by false religions during this exile, we deduce that the future redemption will be precisely from those fallacies. Knowing that this is the nature of the future redemption, Saadia Gaon says that we have a lot of good to look forward to. Even though our knowledge of the good is only quantitative, we are nonetheless driven toward the good that will be obtained in the future redemption.

AND RECEIVE EVERY PERSON WITH  
A PLEASANT COUNTENANCE.

Maimonides says that one should do business with others calmly and in a friendly manner. Rabbeinu Yona writes:

*“Look happy so others will like you.” [The reason being, you will have less stress. His second explanation is,] “Remove anger from yourself, which is a very poor character. Instead, act pleasantly. Also, you must overlook your own desires and your own will in place of the desires and the will of others. In this manner, you will have many friends. And you will protect yourself from others harming you. For one who shows himself as angry will invite the harm from others.”*

What does anger have to do with our statement of receiving everyone with a pleasant countenance? A person loses his temper occasionally, but meeting people is a daily occurrence, adding to the incongruity between our mishna and the topic of anger.

Why aren't people pleasant to one another? Rabbeinu Yona teaches that it's due to a constant undercurrent of anger. When some event occurs and a person responds with anger, the anger has nothing to do with that event. Rather, the event is an opportunity for the person to vent his own

preexisting frustrations. He was angry long before the event. King Solomon says, “Remove anger from your heart and remove evil from your flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity” (Koheles 11:10). What is the cause of this constant anger? A person is dissatisfied with reality because it does not conform to his wishes. Why does he vent his anger against others? Because he feels others are somehow to blame. “Remove evil from your flesh” means this anger will ruin the individual, one who is made of flesh blood.

What is the solution? Man’s failure is his refusal to accept external reality—situations and events—and his internal reality—his traits and how he reacts.

King Solomon ends with “For childhood and youth are vanity.” King Solomon teaches the cause of the anger is man’s inextricable tie to his infantile desires. One must remove himself from the subjective framework of demanding that things must go his way, and come to accept reality. One must remove his anger regarding matters that do not unfold as he wished; one must accept reality, and then one can find happiness. Otherwise, this anger will devour one’s flesh. And if one succeeds in making this internal change, he will be able to greet everyone with a calm and friendly countenance; there’s no reason not to. The reason people are not friendly is because of their internal frustration.

Rabbeinu Yona teaches that one should give in to oth-

ers and forfeit his own desires, allowing other peoples' desires to be realized. One must do so as the insistence on one's own desires is an infantile and egotistical expression. One insists on having things his way based on his desire to be right. However, this will cause discord. Conversely, allowing the other to fulfill his desires will create friendship, wherein you might benefit in the long run. Part of the problem in giving in to another person's desires is one's imagination that the other person will view him as a pushover. But the wise man views that imagined or even true estimation as irrelevant. In addition to retaining this person as a friend, you will have removed anger from your heart, as you disengaged from strife and stress. Peoples' nonsensical arguments are rooted in infantile causes, "For childhood and youth are vanity." One must consider how so many people get into these petty arguments that result in tremendous hatred. What follows is that the offended party makes up in his mind to get even, and then he does so, ruining the other person's life.

How do these three matters relate to each other? Again, Shammai tells us to fix our Torah study, speak little and do much, and receive all people in a friendly manner. Shammai's first instruction to fix our Torah study times is important, but alone it is insufficient. Wisdom will not be a person's salvation unless it is related to a person in

a specific manner. His next instruction regarding speech is to remove ourselves from engaging in the “apparent” good [like Ephron displayed], and seek what is truly good. Finally, Shammai advises us to conform to the reality of others. Receiving everyone with friendliness and forfeiting one’s own desires and will, releases us from the infantile state and wisely secures greater friendships. By obtaining knowledge, seeking what is inherently good, and changing our personalities to conform with reality, a person will be successful.

## 1:16 HALACHA AND RULINGS

RABBAN GAMLIEL SAYS, “MAKE A TEACHER FOR YOURSELF, REMOVE YOURSELF FROM DOUBT, AND DON’T BE IN THE HABIT OF TITHING BY ESTIMATION.”

Maimonides and Rabbeinu Yona take the same approach:

*The teacher here is not referring to a rebbe to learn from. Rather, this refers to rulings in halacha (Jewish law). “Make yourself a*

*rebbe” upon whom you can rely on to learn what is prohibited and what is permitted (issur v’better). “And you should remove yourself from doubt,” like the Jerusalem Gemara says, “Go find me an elder from the marketplace, upon whom I can rely [on his knowledge] and I will permit this item for you.” So also, we are commanded not to give tithes by estimation, for this is a doubtful matter.”*

Rashi learns, “Make a teacher for yourself ” literally: Learn from a rebbe to gain knowledge of the facts. Do this so you don’t have doubts about the subject matter. Learning independently generates many doubts.

Previously, we understood the instruction of “Make a teacher for yourself” as referring to one’s presumptuousness. Here we are told the reason for making a teacher for oneself is to remove oneself from doubts. For even if one abandons presumptuousness, and is careful to abide by the facts, if he doesn’t have enough facts, he will have doubts.

Rashi offers a second explanation: Do not rule on law and feel secure about it. For if one rules on something that is not clear-cut, he should inquire of his rebbe on the correctness of his ruling.

If in this second explanation one must inquire about his theory, does this not include an inquiry regarding the facts

as well, making Rashi's first explanation unnecessary? The answer: Man desires to feel self-sufficient. Relevant to our discussion, this has two expressions. One is that he can make Torah rulings by himself—although he has doubts he gives a ruling as he desires. A second expression regards a cautious individual who obtains all the facts, however, he rules without gaining clarity on his theories. Either way is wrong.

Rashi continues:

*Remove doubts: There should not exist any doubt in your heart regarding the principle of principles and the knowledge of the principles, but obtain certainty and knowledge in the mind's eye, for this is fundamental.*

We see Rashi had a conceptual approach with “principle of principles.” The way the rabbis learned was that first they organized the basic principles and then they arrived at one principle that unified all the principles. This was theoretical and conceptual learning.

Rashi says that this deals with learning. One has a certain relationship with Torah study. The purpose of life is to strengthen the bond of this relationship. If one has doubts regarding his Torah study, each doubt removes him from this bond. And his bond can be strong, provided he fastens

his mind's eye onto clear ideas.

Pirkei Avos is about the perfection one obtains from knowledge. It does not discuss knowledge per se. Rashi is saying the perfection that is obtained through knowledge is the relationship a person has with that knowledge. Doubts break that relationship.

How precisely does definite knowledge strengthen one's bond to knowledge? The soul has a desire: It strives for the absolute concept behind everything. If one has not arrived at the concept, there is frustration. This frustration is the factor that breaks that bond to knowledge. While one deliberates between two sides of a theory, there is frustration. But once one chooses one explanation and rejects the other, there is satisfaction.

We must know that among the rishonim, we find perhaps a few doubts; in the acharonim we find many doubts. This certainly creates a gap for us regarding our bond to our Torah knowledge.

Rabbeinu Yona writes:

*Accept your friend as a teacher, even though he is no wiser than yourself, and even if this person does not match your level of wisdom, in order to remove yourself from doubts. And the Jerusalem Talmud says, "Go get me an elder from the marketplace and I will rely on him and I will*

*make it permissible for you." Many times, a wise man will be in doubt when it comes to ruling. He will not be able to decide whether something is permissible or prohibited. And an error will occur through him. If one prohibits what is permissible, one destroys another Jew's money. What then should one do? Make your friend into your rebbe and rule according to his opinion even if the matter isn't so clear, and even to permit it, even though he isn't as intelligent as you. And the gaonim said, "If one person is in doubt and the other person is convinced [of a halachic ruling], the halacha goes in accord with the one who is convinced." This applies even regarding a student before his rebbe, where the student is convinced and the rebbe is in doubt: The halacha goes in accord with the student.*

Why does halacha follow the student in this case? This is not rare, as we have a similar principle to follow the majority, *acharei rabbim l'hatos*. Even though there might be a greater mind among the minority of judges, we follow the majority. This doesn't mean the numbers on the side of the majority somehow translate that view into a wiser position. Combining minds cannot yield greater wisdom. We rule in accord with the majority, as this is the system of halacha. Similarly, the Gemara says that they didn't rule in accord with Rav Meir because he was so abstract; they

couldn't grasp his thinking in order to rule according to his opinion.

The reason the student is followed when the rebbe is in doubt is because rulings cannot tolerate doubts. What is odd is that although we follow the student, the rebbe does not. How is this so? Since halacha is determined by one's mind, if one is in doubt, he is stuck. The onlooker follows the student since the rebbe's doubt removes him from rendering a position. The student is the party with a clear decision. But the rebbe didn't remove himself from the question, as he is still pondering the issue. For him, there remains a doubt. But the onlooker is unfamiliar with the area of inquiry and he seeks an authoritative view. Therefore, he can follow the student's decision. But the rebbe is involved with direct knowledge of the area of inquiry, and he came to a standstill. Therefore, he cannot rule based on authority.

Initially, the Rash was in doubt as to whether to recite two blessings or one when putting on tefillin. So he recited only one. But once he learned this area more fully, he changed his mind for he saw the reasoning to recite two blessings, and from then on he recited two blessings for he was no longer in doubt. Rav Chaim used to ask Rav Yitzchak Elchanan for his psak, halachic ruling. But he added, "Don't give me your reasons." This would have

forced Rav Chaim to use his mind and decide the ruling based on his own knowledge. He might arrive at a different conclusion and place himself in doubt as to whether he should follow himself or Rav Elchanan.

What then is the advice of “Make a teacher for yourself” and “Remove yourself from doubt?” Halacha demands confidence to decide a case. Therefore, one should not rely on someone less wise than himself. Now, at times, even a great mind can come to a standstill. Yet, he can respect another person’s intuition.

We question Rabbeinu Yona’s solution. He explains the dilemma in deciding in favor of either possibility. Prohibiting what is truly permissible would destroy the money of another Jew, while permitting what is truly prohibited causes a violation. How then does calling “an elder from the marketplace” resolve these problems?

When one is immersed in an area of Torah, he is to decide the halacha based on his primary knowledge. Otherwise, one must decide the halacha based on authority. How must one proceed when he comes to a standstill and cannot decide in favor of, or against, a given position? If one rules to prohibit the item in question, he destroys somebody else’s money. For he had the option of ruling based on authority. If one senses another person has good intuition in the area, he can rule the case based on his authority. Doing

so, he does not violate the Torah by destroying the money of another Jew or permit what is prohibited. Following an authority is a recognized means of ruling on a case. At times, deciding halacha by an authority will require a person to follow the ruling of a younger rabbi. This requires humility and a high degree of ethical perfection.

One who is not precise in halachic rulings is lacking in his relationship to the halachic system. So too, one who is not exact in his tithes is lacking in this relationship, explaining why this last point is also in our mishna.

Tithing is a practical example while deciding halacha is a theoretical example. A person relates to the body of Judaism in these two ways: practically and theoretically.

Why does the mishna warn about becoming “accustomed” to tithing by estimation? In discussing halacha, the mishna should have said, “Don’t estimate tithes.” Thus, the implication is that the mishna discusses character traits, not halacha. Meaning, if you allow yourself to estimate, you will start doing so more often, based on your character inclinations. A character trait that goes unchecked eventually encroaches other areas.

Rabbeinu Yona says there are two types of doubts. One is the indecisiveness about how a ruling should be decided. The second is when a wise man develops a new theory and understands that to be the clear truth. In this case, he

should not seek an “elder from the marketplace.”

How does halacha perfect man? This system takes man, who is emotional and tied to particulars, and makes his life one of “universals.” Nothing in halacha is particularized. Once a person’s life becomes imbued with halacha, the way he now lives reflects universal principles. In comparison to man, the rishonim discuss the “olam katon,” the minor world: the microcosm and the macrocosm. Man’s life reflects the cosmos. Just as the cosmos work by universal natural laws, so does the man who follows halacha. He has a form to his life; he is constantly involved in universal principles in all he does. In halacha, there are no particulars, there is no room for the emotions to break through.

A prime example is taken from Gemara Pesachim: “If you see the donkey of your enemy succumbing under its load...” The Gemara asks, “Is it permitted to hate him? [He is called ‘enemy.’] You must say this enemy is hated for doing some sin.” As such, it is a mitzvah to hate him. This teaches that there is no room for emotional likes and dislikes. One can dislike another only because he violated the Torah, and not because of some emotional issue. Then there is a mitzvah to hate him. The only justified hatred is toward someone who violates God’s will. Conversely, if someone did not break the system of Torah, one is not permitted to harbor negative feelings toward him.

Living in line with halacha daily one is constantly thinking in terms of objective reality. He is offered no expression of personal feelings. The world has no concept of objective ethics. The worldview of ethics is built on personal feelings and not on reason. Judaism's ethics are based on principles: "Love thy neighbor as thyself" means that a Torah-abiding Jew demands a specific treatment. One's value for himself must equal his value for his friend. This is based on the principle that both parties are equally God's creations, demanding equal appreciation and care. Hatred of Amalek is also a mitzvah. This is possible only if one loves God and the Torah. Amalek opposes God's will and your will. One must hate even a Jew who violates the Torah.

Maimonides says if one desires the lifestyle attached to universals, he must remove doubts, for this impedes halacha from his actions, thereby impeding his attachment to halacha's universals. What brings about doubts? It is the carelessness in avoiding due study and discovering Torah principles that guide rulings, and the carelessness in performance, like estimating tithes. As stated, man functions in the theoretical and the practical spheres.

(Rabbi Chait now cites Maimonides' Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishnah where he cites, "God has in His world only the four cubits of halacha.")

“GOD HAS IN HIS WORLD ONLY THE FOUR CUBITS OF HALACHA”

This quote from Gemara Berachos is completely misunderstood. Maimonides not only explains this quote, but he provides a methodology vital to understanding the rabbis and how their words were hidden. It is not so often that Maimonides is lengthy in his treatment of an area, or is as clear as he is here. What is Gemara (Talmud)? Rav Ashi addresses four categories: 1. Explanation of the Mishnah, 2. Final rulings of halacha (psak), 3. Innovative Amoraic theories, and 4. Drashos and aggadah (allegory/metaphor). Maimonides elaborates on this fourth category:

*A person should not belittle the value or benefit of drashos. People tend to look lightly upon drashos, feeling that the essence is halacha. One must not belittle drashos. On the contrary, drashos carry a tremendous purpose and benefit. Drashos include very deep hints and astonishments. Drashos teach man the good in life on a level unsurpassed. These statements by the rabbis' drashos reveal metaphysical matters and truths that the wise people hid from laymen. However, one who understands drashos literally will find that they contradict reason to the height of absurdity. The rabbis wrote this way for a purpose: to cause Torah students to study harder.*

Apparently, Maimonides held that to gain knowledge, one must work on an area himself. If one does not do so, the knowledge is of very little value. Hiding the true lesson in a drasha forces a great amount of study. Sometimes, making an idea so clear for someone will forfeit the student's thought process. Understanding a concept by using one's thinking renders that idea part of a person to a greater degree than receiving the idea passively. Maimonides continues:

*A second reason medrashim were disguised was to blind the eyes of the fools so they shouldn't see the truth. If the truth about these hidden topics had been revealed, foolish people would reject them. This is why we say one may not reveal the Torah's secrets to a fool. Why? Because their minds are not complete enough to behold the truth in its purity. The rabbis themselves hid Torah secrets from each other. One wise man found himself around another man who knew the secrets of creation, while he knew the secrets of metaphysics. He said to him, "You teach me about creation and I'll teach you about metaphysics." The latter agreed and taught him about creation. When he finished his lesson, he said, "Now you teach me metaphysics." The first wise man replied that he could not do so as he did not feel the other was ready for that knowledge. He did not keep metaphysics*

*concealed in order to retain a superiority over the other person. Even lowly individuals recognize such a trait as base. Certainly, great rabbis do not behave this way. The reason he kept metaphysics undisclosed was because he saw himself fit to learn creation, but that the other man was unfit to learn metaphysics. He learned to conceal matters from King Solomon, who said, "Honey and milk should be under your tongue" (Song 4:11).*

This is a metaphor for the idea that valuable matters should not be spoken. Things that are sweet to the soul, just as honey and milk are sweet to the palette, must be concealed. Metaphysics gives man tremendous enjoyment and happiness. This particular knowledge is really the happiness of man. And man cannot attain real happiness unless he has that knowledge. But that knowledge must be guarded because it can be very harmful to others.

*These matters cannot be taught or spoken about publicly. They are alluded to in hints and hidden phrases. Now, if God removes the coverings from a person's heart, from one whom He finds fit before Him, after this person prepared himself with various studies, he will then understand it according to the way his mind will allow. What a person can do in Torah study is to direct his heart to God and pray before*

*Him, and he should ask God to give him the knowledge and help him to reveal to him the secrets of the holy writings, just as we find King David did, as he said, "Open my eyes that I will gaze at the wonders of your Torah" (Psalms 119:18).*

It is interesting that Maimonides says the only way one can reach that level of wisdom is to pray to God to reveal those secrets. Apparently, Maimonides felt that a person would obtain this knowledge only through an act of God's providence. This knowledge is of a different type. It is not like knowledge of the subject. The nature of this knowledge is akin to honey and milk; it is "sweet."

This knowledge relates to a person in a different way: It immediately becomes part of the person. Maimonides says in his Guide that it is not necessary to use memory to retain this type of knowledge.

*When God reveals to a person what He may, the person will hide that knowledge from others, as we have said. And if he alludes to it, he will do so only to another who has complete knowledge and also lives properly.*

When Maimonides says “complete knowledge,” he does not refer to knowledge that is separate from a person. He refers to knowledge that perfects a person. It is not knowledge per se but includes its perfecting effect. For example, there were many great mathematicians who lived crazy lives, like Pascal. He was a genius but he was also partly insane. The knowledge we discuss is what the soul searches out to attain its perfection, providing the soul its greatest benefit. This knowledge reflects the way the soul lives.

*Therefore, for a person who is complete and attains this knowledge, it is not fitting to share this knowledge with anyone other than one who is greater than himself, or one who is as great as himself. Because if he should present this knowledge before a fool, even though the fool will not degrade him to his face, nonetheless he will not view that knowledge as something of value. Therefore, the wise man said, “Do not speak to a fool for he will degrade what you say” (Proverbs 23:9).*

King Solomon spoke in such metaphors, since it’s good for the public to understand metaphors. For when they reach perfection, they can reflect on them and understand their true meaning.

*Therefore, when one finds something from the rabbis' words that goes against reason, according to your own assessment, do not attribute this lacking [what you deem as unreasonable] to the rabbis, rather attribute it to your own mind. And when you see a metaphor whose plain meaning is far from your understanding, you should feel very bad that you don't understand the ideas and that you view the rabbis' words as foolish, that you are so far from the truth that the truth seems absurd to you.*

*Just as people are different physically, their minds differ as well, one mind being more perfect than another. And there is no doubt that a person who can understand a very abstract idea has a different type of mind than a person who doesn't understand it. Therefore, there are matters where to some people the idea is completely clear and to others that idea sounds impossible.*

Here, Maimonides expresses the concept of *emunas chochamim*, trusting the wise men. We cannot view the *chochamim* as we view others. The *chochamim* had tremendous minds. Those who truly appreciate their intellectual level know that others who view the *chochamim* as absurd do so because of their own ignorance. But this is a difficult

matter because people are presumptuous. When they read something and it makes sense to them, they assume they understand its true meaning. And when they read something that appears to be absurd, again they assume they have accurately assessed its meaning and reject it as false. Maimonides warns us from making this mistake regarding the words of the chochamim.

*One who knows well the study of medicine, mathematics, music, and understands physics, and possesses a good mind, but has no concept at all of geometry and astronomy, what will such a person say if you tell him the sun is more than 100 times larger than the earth [which appears to us as a small ball] and that the globe of the earth is 24,000 miles? There is no doubt that this person would not accept this idea. It would all seem impossible. And at first sight, he will consider such claims absurd. For he will say, "How was it possible for man, [standing] on one spot on the earth to be able to calculate the earth's circumference and the true size of the sun?" But when one studies geometry and astronomy, he learns that there are methods to calculate these measurements. Then the truth will become clear to him. We are describing a person with knowledge. How much more so for a person with no knowledge at all? And he never went through a process that prepared his mind for understanding. If we present*

*to such a person the metaphysical points found in medrashim, they will seem very far and distant from him, like the distance of the heavens from the earth. And he will not be able to understand anything at all from the medrashim. Therefore, we must establish the chochamims' truths in our hearts, and we must investigate them and not be too quick to view them as false. We must continue studying the chochamims' words until we grasp what they truly mean as far as possible for our minds. Because even those rabbis consider themselves inferior to those who preceded them. The hearts of the early rabbis were like a temple and those who followed were like the eye of a needle. Certainly are we who have lost a great amount of knowledge. We each have weakness of mind, overpowering desires, laziness in study, and we run after worldly matters.*

These last four critiques break down into two groups. Our inherent flaws include weakness of mind and overpowering desires. And our flawed activities include laziness in study and chasing worldly matters.

*Certainly we must admit that our inability to understand the rabbis is our own weakness. The only people who despise the rabbis' words are those who chase their own desires. The rabbis recognized the truth of these words and said one must*

*learn all night and even part of the day.  
The rabbis made Torah study the ultimate  
objective. And they said, "God only has in  
His world the four cubits of halacha alone"  
(Tal. Berachos 8a).*

The whole purpose of life is Torah, and a person should spend his life studying it. Maimonides refers to the study of Gemara, which encompasses all these matters concerning perfection.

Until one progresses in his learning and finally uncovers the true insights and meanings of medrashim, he won't fully grasp Maimonides' words. The experience is necessary. Maimonides talks at great length here as he realizes he is talking to a person who has never experienced this yet, making the convincing appeal of these ideas quite difficult. Maimonides emphasizes this lesson so many times in order that a person will at least accept this, that he might perfect himself (and how he views medrash). When someone finally grasps the deep insights of a medrash, which he initially thought was foolish, he will then know the high level of the rabbis' minds and that other medrashim too are not as they appear on the surface; they too must contain great wisdom.

Maimonides saw these truths from his own experience. He knew that people are presumptuous and will accept the

initial meaning that arises in their minds and dismiss medrash as ridiculous. Maimonides quotes the verse, “The wisdom of the wise is lost and the understanding of those with understanding is hidden” (Isaiah 29:14). He says we are intellectually weak.

Do not think that our scientific progress indicates that our generation possesses the wisdom Maimonides describes. The wisdom to which Maimonides refers is the wisdom of life that makes a person truly happy and satisfied. We were never further from this satisfaction than we are today. Although we have soared in technical knowledge, the world has not made any progress in real knowledge. Despite this technical knowledge, there is constant jeopardy of nations bombing each other. Maimonides makes it clear that this wisdom is attainable only when there is a supremacy in the part of man that loves wisdom and when the desires are suppressed. But if the desires reign, it is impossible to obtain this wisdom. It is not a matter of IQ. Man’s soul must be in a harmonious state and it requires an abstract mind. But one cannot advance the mind in this direction if there is no perfection.

A few questions: Why does Maimonides say that the person will understand a medrash but dismiss it as far-fetched? Why doesn’t he say the person will simply not understand the medrash? Additionally, why doesn’t Maimonides say

this knowledge will harm him, as he said in his Guide?

Addressing the second question first, how is knowledge injurious? A metaphysician operates in a different framework from the average person. He moves around a different “axle.” The average person doesn’t share the chocham’s motivations. When the average person learns that his system is false, he may abandon it. But he is also not yet ready to accept the chocham’s lifestyle. This is at least a valued level. But there are others further from reality who cannot even recognize the value of the chocham’s lifestyle. They have invested so much in their life choices that they cannot perceive its fault. In this case, a chocham wouldn’t represent the Torah’s philosophy. People so distant from reality would view the chocham’s life as ridiculous.

Regarding our first question, why doesn’t Maimonides say the person will simply not understand? We stated that Maimonides is describing a type of knowledge concerning how one should live. What prevents an average person from seeing these truths or his own imperfections? The average person relates to the general concept of a “philosophy of life,” but he is corrupt. Therefore, when a chocham presents a philosophy of life that conflicts with the average person’s values, he will reject it. This is why Maimonides doesn’t say he won’t understand. The average person in fact feels that he understands, but that the chocham’s life

is ridiculous. Thus, viewing the chocham's philosophy as wrong, the average person veers further away from a Torah lifestyle.

Therefore, the rabbis hid their ideas. They wanted people to realize not to take their words literally, but rather accept that medrashim contain deep ideas. But people did not do that; they understood the medrashim literally. The rabbis' method failed. Maimonides is trying to explain the rabbis' intent in order to make this method work.

Maimonides will now give an example of the rabbis' medrashim, presenting what it seems to mean on the surface and what it truly means.

*“God only has in His world the four cubits of halacha alone” (Tal. Berachos 8a). Now take a look at these things. If you try to understand them plainly, it will seem to you very far from the truth, as if the entire objective is the four cubits of halacha and everything else in science and other areas of wisdom are worthless. And in the time of Shem and Ever and those who followed them, when halacha did not yet exist, God had nothing in the world.*

We see from here that Maimonides held that in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever, they studied philosophy and the path of life and there was no halacha as of yet to be learned.

And although they did possess the Noahide Laws, the purpose of those laws was not halacha, but that people should fulfill those commands. A Noahide studies halacha for performance alone, and not for the sake of study. Therefore, one cannot say regarding Noahide Laws, “God only has in His world the four cubits of halacha alone.”

*But if you think about these things, you will find a deep concept and tremendous wisdom. You will find it encompasses many ideas. And now I will explain it to you so this should be an example for everything that you find, and therefore you should analyze this very carefully. [It appears Maimonides did not have the text “From the Temple’s destruction, God has only...” as we have in our version in Tal. Berachos 8a]*

*You should know that the earlier wise men had a great inquiry according to their knowledge, and they said, “Everything that exists must have a purpose, because there is nothing that is created that we see that has no purpose.” And when this became apparent to them, they began to analyze the purpose of all things. And they found that anything with a utility value has a definite purpose, for a person does not create an object for no reason, but he does so to use it. For instance, a silversmith will not create a bellow unless he first thought about how to use it; similarly regarding a hoe and the needle and all things of utility.*

*Now, of those creations that God's wisdom produced, there are some whose purpose we immediately see, while of others, we are ignorant of their purpose. Using knowledge alone we cannot understand the purpose of all the particulars, because it is impossible to know why nature produced all that it has; why some insects have wings and others do not, why some have four legs and others have fewer, and all of these particulars. One who has greater knowledge will have a greater understanding of these matters. King Solomon knew them in so far as man can know. The verse says how he spoke about the trees and the various animals (I Sam. 5:13).*

Maimonides did not disparage the knowledge of natural science; he did not say zoology is nonsense. Even King Solomon sought this knowledge. Maimonides felt that zoology contains great wisdom and that people should gain knowledge from it. Today, man finds more and more of the reasons behind nature's particulars.

*You must know one thing: All that is found in the sublunary world [animals, trees, and all else] are only here for man's benefit. And if you find that which you think doesn't benefit man, that is due to ignorance. And since we know that everything exists for man's benefit, we must identify man's purpose. If we do not know*

*man's purpose, we cannot know the purpose of everything else that exists on earth.*

*As those earlier wise men started to delve into investigating man's purpose, they saw animal life was simpler to understand [to classify their actions in a simpler way]. Whereas man is complex, with diverse actions, it becomes difficult to identify his purpose in being created. However, after the wise men investigated everything about man, they arrived at man's purpose: to understand abstract concepts in the knowledge of truth with clarity. For it is false to maintain that man's purpose is to eat and drink, or to engage in intercourse, or to build houses, or to be a king, for these are temporary and add nothing to man's essence.*

*Moreover, these are shared by animals, leaving no need for man as man is supposed to be differentiated from animals. And that which truly adds to man's essence and takes him from one step to another [moving man to higher levels of progress] is his knowledge. And as God created man for the purpose of knowledge, all other creations must be created so man engages in his purpose, which is the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, all sublunar existences must have as their purpose man's engagement in abstract concepts. And the most abstract concept is the concept of God's oneness. All other sciences are only a build-up to that one idea.*

*In order for a person to obtain this knowledge, you must be away from the instinctual desires: "The soul is destroyed with the strengthening of the body, and the soul is repaired with the destruction of the body." If a person values the physical, he is akin to an animal. Such a person cannot perceive abstract ideas. The purpose in this world is a person who has knowledge and proper character. Once a person lives this way in knowledge and actions, he is the objective of everything.*

*I want you to know that this which we have mentioned was known not only by the prophets but also by the wise men of other nations, even though they had no contact with the prophets. But they knew the only purpose for life is that man understands abstract ideas. I will quote one of the great philosophers, "God's purpose for man is that we be understanding and righteous" (Aristotle).*

If all was created for man, why was man created? Man was not created as a means for something else. Man was created as an inherent creation: part of an expression of God's nature to create. The rest of the universe was not created for man; it too is an expression of God's nature to create. Galaxies that are billions of years old have nothing to do with man. It is irrational to say otherwise. The ulti-

mate answer as to why man exists must relate to an expression of God's nature.

*If man preoccupies himself with chasing his desires, he will only think about eating, drinking, and intercourse. He becomes like an animal. The intellect will be unknown to such a person. Man is created for two purposes: knowledge and actions. Knowledge concerns man's entertaining the true metaphysical ideas and the actions are that man controls his instincts so he takes only what is necessary. Actions also apply to ethical perfection.*

“Action” refers to living in line with truth and perfection. Maimonides is not referring to acts of mitzvah (ma’aseh mitzvah). “Great is learning for it brings one to action” does not mean ma’aseh mitzvah, for learning is the greatest mitzvah; it too is an action. Action refers to living in accord with the true ideas.

*An intellectual person who chases his desires is not truly intellectual. Because the beginning of wisdom dictates that one should not partake of the physical pleasures except for what is necessary to maintain physical health. And as we complete Pirkei Avos, we will explain this properly.*

Why does chasing desires conflict with living intellectually? Maimonides holds that man partakes of two different worlds. Eating to satisfy a desire is not an isolated event. There is a whole world in which such a person engages. That world is a primitive part of man. We once identified this phenomenon as “psychological reality.” One doesn’t eat simply for a momentary satisfaction. It represents a whole mindset. One who is engaged in this infantile frame of mind cannot fathom ideas. He has too many emotions swaying him. You might find a hedonist who is a great mathematician or politician, but he cannot be a great metaphysician. A metaphysician must view objective reality, while one chasing his desires is functioning in a psychological state. (The latter’s mind is not engaged with the external objective world of abstract thought, but with the internal fantasy world of instinctual gratification.) So, while one can gratify his desires and work at mathematics, he will not be able to think about the universe and metaphysics. This is Maimonides’ idea. The hedonist is removed from the unity of God. Such people could not tolerate life as a metaphysician.

The rabbis talk about four people who studied metaphysics, “nichnassu l’pardes,” they entered the garden (Tal. Chagiga 14b). Rabbi Akiva alone was successful studying this area. Achare became a heretic, another died, and the

last of them lost his mind. This means they could not tolerate the view of objective reality, even though all of them were very wise. Do not think you can simply control your desires and suddenly become a great metaphysician.

*There are others who are in control of their desires but have no wisdom. These are better than the first.*

The following statement bears out this quote by Maimonides: “A fool cannot fear sin, and an average person will not become pious” (Avos 2:6).

The first person Maimonides describes previously possesses good intellect but does not control his desires. (By “desires” we refer to any emotion that overpowers a person.) It is interesting that the second person who controls his desires but has no wisdom is more perfect than the first. Why is this so? It is because he is not steeped in a false system like the first person: With all his knowledge, he is not living in reality but in the psychological world of instinctual gratification. The second person is not steeped in a false system, but he has not seen the true system. Maimonides says the second person is better, but he is not on the proper path. Once this man gains knowledge he will continue controlling his instincts, but in a different way.

Now, to whom does Maimonides advise to abandon his

desires? It cannot be to one who is steeped in his desires. He must be addressing the person who can control his energies; this person is on a high level. This is a very unusual state of mind, and not found that often. In Chapter 10 of his Hilchos Teshuvah (Laws of Repentance), Maimonides describes a person who serves God based on love: he studies Torah and performs mitzvos for their own sake and for no other reason. Maimonides adds that not every wise man merits this perfection. However, there is not much written on how to attain this level, and it is not a simple matter. For a person might strive to be more religious purely based on ego. In this case, he is no better off; he merely trades one emotion for another. Maimonides' advice is directed toward a rare person with the ability to control his energies.

Thus, Maimonides describes three personalities. One person is overpowered by a certain psychological force. It could be an appetitive force or an egotistical drive he engages to control his appetite. In either case the person is driven by a compulsion. Neither personality embodies perfection.

The second personality is one who lives in moderation. He views this as the proper way to live. He is also not attached to any fantasies. This person is more perfected than one with a brilliant mind who is overpowered by emotions, which pulls one completely out of reality.

The third person Maimonides discusses is on the “path of truth and the upright path.” He functions on a different plane. He is enraptured by a vision of ultimate reality. He is a metaphysician. The reason he lives in moderation is the result of the vision that he sees.

Again, the rabbis did not spell out how to attain this level. And it could be for good reason that they do not discuss it. For it is a dangerous path with many pitfalls. The rabbis gave basic ideas, but the person with the ability to attain this level will move toward this life on his own.

The permissiveness of today’s generation is its greatest flaw, and it procreates on its own. For when parents are permissive with their own desires, they will act the same toward their children’s desires. However, to progress toward perfection, one must be able to exert control over his desires. Thus, Maimonides says that one who conquers his inclinations is on a high level. Of course, on the highest level is one who worships God based on love. But to start, one must conquer his inclinations. And, as Maimonides says, he must do so with intelligence, as opposed to one who does so based on ego emotions. But I stress, without conquering one’s inclinations, you will not progress toward perfection. And this must be teamed with the pursuit of knowledge. Through both, one is on the path toward perfection.

*There remains one big question. A person will ask, "As everything God made must have a purpose, and as in the sublunar world man is the most perfect creature, and as man's objective is to perceive abstract concepts, why then did God create all the other people who cannot obtain that objective of abstract thought? And we see most people do not have any wisdom. Rather, they chase their desires. And people do not have metaphysical knowledge. And the person who despises the desires is one among many, and only one is found in many generations."*

*However, the answer as to why these many people exist is for two reasons. The first reason is to serve the one perfect individual. For if all people searched for knowledge, civilization would be lost in just a few days. Because a person has many needs, like plowing, reaping, grinding, cooking, and manufacturing utensils, all just to have food. And to make clothing, one would have to learn weaving, and for shelter one would have to learn architecture. And all of these matters are very time-consuming and complex and require much effort. And there are not sufficient years in Methuselab's lifetime to learn all of these skills, even to live a very meager existence. When will one find time to learn and gain wisdom?*

*For this reason, it is necessary that all oth-*

*er people exist. They will address all these needs so the wise man will readily find all his needs. Thereby, wisdom will exist.*

*How wonderful is the statement of the one who said, "If it wasn't for the crazy people, the world would be desolate." Because there is not to be found in the world a craziness like human craziness. Man is very weak, and travels from one part of the earth to another, traversing deserts and dangerous oceans in order to obtain some gold pieces. And if you observe men further, you notice that when he has collected enough of these gold pieces for which he has almost sacrificed his life, he will start dispersing all of his gold to people hired to construct a very strong building on a specific location that will last many, many years. And he knows himself that he will not live that long to benefit from what he has built. Is there such a craziness like this? And [man behaves] the same regarding all the world's entertainments.*

Maimonides discusses the fantasy and compulsion wherein man strives for something still unknown, risking health, life, peace of mind, and family in the process of acquiring possessions far beyond his necessities. Man doesn't even know what he is looking for. This is what Maimonides means by, "Is there a craziness like man?" In the animal kingdom, you do not find this: The animal

knows exactly what it needs. It hunts, eats, and when hungry again, it goes after its exact needs. But man doesn't know what he is chasing.

Maimonides then says that all the entertainments/pleasures man chases are “holalyluss v'sichluss” (madness and folly). They are not satisfying, yet people chase them as if they will provide happiness. Man exerts himself to purchase a car that drives a bit more smoothly than another; one in which he doesn't feel that many bumps, thinking that this slightly smoother drive will somehow offer happiness. And when he finds that this car does not provide that happiness, he will not learn from his mistake but will indulge his fantasy yet again and chase the next best car. Man's craziness is applicable to all his pursuits.

Maimonides says that the description “am haaretz” (people/man of the land) is given to such people who do not pursue abstract thought, defining their purpose as establishing the earth in pursuit of pleasures.

*But what [is the purpose] of a stupid fool who lives calmly with people serving him and working for him? And it is possible that one of his workers is a wise man.*

*Do not think the objective of the system is how you see that this fool should have people working for him and enjoying peace of mind. You are wrong. For this wealthy*

*fool will command his servants to build a tremendous palace and plant a vineyard like former kings. And it is possible this palace will be ready for a very righteous individual who is pious and who will arrive years later. And on one hot day he will walk by the palace to benefit from the shade of the palace wall and save his life [from the hot sun]. Or he will take from the vineyard from that desolate palace, from the grapes that still grow there, and he will make a cup of wine and he will drink it and save his life. This is God's way and his wisdom. He brings about matters in hidden ways from distant sources. This is why Ben Zoma said when he was on the Temple Mount and saw the Jews going up for the festival, "Blessed be He who created all of these [people] to serve me." For Ben Zoma was a unique person in his generation.*

*The second reason these many people exist, other than those obtaining abstract concepts, is to create a society for the wise man, not just to cater to his needs, but in order that there is a society. Maybe you will think that this is not so important. But you should know it is more important than the first reason. Man requires a certain psychological situation in which he can flourish. Man's psychological nature is deeper than first meets the eye. Society creates the required frame of mind. If the wise man was alone with just a few other wise individuals, he would not function properly.*

In his Guide, Maimonides says that when a person knows another person exists, this knowledge alone removes his loneliness, even though he does not interact with the other person. We cannot underestimate the importance of psychological well-being and what is necessary to promote it. Again, psychological equilibrium outweighs the first purpose: a society that produces the material needs for the wise man.

A person might ask what type of egocentric people were those like Ben Zoma, who said, “The world exists just for me”?

We must understand the motivation and state of mind of those like Ben Zoma. A person who appreciates God’s wisdom loses his self-estimation and loses the sight of himself. Such a person has a constant vision of God’s wisdom in front of his eyes. Therefore, Ben Zoma’s words had nothing to do with himself, and were in fact purely an appreciation for God system. He was admiring how God arranged the world in a manner where those seeking God’s wisdom are secured in obtaining it through a society that provides all that is necessary to do so.

*The whole purpose is to have this perfect individual. When you want to understand and learn from the words these two matters—wisdom and action—you will*

*know what is meant by “God only has in His world the four cubits of halacha.”*

Maimonides explains this quote in a general and a specific way. Generally, society provides the material needs necessary for a wise man to engage a life pursuing wisdom. The second way is in a specific manner via providence—hashgachah pratis—where all the wealth of that wealthy fool provides a wall so that years later a wise man benefits from its shade.

“God has in His world only the four cubits of halacha” means that both generally and specifically through providence, God relates to the wise man. The reason a person will be bothered that so many people will toil for years, building the palace and planting the vineyard for just for one wise man, is because of a flawed value system. If one had the correct view he would understand God’s entire objective is for the man who engages in the pursuit of wisdom. All else is truly unimportant, other than providing for the wise man’s needs.

Maimonides elucidated all these points as he wished to explain what medrashim (metaphors/allegories) are. Can we detect a formula he has shared?

Maimonides says halacha also refers to metaphysics. So why did the rabbis use the term halacha? They did so to

appeal to the masses.

Maimonides says there are three stages in understanding the rabbis. First is what appeals naturally regarding one who has no knowledge. The second stage is where one gains knowledge but thinks the rabbis make no sense. An example is the question cited previously regarding Shem and Ever. As they lived before the existence of halacha, how do we apply the statement “God has in His world only the four cubits of halacha” to their generation? And the third stage is when one gains knowledge and perceives what the rabbis meant in their medrashim. Such a person fully grasps that all that Maimonides wrote in these few pages is contained in the words “God has in His world only the four cubits of halacha.”

Maimonides says that this metaphor serves as an example for all others. Thus, every other medrash will follow these three stages: First it will seem incomprehensible, then one will have questions, and finally the truth will unfold, making perfect sense.

If one gains the knowledge, he will see how the rabbis’ words unfold and he will understand amazing ideas. Maimonides was emphatic that we do not view the rabbis’ words as foolish.

What convinces a person of a scientific truth is that it complies with reality. The same applies to Torah's wisdom: One sees a method of learning that continually reveals great wisdom. He then comes to realize the method is accurate. Many times, Maimonides experienced the rabbis' method of medrash. His hurdle was to share this method with people who never experienced medrash. Therefore, Maimonides used his own authority and stated matters emphatically. He employed the same emphatic authoritarian tone in his Guide. For example, he wrote "Know this well," "Read this over a few times," "Note it," etc. As Maimonides saw universal truths while his reader had not, he relied on his authority and emphasis to convince the reader to proceed and expect to find those concepts on his own. Aggadah and medrash are of the utmost importance because they teach perfection. Therefore, Maimonides said we must never underestimate the rabbis' words on these matters.

## 1:17 SPEECH AND PERFECTION

SHIMON, HIS SON, SAYS, “ALL MY DAYS I GREW UP AMONG THE SAGES, AND I DID NOT FIND ANYTHING GOOD FOR THE BODY EXCEPT SILENCE. AND THE EXPOSITION [OF TORAH] IS NOT WHAT IS ESSENTIAL, BUT THE ACTION. AND WHOMEVER INCREASES WORDS BRINGS SIN.”

Rashi comments:

*“Also a fool who is silent will be considered to be a wise man; the silent of lips [will be considered] an understanding man” (Prov. 17:28). And the inverse too is true. If one talks a lot with others, always responding immediately, even if he is wise, he will be considered a fool. Therefore, there is nothing as good as remaining silent until you understand.*

Proverbs appears to be offering political advice regarding how to appear intelligent. But Shimon ben Gamliel is discussing perfection. Of what relevance is this advice from Proverbs? Also, how does Rashi know the reverse is true, that even if one is a wise man and speaks a lot, he would appear to be a fool?

There is a part of man that senses truth about others. “The memory of the righteous will be a blessing, and the

reputation of the wicked will rot” (Prov. 10:7) refers not only to the righteous people remembering other righteous people in a good light. But the masses too, on some level, recognize the righteous person for who he was. There is a part of man that is in line with reality.

This is Rashi’s point in quoting Proverbs. He is not suggesting Proverbs offers a political angle on how to appear intelligent. Rather, he says that silence is the true mark of an intelligent person, and that others detect this truth.

But how exactly is the silent fool considered wise? It is not because he is perceived as a reflecting and pondering intellectual type. People recognize that a chocham (a wise man) directs his energies toward ideas. Also, as subjective as people may be, they respect that objective thought is the highest level. For example, people often accuse others of being “personally involved” and therefore unable to grasp the truth. People recognize the vital role which objective thought plays in arriving at truths.

Determining a truth requires the examination of real phenomena, and nothing else. And when one sees another person jumping to give his opinion, people know that this response is not due to a genuine concern for the topic. Rather, this quick response conveys an instinctive pressure—a social concern to demonstrate to others how intelligent one is. To some degree, all people are involved in

this behavior and they sense this drive in others who jump to offer opinions. However, when one sees another person remaining silent, he senses that he is examining the matter in order to arrive at a true understanding. Intuitively, people sense that the quiet individual does not need to display his intelligence. Such a person is not engaged in this social egotistical emotion. The existence of the mitzvah to do teshuvah is predicated on some awareness of our shortcomings. Similarly, we are intuitively aware of the shortcomings of those needy for social approval by their quick responses to present themselves as intelligent. We know this is false, and when others portray this behavior, we dismiss them as fools.

Rashi says the reverse is also true. A wise man who talks excessively will be viewed as a fool. This is because others sense that he is emotionally involved. His advice will then be discarded, no matter how good it was. Rav Soloveitchik said that his uncle, the Brisker Rav, spoke out against the anti-religious movements in Israel only on three occasions. He knew that despite the many other worthy issues, speaking out against all of them would cause others to disregard his views and he would lose his credibility. Therefore, he restrained his speech except for matters of great crisis.

How does Rashi's view relate to perfection? As stated, this is not merely political advice, but there is a reality to

this impulsive behavior. One who responds impulsively is driven by an emotion and will not examine the phenomena. This prevents him from arriving at any truth. Rav Shimon ben Gamliel learned from his many years among the chochamim that they were very careful to restrict their emotions from clouding any issue. They examined the phenomena alone.

Many rabbis of the preceding generations taught ethical lessons, (mussar), and referred to futile speech, divarim bitaylim, as one of the worst sins. At first, people don't view divarim bitaylim as that damaging. In many mussar yeshivas people would accept a taanis dibur, a vow of silence, upon themselves. They would focus on these divarim bitaylim that became a primary focus in self-perfection and mussar.

Maimonides comments:

*“With excessive speech sin will not cease, and he who restrains his lips is wise” (Prov. 10:19). The reason this is so is because most spoken words are extra and sinful. And when a person speaks a lot, he definitely sins since there will certainly be at least one word that isn't proper. One should make a fence around wisdom and that fence is silence. Silence was the trait through which the chochamim identified families of good character for marriage purposes.*

*In one of the Arabic ethical books, it records that one of the wise men was very silent. They asked why he behaved this way. He replied that after investigating the area of speech, he found it is comprised of four categories.*

*The first category is that of completely harmful speech containing no merit whatsoever. This includes speaking against others, cursing them, aggressive talk, and lewd speech. All people know that these forms of speech are foolish and wasteful.*

*The second category is speech that on one hand is beneficial, and on the other hand is harmful. Flattery is beneficial, but can simultaneously be harmful. If you flatter a man in order to derive some benefit from him, and you speak these words in the presence of others who dislike him, the flattery will arouse their hatred and incite them to harm the man you praise. Therefore, if possible, one should praise another person privately.*

*The third category of speech serves no purpose and causes no harm, like most of the stories of the masses. These include statements like, "How was this wall built?" or "How was this building made?" These words are extra and contain no benefit.*

*And the fourth category of speech concerns matters of complete benefit, like science and ethics and speech regarding human survival. This is fitting to discuss.*

*This wise man said, "Whenever I hear speech, I test it. If it belongs to the fourth category, I speak about it. But if it is from the other three categories, I keep silent." Those with knowledge of character said, "Ponder this man and his wisdom that he omitted three quarters of his speech. This is wisdom that is fit to follow."*

Human instinctual energies are directed toward speech through sublimation. This wise man held that speech is directed toward aggressiveness and sexual matters; but primarily, speech is aggressive. That is his first category of harmful and aggressive speech.

His second category is speech that is helpful but simultaneously aggressive. His case is interesting. One praises another in order to derive some benefit. But in doing so, he harms the one he praises by inciting envy and hatred in his enemies, and he is aware of his incitement. But he simply doesn't care, as his objective is to benefit himself.

This wise man's first two forms of speech categorize two distinct psychological phenomena. The first type is overt and intentionally harmful. But there is a second type ex-

pressing a very subtle manifestation of aggression. Man is devious, and sometimes a person will parenthetically harm another, which is defined as a subconscious aggression.

This wise man desired to convey these two types of aggression, explaining why he broke up these two expressions into two distinct categories of speech. The second category is always accompanied by some benefit to the speaker. That benefit obscures his subconscious aggression, and that benefit gives the speaker license to harm another in a subconscious way. It is amazing that they were aware of subconscious phenomena.

This wise man recognized it as an important trend in human nature. This type of speech is not an isolated event, but an objective mode of behavior. It is a “type” of speech.

The third category has no benefit and no harm. But the wise man held that one should refrain from such speech. Why? Similar to action, speech too is a means for instinctual expression. But speech is also a means for the highest expression: human thought. In thought, man encounters the Tzelem Elohim, the soul, and man uses speech to appreciate God’s endless wisdom; man acts Godly. Although there is no harm in the third category of speech, this wise man did not want to lose any of his energies that could have been applied to God’s wisdom by speaking mundane matters.

Rabbeinu Yona writes:

*Rav Shimon ben Lakish said, "At Sinai, we would have required two mouths. But as we have one, and cannot control ourselves from evil speech, certainly [this would be more difficult] with two mouths." He meant to say that the mouth that speaks Torah should not also speak about worldly futilities. For the holy wise men made themselves ministering vessels that should not be used for the mundane.*

Conceptually, Rav Shimon ben Lakish felt that the disparate functions of speaking Torah versus mundane speech demand two separate mouths. But reflecting on this, he retracted. For if one mouth would have been designated for mundane speech, this would endorse poor character: One mouth is thereby "permitted" to engage in poor speech. Rav Shimon ben Lakish decided that man is better off without that permissiveness, and is instead, directed to control his speech.

In the final chapter of his Guide, Maimonides describes four levels of human perfection:

*The ancient and the modern philosophers have shown that man can acquire four kinds of perfection. The first kind, the lowest, in the acquisition of which people spend their days, is perfection as regards*

*property—the possession of money, garments, furniture, servants, land, and the like; the possession of the title of a great king belongs to this class.*

You will notice Maimonides does not say this is wrong, rather it is the lowest level of perfection ... but it is still a perfection. A person's financial state is considered a perfection.

*There is no close connection between this possession and its possessor; it is a perfectly imaginary relation when on account of the great advantage a person derives from these possessions, he says, "This is my house, this is my servant, this is my money, and these are my hosts and armies." For when he examines himself he will find that all these things are external, and their qualities are entirely independent of the possessor. When, therefore, that relation ceases, he that has been a great king may one morning find that there is no difference between himself and the lowest person, and yet no change has taken place in the things that were ascribed to him. The philosophers have shown that he whose sole aim in all his exertions and endeavors is the possession of this kind of perfection only seeks perfectly imaginary and transient things; and even if these remain his property all his lifetime, they do not give him any perfection.*

*The second kind is more closely related to man's body than the first. It includes the perfection of the shape, constitution, and form of man's body; the utmost evenness of temperaments, and the proper order and strength of his limbs. This kind of perfection must likewise be excluded from forming our chief aim, because it is a perfection of the body, and man does not possess it as man but as a living being. He has this property besides in common with the lowest animal; and even if a person possesses the greatest possible strength, he could not be as strong as a mule, much less as strong as a lion or an elephant. He, therefore, can at the utmost have strength that might enable him to carry a heavy burden, or break a thick substance, or do similar things in which there is no great profit for the body. The soul derives no profit whatsoever from this kind of perfection.*

*The third kind of perfection is more closely connected with man himself than is the second perfection. It includes moral perfection, the highest degree of excellency in man's character. Most of the precepts aim at producing this perfection; but even this kind is only a preparation for another perfection, and is not sought for its own sake. For all moral principles concern the relation of man to his neighbor; the perfection of man's moral principles is, as it were, given to man for the benefit of mankind. Imagine a person is alone and*

*has no connection whatsoever with any other person, all his good moral principles are at rest; they are not required and give man no perfection whatsoever. These principles are only necessary and useful when man comes in contact with others.*

*The fourth kind of perfection is the true perfection of man: the possession of the highest intellectual faculties, the possession of such notions that lead to true metaphysical opinions regarding God. With this perfection man has obtained his final object. It gives him true human perfection; it remains to him alone; it gives him immortality, and on its account he is called man. Examine the first three kinds of perfection and you will find that if you possess them they are not your property but the property of others; according to the ordinary view, however, they belong to you and to others. But the last kind of perfection is exclusively yours; no one else owns any part of it, "They shall be only your own, and not strangers with you" (Prov. v. 17). Your aim must therefore be to attain this [fourth] perfection that is exclusively yours, and you ought not to continue to work and weary yourself for that which belongs to others, while neglecting your soul until it has entirely lost its original purity through the dominion of the bodily powers over it.*

There are many difficult points in Maimonides' words, but I will address one. Why does Maimonides have this exhortation to be concerned with the perfection that is "yours," and how exactly is it yours? He should have written that man's perfection is intellectual perfection. What does he add by saying it is "yours?"

Maimonides' formulation depends on his precise way of thinking, which differs from the way people think today. This explains why some of his ideas seem incongruous with ours. We must understand Maimonides' use of the word "perfection." He refers to fully actualizing something to which man relates. And man relates to four categories: property, his body, morality and psychology, and his intellect. "Perfection" in any one of these categories refers to bringing it to its full potential. (Therefore, the term perfection in these categories must not be confused with the term perfection when used in the phrase "the perfected man," which refers to man's true essence, i.e., his intellect.)

We question why Maimonides first calls these categories "perfections" but then says the perfection of property is "imaginary," that the perfection of the body "offers no profit whatsoever," and that moral perfections "give man no perfection whatsoever." Are these perfections, or not?

Maimonides maintains that the only worthwhile goal is that which is truly yours. This explains why Maimonides

defines four classifications of what is “yours.” People recognize this to be true. It is only human nature for man to pursue that which is his. Even when helping others, man does so because it provides him with some satisfaction. Man chases that which provides him a sense of attainment; he considers all four categories as attainments. (What man cannot obtain, he cannot view as a perfection for himself.)

As attainment is the category under which falls all possible perfections for man, Maimonides categorizes those attainments. He maintains the difference between a person who finds happiness and the true life and another person who does not, is a mistake regarding his selected attainments.

This explains Maimonides’ formulation. He first identifies property as an attainment, but then says man makes a mistake—he thinks he has a true possession in his property. Had man thought there was no real possession, he could not chase after property. But Maimonides refers to this first category of attainments as “perfectly imaginary and transient.” Yes, man has possessions, but it is a completely artificial and societal structure. Therefore, although property exists, insofar as man’s true perfection, property is nonexistent.

This also applies to the second category of bodily perfection. People look at health as the be all and end all. We

hear people say, “If you’ve got your health, you’ve got everything.” But Maimonides says, “The soul derives no profit whatsoever from this kind of perfection.”

The third category is psychological health. Proponents of this perfection say, “The main thing in life is that you’re happy inside.” Followers of this philosophy say that without psychological health, wealth and health don’t matter.

These three categories cater to one’s feeling that this is the real “me.” One person says, “I am wealthy.” Another says, “I am healthy; this is the real me.” And the third person says that the real me is my psyche. In all cases, the person feels he has attained that which is truly him. Therefore, Maimonides says that the only thing that is man, is his mind. Thus, only perfection of the intellect is true attainment. This alone is truly man, and this alone can make man happy.

Why does Maimonides give such an exhortation “not to follow the other categories,” and “make sure you go after the intellect, for this is truly yours?” His exhortation is necessary due to how man is raised and influenced by his parents and society. Man is subject to adopting values. Maimonides warns us of this blind adoption, but moreover, people don’t truly maintain their adopted views as truly their own. Man makes a mistake in following the opinions of others.

This error of adopting values from parents and society is the most significant influence against man's perfection. Therefore, Maimonides gives this exhortation. In one small recess of his mind, man lives to satisfy what he feels others value, and does not live for what he alone truly values. In the final chapter of his Guide, Maimonides describes King Solomon's quote as follows:

*The same idea is expressed in the beginning of those poems, which allegorically represent the state of our soul. "My mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard have I not kept" (Song 1:6).*

This means "I have been influenced by others." He thinks he is working for himself. But in the back of his mind he is trying to make others happy. One lives to satisfy how he imagines others will view him. Thereby, he neglects his own happiness and his own soul. Maimonides' words are invaluable. Even religious people vocalize their motives in being religious: "My father was religious, as was his father, and I will be religious too." To be happy, man himself must be the one who benefits, not others. And in intellectual pursuits alone, man is the one who receives the benefit. Living to satisfy a small piece of the mind desirous of pleasing others does not satisfy a person.

How does one do things only for himself? In the beginning of his Mishnah Torah, Maimonides says that when one gains knowledge of the universe, it creates a desire to know God. But, as a person's original mental environment commencing at infancy is purely social, when all his concerns relate to his family and people per se, one must change his mental environment. In his Guide, Maimonides also says that people on a higher level do not enjoy spending time around others.

From youth, man is constantly surrounded by and preoccupied with his parents and siblings. This becomes his whole world. But when man studies the universe and witnesses its tremendous wisdom and realizes that he is but a small speck on the planet, which itself is a small speck [in the universe], he changes his mental environment through intellectual growth. This is one method man can use to bring himself into reality.

A second method Maimonides uses to help man adapt to reality relates to human compulsion: a difficult matter to deal with. He suggests that one temporarily goes to the opposite extreme. This method neutralizes the compulsion, offering man an intellectual freedom from his former urges. [If one is greedy, he can eliminate his greed by being overly-charitable for a set amount of time.]

Maimonides' third and perhaps most important method is found in Hilchos Teshuvah:

*From the paths of teshuvah, a person should change his name and say, "I am not the same person I was before," and consider himself a totally different individual (Hilchos Teshuvah 2:5).*

Maimonides means that what prevents progress is self-love and a fixation to the self. A person thinks that the real self is what others like about him, such as his personality traits. This becomes his identity. And if a person loves these features about himself and considers this "himself," he will not change them for anything. This explains why Maimonides says that a baal teshuvah (one who repents) must abandon his identity. One must not fear changing, for these traits are not truly him.

A fourth method is the main method: revision/teshuvah. Here, one recoils and withdraws his energies from the emotions, and relives the situation of sinning in his mind. In teshuvah, one has a much better chance of working with his mind than in the former situation (when he functioned purely based on emotion). For in the former situation, the instincts were engaged and energies were taken away from the mind. In teshuvah, one withdraws his energies from

the outside world and uses his mind. This offers man the opportunity to discover things about himself and to change himself. Essentially, this is teshuvah.

What can a person do to perfect himself? He must first perfect himself in knowledge and know how to think properly. Pirkei Avos focuses on knowing the characteristics of perfection. This knowledge should remain in the back of one's mind. Through life's experiences, if one possesses Pirkei Avos' main pillars of perfection, as situations arise, man makes mental connections between those situations and his concepts of perfection. One can then apply those concepts of perfection to the present situation and perfect himself. This is how knowledge plays a role in perfection.

But there is another equally important area of knowledge: extreme honesty with oneself and his emotions. However, there is a false haughtiness that prevents the attainment of this type of knowledge. Humility is vital if one is to be honest with himself. One must love truth to the point of self-debasement. Man must recognize his character flaws and his faults. Being honest with his emotions, one must reflect many times on his actions by asking, "What was my underlying thought behind this action?" With humility, one gains more self-knowledge, which enables him to improve himself, correct himself, and attain great happiness, as he will be more in line with his true nature.

King David said, “I am a worm and not a man” (Psalms 22:7), a creature driven purely by its instinctual forces. This is humbling, but it is a beneficial realization that brings man in line with reality. A person must know his instincts and what underlies his character. If a person succeeds in this, he will remove much of the drive to act for the wrong motivation to please others. Maimonides said that man makes a mistake regarding which attainments he should go after. If one retains a false opinion of his self-estimation, he will continue living to please others and he will not attain happiness.

Returning to the categories of speech, Maimonides classifies speech into five categories. The previously cited four categories from the Arabic work classified speech philosophically. In contrast, Maimonides classified speech according to the Torah, i.e., practically.

Maimonides’ first category is obligatory speech, such as conversations about Torah and wisdom. His second category includes prohibited matters like bearing false testimony, lying, and slander. In his Hilchos Dayos 7:1, Maimonides defines slander (*rechilus*):

*One who slanders his fellow violates a negative command, as it says, “Do not go as a talebearer among your nation” (Lev. 19:16). Although one is not whipped for*

*this matter, it is a great sin and caused the killing of many Jews. Therefore, it is juxtaposed to, "Do not stand by the blood of your fellow" (Ibid.). Go and learn what occurred to Doeg the Edomite.*

*What is rechilus? One who loads himself with information, goes from one person to another and says, "This is what so-and-so said," or "This [is what] I heard about so-and-so."*

One who violates rechilus is not necessarily one who says, "So-and-so spoke against you," but anything that incites A against B is rechilus. Therefore, this violation occurs when one creates strife. He derives some enjoyment when he riles people up to fight against each other. Maimonides says such a person destroys the world.

*There is a sin far greater than this included in this prohibition, and it is lashon hara. This is one who speaks degradingly about his fellow, even though he speaks the truth.*

If this sin is worse, why is it not openly written about in the Torah? If lashon hara is worse, it should be the very prohibition, and not simply parenthetically subsumed under the prohibition of rechilus.

Maimonides supports the severity of lashon hara from

the excision (kares) mentioned in the prophets: “God should cut off all who speak smoothly; the tongue that speaks great matters” (Psalms 12:4).

Maimonides also cites another case of excision found in the prophets: One who has intercourse with a non-Jew (aramis). Maimonides says that one must not belittle this sin, even though there is no (prohibition of) niddah, nor is it listed in the prohibited sexual partners, and the Torah does not openly prohibit the woman to the man. (As these two sins are quite severe, we wonder why they are not highlighted in the Torah.)

We answer this question by distinguishing between the framework of Torah prohibitions and the framework of perfection. Torah prohibitions follow a different pattern, for Torah cannot legislate perfection. Torah can only set up certain laws that can lead one toward perfection. But perfection itself cannot be legislated; perfection is a result of Torah laws. In these two cases, we have the same situation.

The talebearer should not destroy the nation by creating strife. But lashon hara is a more egregious crime since one builds oneself up and feels elation by degrading another. Sins of ego are more difficult to correct. This is how lashon hara is worse. It is also harmful in that it prevents one from seeing his own faults. Additionally, the speaker assassinates a person’s character and ruins him socially. However,

the Torah could not openly legislate against lashon hara. Instead it says not to create strife, under which lashon hara is subsumed. Therefore, although lashon hara creates less strife, it is far more damaging. This explains why lashon hara is punishable with excision from the prophets, and this applies to all cases that are philosophically detrimental. As the Torah does not legislate perfection, it does not include lashon hara. But as Prophets discusses the purpose of the Torah, it can refer to perfection. Similarly, intercourse with a gentile woman is not as halachically severe as intercourse with a niddah. But as physical relations also create psychological ramifications, such a person will be transformed through this sexual bond with the idolatrous woman. This sin is viewed as approaching idol worship.

Maimonides' third category of speech is one we should avoid. This type of speech, which includes discussing novels, current events, and peoples' lives, offers no benefit. By partaking in such speech one neither rebels nor adheres to the Torah system, but it is recommended that one does not engage in such speech. Maimonides refers to this category as "futile speech." The pious (chassidim) veered away from this type of speech. Maimonides says, "About Rav, who was a student of Rav Chiyah, it was said that never in his life did he talk about such matters. Speech that degrades that which has value or praises that which is bad, also be-

longs to this category.”

Shouldn't this last type of speech belong to the category of prohibited speech?

The second category, prohibited speech, is speech that is destructive, like lashon hara. But this third category of futile speech differs as it is not destructive per se but is a sublimated form of instinctual gratification.

Man's nature has two parts. And as strange as it is, man switches between them many times. Man's distinction from animals is that he possesses a category in his mind of “the good.” That is, man must view all his actions as good (man must justify all that he does). Animals simply act without any thought. The verse states, “It has been told to you man what is good” (Micha 6:8). Once Adam sinned, he was given the faculty that discerns morality, i.e., good versus evil. Since then, man must filter his actions, determining if they are good or evil.

There are two areas that vie for the good. One is man's emotional life, which has been with him since his childhood. This part is closely related to the instincts. Man's other faculty that vies for the good is the intellect. Many times, using intelligence, a person will arrive at the good. But man does not always use his intellectual state of mind; he slips into an emotional state of mind, functioning in a different manner, which has its own definitions of the good.

One of the greatest problems for a person in discerning the true good is his attempt to unify these two states of mind. Man attempts to remove this intolerable dichotomized mindset through intellectualizing his emotional choice of the good. When a person knows he is living wrong emotionally, he attempts to justify his emotional choice. This distorts the accurate perception of the true good in life. A person living on a higher level should be able to tolerate two frames of mind. He should seek objective truth intellectually, but he must understand that at times, he will slip back into his emotions, which drive a person to believe that new cars and new suits are the true good. There is no logic behind the workings of the emotions.

A person must be able to tolerate this conflict between his two worlds. And as distant as he is from the good, because of his emotions, this must not prevent him from using his mind to accurately understand what is truly good and aim toward perfection. This is the purpose of Pirkei Avos: the study of the highest level of perfection. So, although one cannot instantly remove himself from his various emotions, he must allow these ideas in Pirkei Avos to sink in and register on his mind. (If he doesn't, he cannot progress.) Then, if he recognizes the true values, and as he lives he observes himself, life's experiences should eventually lead him to mold his nature according to those true

ideas and values. The Gemara says that one must stand up before the elderly, even gentiles. This is because the aged have gone through many life experiences that offer wisdom.

God created man to live for seventy or eighty years. The reason for a lifespan of this duration is that man should have certain experiences. A person who possesses the true ideas will be molded by those experiences and draw closer to the truth. But if one does not tolerate conflict, he will not perfect himself, for he will reject every idea that conflicts with his emotions. And once he rejects truth, there is no hope that this person will ever reach perfection.

In this matter, Judaism strongly differs from Christianity. Christianity upholds as virtuous the idea of a saint—a person who lives without sin. This idea is alien to Judaism. Even the greatest man must do teshuvah for every man sins: “For there is no man in the land who performs good and doesn’t sin” (Koheles 7:20).

A person who thinks he can avoid the conflict between the two states (emotional and intellectual) is living a false life. It is impossible; saints do not exist. This is a false vanity that stems from man’s ego—a detrimental attitude. Judaism demands that a person live in line with reality. Great chochamim were able to live with complete objectivity and were dedicated to an analysis of the true good in life. They

were free from emotional bias and any concern for the self.

Let us return to the previous topic. We questioned why Maimonides includes speech that degrades perfection in the third category. It seems that this type of speech should be included in category two: prohibited speech. The answer is there are two types of speech that degrade perfection. One is where a person teaches that the good values are bad, and vice versa. This type of speech is certainly prohibited. Maimonides categorizes a different type of derogatory speech in his third category: frivolous speech. For example, as a person jokes with friends he praises a lazy person. Or, in a joking manner, one makes light of a person who is very meticulous about valuable matters. Here, one praises a bad trait or degrades a good trait. Maimonides describes an emotional category, and when one slips into this emotional state, there is a new “good” that registers on his mind. This mindset carries a very great force.

The chochamim veered from this form of speech (as it distorts the correct concept of the truth). All the particular expressions of this type of speech, for example, “Why did this person get rich?” or “Why did this person die?” carry with them a different value system, in which, man cannot avoid engaging. This is the materialistic value system, and through speech one derives pleasure from it. We cannot say this speech is destructive as it is true regarding

the second category, but this type of speech is what people perceive to be the most enjoyable part of life. This is what we call entertainment; movies and television would fall under this category. Here, speech is used as an instrument to engage the materialistic value system, through which, one satisfies his instinctual energies. Maimonides says that although this speech is not prohibited, one is recommended against engaging in it.

Maimonides has a fourth category of speech that is advisable to speak, but not that we are obligated to talk of this topic, as is true regarding mitzvos. This fourth category includes songs, matters that uplift the soul, and praises of the chochamim. Learning proper character traits is also included in this category. However, shouldn't this study be included in the category of speech that is obligatory? The answer is that this category of speech is not analytical, as is true of an intellectual study. There are two types of emotions: destructive and constructive. This category of speech regards the good emotions that draw people toward the good life. One might not be in an intellectual state of mind at the moment, but such speech draws one toward the proper values. And as one does not commence life naturally attached to wisdom, but is in the emotional stage at first, this category of speech is helpful in redirecting a person in an emotionally appealing manner. (Maimonides speaks at

such length on this topic of speech as this is the method of perfection.)

Maimonides' fifth category is optional speech. This comprises business discussions. Maimonides says that one should minimize this speech, but if this is the case, shouldn't this type of speech also be prohibited? Maimonides answers that talking for the sake of obtaining emotional gratification is destructive. But business talk per se is not destructive (explaining why it does not belong in prohibited speech). Maimonides' explanation that people minimize such speech is in order that one maximizes his time in the ultimate good. In emotional speech, one harms himself every moment that he's talking. But one needs to engage in business. Therefore, one should speak only when needed and minimize his speech: this is to free his energies from discussing matters concerning his physical existence in order to be engaged in the higher area. The great chochamim tried to simplify their physical existences and reduce their physical needs. By doing so, they directed themselves to the higher part of their natures.

This category does not imprint on man a value of what is good. (This type of speech causes no damage per se.) Nevertheless, a person can attain greater perfection by minimizing this type of speech.

When Maimonides says it is fitting to "never" engage in

prohibited speech, I do not feel he means to suggest this practically, that we should aspire to reach the level of Rav. I believe he means this philosophically: We should appreciate the harm of such speech. But this doesn't alleviate the steps one must take to reduce his destructive speech. One must engage in some program of speech reduction.

As stated previously, this is the area of man's perfection. Since man doesn't so much act physically, but he sublimates all of his instincts through speech, it is in speech that lays human perfection. This explains the verse, "Who is the man who desires life, one who loves life and seeks good? The one who guards his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking lies" (Psalms 34:13,14).

As speech is man's sublimated form of instinctual gratification, it explains why there is such an emphasis on lashon hara. We sometimes feel the chochamim go a bit overboard with their warnings against lashon hara, but they did so for very good reason. Speech is the area where man enjoys psychical gratification and therefore where he perfects himself. If one wishes to change himself, he must address the area of the verbal. The fact that people work out their thoughts through speech further illustrates that speech isn't merely a result of thought, but a part of the very internal workings of man.

Many people do not achieve perfection because they

adopt societal norms and values. Society maintains that frustration and all that leads to a state of tension and frustration must be avoided. Judaism disagrees, maintaining a concept that conflicts with society. If one is to change the direction of his energies, he must undergo frustration. Frustration is a very good state; it indicates that one is re-directing his energies from one direction to another. Psychology too says that frustration is necessary to uncover emotional conflicts in order to cure the patient. But society preaches, “What feels good, is good,” thereby crippling people from enduring a constructive change of their emotional makeup. Maimonides says that no person is born in the perfect state: Man must change. Ultimately, in the perfected state, there is no frustration.

Maimonides writes:

*That area which man is advised to speak about, this is man's purpose. If man can speak in this all his days, this is the purpose.*

This means that the goal of abstention from negative speech is the engagement in the commanded type of speech (i.e., mitzvos, wisdom, perfection, and the like).

*A person should act as he speaks, as it says, “Pleasant are words spoken from the*

*mouth of one who performs them.” Also, “And the exposition [of Torah] is not what is essential, but the action” (Avos 1:7).*

People are most influenced through their attachment to another person. When a person witnesses someone preaching but not practicing, that is harmful. It conveys that the ideas espoused do not have to be carried out in action.

“Tzaddikim sing of God; the pleasant praise is that of the upright [people who act]” (Psalms 33:1). This is why people degrade a person who learns but doesn’t care for the upkeep of a beis medrash (study hall.) By not living in a proper way, one creates a profanation of God. Most people never rise above this level of judging others by their actions as opposed to their speech. “And the exposition [of Torah] is not what is essential, but the action” refers to the effect one has on others. People are affected by personalities, not by one’s learning.

Why does our mishna say that silence is best, as opposed to saying that proper speech is best? The answer is that silence is the state of frustration that one undergoes when in the process of redirecting his energies. Silence is what perfects a person. This is followed by “The exposition [of Torah] is not what is essential, but the action”—teaching that although one’s own perfection is through silence, in-

fluencing others toward the good requires action.

Maimonides writes, “Always teach students with brevity” (Hilchos Dayos 2:4). What is the harm in speaking at length? In fact, one of the ways to acquire Torah is through *arichus sifasayim*, elongated speech.

Maimonides does not refer to the number of words spoken. If the student requires a lengthier elucidation, the rebbe must accommodate him.

*And so with words of Torah and words of wisdom, his words should be minimal. But if his words are many and the matter is small, this is foolishness. And on this it is stated, “A dream comes in great matters, and the voice of the fool in many words” (Koheles 5:2).*

Man’s purpose is to partake in abstract ideas (truths). What prevents man from doing so is his emotions (which are expressed in speech). Therefore, man must avoid speaking too much even when discussing Torah. The part of the mind that avoids precise definitions (*svara*) is the same part of the mind that engages nonsensical matters. “Speaking minimally” refers to giving a precise definition, which is brief by nature. If one gives lengthy definitions, he is being descriptive and he is engaging the emotions/imagination. When one’s explanation goes on and on, he is not keying in

on the abstract essence of a definition that only the mind's eye can see. He is engaged in imagination.

A person uses description instead of abstract concepts because he doesn't believe in the abstract but in the physical representation of the abstract. And since he believes in the latter, he must deal with all representations. But a person who gives definitions deals only with the one abstract idea. Definition is briefer than description because it is the principle that defines the many cases and descriptions. (Namely, one can define "animal" as an animated instinctual creature without wisdom, or one can list many examples of animals. The former is briefer.)

Urging the teacher to use brevity—*derech kitzara*—the rabbis mean to teach in precise, yet abstract formulations. The final formulation must be brief, but one should discuss a matter [with elongated speech when necessary], which is one of the ways to acquire Torah. But if the final formulation is not brief, it indicates that the nonsensical part of the mind is involved.

"For a dream comes in many matters" (Ibid.). Behind all the matters there is one idea, but the representations are many. Why? Because dreams are the language of emotions and the emotions are attached to every physical representation and image. "And the voice of the fool [comes] in many words" (Ibid.). The fool is not that different from the

dreamer. He is tied to the emotions and to the world of descriptions. Maimonides uses this verse to teach that there is only one perfection: the world of the totally abstract, the shortest and most precise formulation.

One must remove himself from all nonsensical areas and engage only in thought. And thought too must be refined from all nonsense so that one ultimately finds himself in the world of the abstract. This is when man reaches the highest level.

Lashon Hakodesh (the Hebrew language) contains no references to sexuality. The existence of Lashon Hakodesh teaches a lesson that speech should be dedicated only to wisdom and to the control of the emotions. Man's perfection is through speech, as stated.

Maimonides now elucidates lashon hara:

*Man is in an unbelievable blindness. It is a very grave sin in which man stumbles regularly. And no one can avoid daily, avak lashon hara [lit. the dust of evil speech: a lesser form of evil speech]. It is preferable to avoid lashon hara itself.*

*Lashon hara is the act of repeating people's faults and reducing their stature in any manner. This applies to debasing a person for what he actually did. Lying would be motzi shem ra—character assassination. Both the speaker and the listener are sinners.*

*Lashon hara kills three people: the speaker, the listener, and the one spoken about. The listener is hurt more than the speaker.*

*What is the avak lashon hara? This is one who intimates to others the defects of people without clearly spelling out his words. King Solomon said [that this refers to] one who hints or alludes [to something] and the speaker gives the appearance that he doesn't know what people understood from [the information] he [gave], and that he didn't intend to speak derogatorily. He claims he was joking. "Like a madman scattering deadly firebrands [and] arrows, [so too] is one who cheats his fellow and says, 'I was only joking.'" (Proverbs 26:18,19). This is avak lashon hara.*

The difficulty is that avak lashon hara seems worse than lashon hara itself. Maimonides discusses avak lashon hara as a subconscious state of mind, where [aggressive] speech escapes oneself undetected. If the mind were conscious, man could control himself.

*Rav Amram said in Rav's name, "There are three matters from which man cannot escape: thoughts of sin, iyun tefilah, [confidence in the fulfillment of one's prayer], and lashon hara" (Baba Basra 164b).*

We understand thoughts of sin and lashon hara, but what is *iyun tefilah*? Rashbam says that this refers to one who, after completing his prayer, assumes God will respond, since he prayed with proper intent. Rashbam means this is talking on the subconscious level, where a person is confident he will be answered. This is egocentric.

We thereby categorize these three sins as follows: Thoughts of sin are the lusts; *iyun tefilah* is ego; and *avak lashon hara* is subconscious aggression. Man cannot escape a daily expression of these drives, as they [regularly] seek satisfaction, even in a mild form.

Further elaborating on the verse “Do not turn toward the idols [elilim]” (Lev. 19:4), this is a prohibition against following nonsense in life. The question strikes a person since nonsense and idolatry are disparate matters.

Most people don’t understand Maimonides words, “The focus of Torah is the obliteration of idolatry.” This is the essence of Torah. People think idolatry is a primitive relic of the bygone past. However, if idolatry is the essence of Torah, it must strike at the core of human existence in terms of human perfection. To reiterate, with “nonsense” we refer to movies and the like, matters that one conjures up in his mind. As this is the essence of Torah, we must arrive at a precise formulation of this prohibition.

The world of reality for most people is what we refer

to as “psychological reality.” This is the childhood reality that one projects onto the world scene. Children live with intense emotions. An example of this projection is those whose lives are guided to satisfy the opinions of a few people. Such people find the estimation of others to be the center of their lives. Not only are the opinions of others important, but they have a universal impact on their minds, where all else revolves around them. This emotion is a carryover from childhood, where family was one’s entire world. In adult life, the family (whose opinions were vital) is then extended to others. We see this childhood emotion expressed in adults. For example, pettiness is expressed when a person feels envy toward the success of another. A person would be hard-pressed to explain why this success affects him. But it hits him in a certain way because he retains the emotions of the infantile world.

The purpose of Judaism is to remove a person from this type of mentality and bring him into the absolute reality. This is where God is the center of reality: “The great essence [ikkar gadol] upon which all depends” (Hil. Yesodei Hatorah 1:4). This comes from an appreciation of God’s wisdom in Torah and in the universe. If one is involved in pursuing God’s wisdom, all else pales and is immaterial, even the overestimation of our own lives. “A generation passes and a generation arrives” (Koheles 1:4). We are just

one generation; our existence is very temporary. One hundred years from now our individual importance will not be as great as we imagine it is now. One of my students said, “If one worries about something, he should think about how important it will be five years from now.” Thinking in these terms prevents the emotions from latching onto temporal values.

A study of reality exposes our lives as insignificant. Why is it that we don’t live with this perspective and we overestimate personal matters? We are still involved in the infantile world. People who read Koheles find it depressing: “Generations pass on,” “Man returns to the dust,” etc. “Why should we think about our deaths?,” people ask (even though death is imminent and certain). We shouldn’t necessarily focus on death, but that we don’t consider these matters and deny their truths shows that we aren’t engaged in reality. King Solomon, Moshe Rabbeinu, and Avraham Avinu never lost sight of reality. If one is in line with reality and with his position in the universe, he would find his existence is radically different, and he would operate based on different reasons. This isn’t easy and one cannot make a quick transition. But this is the purpose of the entire Torah. Insofar as a person has made that transition from his small-minded view of himself and those who surround him, and he has elevated his values from the opinions of others to

objective reality, he has fulfilled the purpose of the Torah. This was Avraham's greatness. He was completely unconcerned with what anyone thought. The rabbis say, "The whole world was on one side and Avraham was on the other side" (Beraishis Rabbah 42:8). Avraham was not courageous, rather he was indifferent to people's opinions. He lived in reality and saw the truth. Matters such as wearing garments of finer quality were of no concern. Such preoccupations are out of touch with reality. Its significance was quite clear to one like Avraham. Insofar as great people are great, so is their measure of partaking in reality.

The Torah's purpose is to remove a person from psychological reality and bring him into the framework of the absolute: objective reality. "Do not turn to the idols" prohibits involvement in movies and novels. This takes time and one cannot remove himself immediately; it is a long process. God gives man seventy to eighty years. Nonetheless, although we aren't perfect, we must study the meaning/definition of perfection.

Idolatry is a person's projection of the infantile mind onto reality. Idolaters' every aspect of life is dictated by their infantile beliefs. It was a tremendous distortion to the point of sacrificing their children's lives to their gods. These beliefs stem from a powerful source in man's nature. Primitive idolatry is not far out of reach in Western society.

It too has expressions of the infantile.

This is what is meant by “Do not turn to the idols:” Do not turn toward those aspects of the human mind that are subtle expressions of a much greater phenomenon of idolatry. “Do not turn...” is speaking to the modern individual. (Raw idolatry speaks to primitive man.)

Idolatry removes man from his central faculty: the Tzelem Elohim (the intellect), the ability for a person to appreciate God’s wisdom. This explains the absence of progress in idolatrous cultures. Their intellects are functionless after generations of following primitive idolatrous beliefs. Novels, movies, and anything that is nothing more than a person’s fantasies embody “turning toward idolatry.”

The Gemara says that if one sees he’s about to commit a sin, he should recite the Shema. By doing so, he focuses on the Creator of universe, which in contrast, makes him view his petty desires as ridiculous. If this doesn’t help, the Gemara says one should remember the day of his death. On that day, a person will realize that many things are unimportant. Why then should one take a two-step approach—instead, remember the day of death and forget about reciting the Shema? The answer is that remembering one’s death isn’t the best approach. It is depressing, but it is a last-ditch effort. More preferable, however, is reciting the Shema. Whereas the reminder of death offers man noth-

ing positive, reciting the Shema offers something in place of his sin: It can make man very happy as he perceives an alternate and more joyful reality than a life of sin. This is why reciting the Shema is the preferred step. Shema also does not bring with it any sadness. Divrei mussar (moral rebuke) also have this saddening effect. A person should not feel sad at losing his desires. This is because the temporal enjoyments of desires are no comparison to the joy one attains when perceiving true ideas and living in line with them.

If a person follows the laws of muktzeh based on a feeling that there is some evil spirit residing in the object, no doubt, this is idolatrous. The purpose of the Torah is to prevent such notions, and this is accomplished through the halachic system. Sometimes muktzeh cannot be moved, sometimes it can. And sometimes one is obligated to move it. All the halachos are worked out in a completely logical manner with complete wisdom. Therefore, there is no way to attach any taboo to halacha. There is not one mitzvah that is not expounded upon in Torah She-ba'al Peh (the Oral Law) and that is not structured with tremendous wisdom.

It is impossible to say that performance of a mitzvah per se is the Torah's objective. This is like a taboo idea. In the first chapter of Mesilas Yesharim, it says that everyone agrees: The purpose of the mitzvos is a means toward

perfection [the act per se is not the objective]. For in Olam Haba (the afterlife) there are no mitzvos. (Thus, this higher state of man's existence is not one of performing mitzvos, which means that there is something greater than mitzvos.) What exists in Olam Haba are the righteous ones engaged in wisdom. Wisdom continues after death. The Gemara says that in Olam Haba, God teaches man the answers to all the difficulties he encountered in his studies while on earth. All agree that mitzvos are a means for perfection. But if one fulfills the mitzvos for some primitive notion or taboo, obviously they don't have much value, but he is better off than not performing the mitzvah, as there is a chance he might come to the truth. But per se, such an act has very little value. The Gemara says one should engage in Torah and mitzvos, even if not for the correct reason, because once one performs them for the wrong reason, he will come to perform them for the correct reason. (But one who performs mitzvos based on a taboo is worse than one who performs them for the wrong reason—lo lishma.) The deduction is that if one would not come to perform the mitzvos for the proper reason, it is not clear if the incorrect performance has value.

In Hilchos Teshuvah, Maimonides says that one should not train others to follow the Torah based on fear of punishment unless the person has low mentality and cannot

rise above that level. But this is a low level. Maimonides says that one should follow the Torah and mitzvos for their great benefit. One should appreciate being part of the nation God selected to receive his Torah. This is the meaning of the blessing "...that He chose us from all other nations and gave us His Torah" ("Asher bachar banu mekol ha'amim..."). Without Torah, one's life would be empty.

The world at large is of the opinion that happiness is something "out there." However, the Torah says the following:

*For this instruction that I command you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and we shall hear it, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and we will hear it, that we may observe it?" For the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Deut. 30:11-14)*

The Torah gives a metaphor for man's fantasy that "somewhere" we'll find that situation and we will be happy. Man incorrectly blames his lack of happiness on external situations. The problem is within man himself as this series

of verses ends, “For the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and your heart.” If man changes himself internally, he will achieve happiness. But if he does not, he can go to the ends of the universe and he will not be happy.

Maimonides continues elucidating lashon hara. He says the Gemara records that at a large gathering, one of the chochamim praised the writing quality of a certain scribe. Another chocham protested, saying, “Don’t speak lashon hara.” Maimonides explains that praising a person publicly will cause him to suffer abuse. Since there are people present who like him and people who hate him, when the scribe’s enemies hear his praises, they will be forced to talk about his shortcomings. This story seems more like good advice than an example of lashon hara. But going back to our definition of lashon hara, we said that it is “the aggressive instinct finding verbal expression.” Maimonides says this case is a protective distancing (harchaka) from lashon hara. This means that one should go so far as to abstain from any speech that can generate aggression toward others, even if that aggression comes from another, like the scribe’s enemies. Therefore, if one truly wishes to avoid expressing his aggressive instinct, he must investigate not only his speech, but even the results of his speech. Only in this manner can one fully remove himself from all responsibility of aggression directed toward another person.

There is an underlying psychological principle in this lesson. A person's aggression is deeply rooted and often disguised. The most common disguise is when one says "I didn't realize...." But this excuse exposes an aggressive undercurrent, which is the cause of the mind slipping-up and not realizing the potential harm. By not taking proper precaution, one caters to his aggressive instinct in some way.

The reason people don't have much success in stopping lashon hara is their lack of understanding. If people saw the benefits in abstaining from lashon hara they would probably be more involved in this type of perfection. Therefore, a person must understand the true good in life so he can grasp the damage of lashon hara. Any person who is not involved in perfecting his speech, is not involved in perfection.

*From the spies we learn that if they, whose lashon hara was only against trees and stones [the Land of Israel], received punishment, how much more so he who speaks of the degradation of his friend?*

The spies prevented the Jewish nation from entering Israel. How can this crime be compared to one who speaks against his friend? We must understand the mechanism of

speaking against a land. Why did Maimonides distinguish between lies and truth—(lies are character assassination (motzi shem ra); lashon hara is truths)? What is the difference? In either case, one is being aggressive in his speech. Why does Maimonides make a point that lashon hara is only when you are not lying? Why do we not categorize lashon hara as all forms of aggressive speech, whether truth or lies? Why must lashon hara be its own category?

In lashon hara, a unique process is operating. It is not so much one's words, for even the smallest degradation qualifies as lashon hara. In lashon hara, the listeners have a certain image of the target of the evil speech. And when one makes even the most benign negative comment about someone, it paints that person in a whole different negative light.

The spies didn't say the Land was so terrible. On the contrary, they praised the Land and gave Moshe the report he requested. But there was only one word they used: "however." Later on they went further and said, "It is a Land that consumes its inhabitants."

With the word "however," the spies wished to introduce suspicion and instill fear in people. The spies were saying, "We don't know what it is about the Land, but for some reason, a lot of people die there." The strength of the spies' report to sway the Jews into rebelling against entering Is-

rael was a mystical type of argument, a fear of the unknown: “Wonderful fruit, good land, but we don’t know why people are dying there.” The spies caused the nation to sense fear by changing the image of the Land. This is why the verse says, “Thus they spread slander among the Israelites about the Land they had scouted, saying, ‘The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers’” (Num. 13:32). Why does this verse use the language of “slander” about the Land? It is because the Torah teaches that this employs the same mechanism as lashon hara. The spies mentioned facts with the purpose of tainting Israel’s image of the Land. This is lashon hara, where through hearing truths, the listener views the target of the lashon hara in a negative light. That is the speaker’s purpose and the way it is received. Motzi shem ra (character assassination) uses a different mechanism: It is transparent aggression, where one lies about another. The Torah splits lashon hara from motzi shem ra because in terms of human perfection, they are two different phenomena. Lashon hara is more concealed and therefore must be rooted out differently from motzi shem ra. As an evil, lashon hara depends more on different psychological mechanisms than motzi shem ra does.

Now that we have identified the mechanism of lashon hara with regards to the spies, what is the kal v’chomer (a

fortiori argument) that if one is punished for slandering land, he must certainly be punished for slandering people? The evil of lashon hara is a lack of knowledge; it distorts reality. Herein lays the harm of lashon hara. One loses out when another person speaks lashon hara and distorts another Tzelem Elohim, an intelligent creature.

In his Guide, Maimonides says there are different types of mistakes. If one mistakenly thinks his friend ate cereal for breakfast but he in fact ate eggs, it is false, but it is inconsequential. If he erred about scientific knowledge, that is worse, since the area of knowledge is greater. If one made an error regarding a person, it is not as damaging as making an error regarding angels, since angels are of a higher existence. And making a mistake about angels is not as severe as making a mistake regarding God. Philosophical knowledge gains importance when we study greater matters.

This answers our question. Making a mistake regarding a piece of land is not as important as making a mistake regarding a Tzelem Elohim. (Degrading a person who is God's handiwork, the one earthly creature capable of perceiving God and His wisdom, and through lashon hara, reducing that person into a "thief" or a "liar" or some other definition, destroys the appreciation of God's true designation of man.)

Quoting the Tosefta and Talmud Arachin 15, Maimonides writes, “For three sins, man is punished in this world and loses his afterlife: for idolatry, sexual prohibitions, and murder; and lashon hara is equivalent to them all.” Each of the three cardinal sins are called “great” (gadol). Regarding idolatry, Moshe said of the Jews’ Golden Calf, “The people sinned a great sin” (Exod. 32:31). Regarding sexual prohibitions, Joseph refused to sleep with Potiphar’s wife saying, “How can I commit this great evil?” (Gen. 39:9) And regarding murder, Cain said of God’s punishment of banishment for killing his brother Abel, “My sin is greater than I can bear” (Gen. 4:13). But regarding lashon hara, the verse says, “Mouths that speak many great things” (Psalms 12:4), using the plural and not the singular, as the three sins above. This indicates that lashon hara includes all the “greatness” of the three cardinal sins. How precisely does lashon hara correspond to these sins?

Lashon hara distorts reality, similar to idolatry. We also understand that lashon hara contains an element of murder (character assassination). But how is it similar to adultery?

Man sins in two ways. One is an unbridled and open instinctual expression. Examples of this first category are adultery and murder. But man also sins in a second manner, through sublimation in speech. One would assume the raw expression is worse. In one sense this is true. But in

another sense, the sublimated expression is worse in that one can't extricate oneself: The attachment is stronger—it is constant and it prevents one from change.

One has a place in Olam Haba in as much as he loves the good. But an instinctual person has no place there. And if one is constantly speaking lashon hara (a ba'al lashon hara) he has no place in Olam Haba. Judaism underlines perfection: “Who is the man who desires life, one who loves life and seeks good? The one who guards his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking lies” (Psalms 34:13,14).

Maimonides continues:

*They spoke about this cursed sin very, very much; at the essence of what he says is that whomever speaks lashon hara denies God, as it says, “They say, ‘We will grow mighty with our tongues; our lips are with us, who can rule us’” (Psalms 12:5).*

Maimonides says this is the essence of lashon hara. What is this essential element? How does one deny God via lashon hara? One speaks lashon hara to devaluate another vis-à-vis society. And this is not done for any ulterior motive, like degrading your competition on a business contract to secure it for yourself. The Gemara (Arachin 15b) says they asked the snake “We understand why you bite, but why did you also inject venom?” The snake re-

plied, “And what benefit is there to a person who speaks lashon hara?” The Gemara means that lashon hara has no [ulterior] objective: The act is self-fulfilling. One speaks lashon hara to decrease another person and raise his own self-estimation. He is happy when he feels society values him, and he’s upset when it does not.

Denying God (kofer b’ikkar) means one rejects the ultimate reality. The Torah says that Reuven heard about his brothers’ plot to harm Joseph and he saved him from their hands (Gen. 37:21). The rabbis say that had Reuven known that the Torah would write this about him, he would have carried Joseph on his shoulders to their father. (Public opinion motivates people.) The medrash continues, “That is good in Reuven’s time, but who writes now? God does.” This means that one should be concerned only about what God thinks. This is the concern of a person who reaches the highest level. But one who is concerned with society rejects God.

Talmud Arachin 15b asks what one should do to avoid lashon hara:

*If he is a Torah scholar, he should engage in Torah. If he is an ignoramus, he should lower himself.*

If the Torah scholar learns Torah, lashon hara will pale by comparison; it will lose its grip. And the ignoramus should lower himself since the appeal of lashon hara is his status in society. He does so by realizing his temporal existence.

AND THE EXPOSITION [OF TORAH] IS NOT  
WHAT IS ESSENTIAL, BUT THE ACTION.

The average person enjoys this as a rebuke to those who sit and learn. Rabbeinu Yona and Maimonides understand this to apply to a shul rabbi who wishes to give mussar, moral rebuke. In this capacity, the main thing is not what the rabbi says, but how he acts. People are more influenced by action than by words. Rebuke given from a rabbi who does not practice what he preaches is ineffective. However, the Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud) says that one word of Torah is greater than all the mitzvos. “Torah study equates to all [mitzvos]” (Peah 1:1).

It is an absurdity to suggest that action outweighs learning Torah, since one of the actions—the greatest one—is learning Torah. Furthermore, fulfilling a mitzvah takes on a value only through learning, which gives the mitzvah its value. If one doesn’t know why he is performing a mitz-

vah, it is meaningless. One must still perform the mitzvah, but without understanding what is written inside tefillin, for example, one misses the mark.

Talmud Kiddushin 40b says, “They asked a question: What is greater, learning or acting? Rabbi Tarfon said action, and Rabbi Akiva said learning. Everyone said learning is greater because it brings one to action.”

Tosfos says “If one asked what he should do, if he hasn’t yet learned, he should learn. But if he has already learned, he should act, for this is better than learning.” How is action superior to learning?

What is meant by action? A person has two parts: a part that thinks and recognizes reality, and the second part that lives in accordance with perfection. This perfected action means his inner self partakes of those values. Inner perfection is expressed through actions. One who lacks inner perfection will display this in poor actions. There are two ways to correct this shortcoming: concentrating on one’s actions, or increasing one’s knowledge. Each of these approaches has a deficiency. Increasing knowledge is good, but it is limited to the abstract. This doesn’t always address specific character flaws. Alternatively, if one addresses his actions—his shortcomings—he is leaving the world of abstract wisdom. In truth, one must address both. Therefore, Tosfos says when one first starts out, he should

concentrate on wisdom. Without wisdom, one has no concept of how to perfect his actions. “An ignoramus will not become a pious man” (Avos 2:6). One must first gain wisdom. But once he has acquired wisdom, one must act to implement perfection in his nature. This is what is meant by “action.” The dispute between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva should be understood as follows: Whose soul is on a higher level? One whose actions are perfected but lacks wisdom, or a great Torah scholar who has not fully implemented that wisdom? Rabbi Tarfon held that although one possesses less wisdom, one whose knowledge flows fully to his actions is more greatly perfected. Rabbi Akiva held that despite not having fully implemented his wisdom into his actions, one with greater knowledge is better off as he sees greater knowledge of God. The Gemara concluded, “Greater is learning as it brings one to action.” This means that one is better off with greater wisdom, for without it, one cannot progress. He is stagnant. One with knowledge has the opportunity to implement it.

Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva’s dispute concerned a person at the end of his life: “Who is superior?” Only God knows. But throughout life, learning is greater because it brings one to action.

Rashi offers a different explanation: “Greater is one who performs the mitzvos, more so than one who learns and

does not perform.” Rashi does not say that he learns and has not performed, referring to one who never had the opportunity, but he says that he does not perform, meaning he refused to act. Rashi identifies a certain type of person who can learn, but the ideas have nothing to do with him; his nature remains unaffected. This schism in the soul displays how less harmonious he is than one whose actions follow his knowledge, however little knowledge he has attained. (Rashi does not address Talmud Kiddushin concerning the debate between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva.) The phrase “accepting the yoke of the kingdom of heaven” (kabbalas ol malchus shamayim) refers to one who brings his rebellious part in line with his knowledge.

#### AND WHOEVER INCREASES WORDS BRINGS SIN.

Rabbeinu Yona says:

*One who talks too much in his words of Torah brings himself to sin. One should not speak too much about halacha, but should wait and think about what he says; he should weigh his words and he should not hurry. “In much speech, sin will not cease” (Prov. 10:19).*

One's response should be in line with his halachic reasoning and not in line with an emotion to respond. A person who has been asked to rule on a question of halacha has an emotion to respond; he wishes to display his knowledge. Unless one is perfected, every person possesses this quality. However, the rabbis state that we should know this emotion exists and we should never be subservient to it. One must refrain from answering unless logic dictates doing so: "Anyone who increases his speech brings himself to sin."

Rabbeinu Yona adds, "And he will think the matter is so." This means that once the person answers without proper deliberation—but answers quickly to show he is knowledgeable—he will then justify his (incorrect) words to protect himself. This is the other side of the same emotion.

Returning to the area of lashon hara, we find an apparent contradiction between two verses. One verse says, "Through our tongues we will become mighty; our lips are with us, who can rule over us?" (Psalms 12:5) The Gemara says, "From here we learn that one who speaks lashon hara denies God" (Archin 15b). The plain implication is that such people use speech for their own goals of destroying others. However, we find another verse, "If the snake bites because no spell was uttered, and no advantage

is gained by the speaker of lashon hara” (Koheles 10:11). As discussed, they asked the snake what benefit it derives from injecting venom. It responded, “And what benefit is derived from speaking lashon hara?” This Gemara says there is no benefit from lashon hara, while Psalms says that through lashon hara one makes himself mighty. How do we resolve this contradiction?

The rabbis teach that behind lashon hara is an emotional feeling of might. One feels a certain sense of strength and security when verbalizing the destruction of another person. This is why he is a *kofer b'ikkar*—one who denies God: He is distant from reality. The emotion is primitive and narcissistic and offers one a sense of omnipotence: mutually excluding the true omnipotent One. The contradiction is resolved as Psalms identifies a false sensation of might. This complies with the Gemara that lashon hara does nothing. Therefore, although in reality lashon hara does nothing, a person will emotionally sense some gain.

## 1:18 ON WHAT THE WORLD STANDS

RABBAN SHIMON BEN GAMLIEL SAYS, “ON THREE THINGS THE WORLD STANDS: ON JUDGMENT, ON TRUTH AND ON PEACE, AS IT SAYS (ZACHARIAH 8:16), ‘JUDGE TRUTH AND THE JUSTICE OF PEACE IN YOUR GATES.’”

Maimonides says that “judgment” refers to societal laws. “Truth” refers to intellectual perfection. “Peace” refers to the perfection of one’s emotions. How do these three differ from Avos 1:2 , “On three things the world stands: on Torah, on the sacrifice (avodah) and on acts of loving kindness?” And how do these three function together?

If we ask what makes an athlete, we can suggest it is training, proper diet, and perseverance. Or we can say it is strength, good reflexes, and speed. The difference is that in the first set we describe what produces the athlete; the second set refers to the essence of the athlete. The same applies here.

Both mishnas refer to sustaining society—“on what the world stands.” The distinction between the two mishnas is that sacrifice is in mishna 1:2, while this is replaced with judgment in mishna 1:18.

What is sacrifice? Maimonides said this is the process wherein man, through the halachic system, elevates his

raw instinctual emotions. Judgement refers to guiding society uprightly.

Mishna 1:2 discusses the elements essential in producing society. These include Torah, sacrifice, and kindness. Thus, people must perfect their minds (Torah), they must channel and elevate their instincts to a higher expression (sacrifice), and they must refine their character (kindness).

The second set of elements, mishna 1:18, describes the things that constitute society: They are judgment, truth, and peace and are based on a verse describing the future redemption and what the Jews must do to usher in that era:

*These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to one another, truth and peaceful judgment you shall judge in your gates (Zechariah 8:1).*

However, “truth and peaceful judgment” is unclear; must we judge by truth, or by peace? The rabbis say there are two types of judgment. One type is where two litigants ask the court to judge their case. But there is also pshara, where there is no judgment, but the litigants forgive their personal claims and follow the judge’s advice. This is the preferred method of resolution. However, if pshara is preferred, how do we understand our verse “truth and peaceful judgment?” It should simply say “peaceful judgment.”

What does truth add?

Pshara is preferable, but society will exist only when both truth and peace are present. The less the courts must judge and impose verdicts on conflicts, the better off is that society. But when two parties conflict and cannot arrive at an agreement, but stand firm on their claims, courts are needed more often. If two parties had a sense of justice, they would both know what is just and agree, with no need for an imposed court verdict. However, a society must be based on an absolute system of justice. This is the “truth” mentioned in our verse. But the mishna universalized peace and applied it to character, which is a matter outside of judgment. This is where each person’s character is perfected. How is this the sign of peace?

Conflict exists when two things try to occupy the same space. But when there is harmony, and through the perfection of human character, when each person knows his boundary, there is no overlap and no one encroaches on his friend’s space. There is peace. But society cannot rely on this perfection of character. It is not practical for everyone to be so perfect that no questions would arise requiring a court hearing and a verdict. A system of laws must exist to guide people’s pshara: A peaceful judgment is impossible without justice. Justice reveals the objective principles to society. Laws plus good character create a proper function-

ing society.

Justice and peace function to guide the internal harmony of society. However, society must also be in line with reality—what is meant by “truth.” Maimonides says this is through the perfection of the intellect. “And it will be, if from the eyes of the congregation an error was committed...” (Num. 15:24). The “eyes of the congregation” refer to the Sanhedrin. They are the body with their eyes fixed on reality.

To summarize, Torah, sacrifice, and acts of kindness are the elements that produce a society that is constituted of judgment, truth, and peace.

The difference between justice and truth can be derived from the following case. There were certain individuals who were angry at the son of Shimon ben Shetach for his ruling against witchcraft. These individuals arranged false witnesses with trumped-up charges against the son of Shimon ben Shetach, accusing him of violating the Sabbath, which is punishable by death. Beis din interrogated the lying witnesses, but they were so well-prepared in their conspiracy that beis din could not find any discrepancy. Thereby, beis din killed the son of Shimon ben Shetach. This was despite the witnesses’ teshuvah and the confession of their lies. For halacha states that testimony cannot be retracted. This case does not embody the truth, but it

does embody justice. Justice is the subjugation to a universal system. Truth refers to what is accurate in every individual case.

In his Guide, Maimonides says that a mitzvah, which is the best thing for man, might not be good for a person in every moment. Nonetheless, one must keep the system and perform the mitzvah. This is justice. Maimonides says even God could not devise a system where every law would be perfect for every person in every situation. There existed philosophers who arrived at proper ideas of truth, but since they lacked a system—justice—they died out.

Rabbeinu Yona offers a different view on what is “truth.” He says this refers to an individual:

*A person should go in God's path, for God is truth and His Torah is true and [therefore] walk in God's ways, as it states, “And walk in His ways” (Deut. 28:9). And the rabbis said that one must not lie concerning even inconsequential speech.*

Based on the Gemara in Baba Metzia that permits one to lie in a handful of cases including lying about how many mesechtas (tractates) one has learned, they asked Rav Chaim for his view. He responded, “How can this be so? It is written, ‘From a false matter distance yourself’”

(Exod. 23:7). But Rav Chaim said that this prohibition is not listed as one of the 613 mitzvos. It comes under the heading of “And walk in His ways” (Deut. 28:9). One of God’s ways is truth. In our case, there is a conflict between truth and humility, and they said one should follow humility. Therefore, there is no question. This explains why Rabbeinu Yona classifies following truth not under “From a false matter distance yourself,” but under “And walk in His ways,” as he writes, “A person should go in God’s path.”

Rabbeinu Yona continues:

*Even regarding unimportant talk, one must not falsify anything, like the case of Rav’s son.*

Gemara Yevamos cites a certain amora whose wife would always bring him the dinner he did not request. Whenever he requested a vinegar dish, she would bring him a beans dish. And if he requested the beans she would bring him the vinegar dish. One day this amora told his son, “Ask your mother to prepare beans for me.” And the son returned with the beans. His father said to him, “Your mother is getting much better!” The son said, “No. I know how mom always gives you the opposite of what you request. So I told her you want the vinegar dish. I switched your request so you would get the beans.” His father re-

plied, “I should have thought of that myself. You taught me something.” The reason this amora didn’t think about the son’s strategy shows how little his own existence meant to him; he was not preoccupied with food. But the amora told his son not to do this because the verse says, “They taught their tongues to speak lies” (Jer. 9:4). Rabbeinu Yona explains:

*A person who becomes accustomed to speaking lies in unimportant matters will not speak the truth when it comes to important matters. The routine behavior of lying will continue in important matters.*

If one is supposed to speak the truth even in unimportant matters, the reason given should not be based on an eventual circumstance, i.e., lying in important matters. Speaking the truth in unimportant matters alone should warrant proper behavior. However, this suggests that lies in small matters are not damaging. The real concern is only the subsequent lies in major matters.

According to Rabbeinu Yona, it appears that lying is permissible in small matters. But how can this be, as we have the verse “From a false matter distance yourself?”

Additionally, there is a dispute regarding how to respond to the beauty of the bride. Beis Shammai says honesty de-

mands that if she is not pleasant looking, one must say so. Beis Hillel says one must say that she is beautiful, regardless of the accuracy of that statement.

The answer is based on the false concept of “truth.” Truth is not simply concerning every fact. Truth must have a purpose. There is no consequence regarding truth, when, for example, one says that the floor is shiny or dull. What is the value in truth? Reality. Truth refers to our relationship to reality and how we perceive reality. Facts, per se, have no value in reality. We have the wrong idea of a lie. A person might say, “You said it is blue, but it is really red. You told a lie.” This is the wrong understanding of a lie.

A lie is a distortion in our perception of reality. People wrongly view a lie regarding factual truths, as in the example of blue versus red. But Judaism has a different concept of the truth. As stated above, Maimonides teaches that errors have degrees. The greater the importance of the topic, the greater damage exists in one’s error in the topic. A mistake about a person is not as severe as a mistake about an angel. And the worst mistake one can make is in relation to God. This is why the essence of Torah is the obliteration of idolatry and the establishment of the true concept of God. A mistake in our concept of God—the ultimate source of reality—pervades the entire reality. (A wrong concept of God taints all other knowledge.)

Thus, there is no value per se in truth or falsehood. The only value is regarding one's knowledge of reality. Therefore, whether the amora desired vinegar or beans is meaningless. The son's lie to his mother is not bad per se. (It is true that God knows all particular facts and this is related to reality. But that is relegated to God's knowledge alone. Humans can't know all particulars; such particulars are irrelevant to us.) However, based on the verse "They taught their tongues to speak lies," Rabbeinu Yona says that people equate factual lies to lies about reality. If people were allowed to lie in smaller matters, they would view lying about greater matters in equal weight and come to err in vital truths. Thus, retaining the restriction against lying even regarding less important topics, one preserves an important emotion that is in favor of establishing reality in the proper way. Although equating factual lies and lies regarding reality is philosophically wrong, retaining this emotion preserves something greater: dedication to complete truth in the areas concerning reality.

The following distinction should be understood: Lying about which food one's father desires is meaningless and has nothing to do with one's reality. But if one lies to another saying John is a good friend of yours when in fact he is not, this psychological reality about how one feels toward another is in fact a lie regarding reality. This may

not be philosophical reality, but it is reality nonetheless.

Other considerations should also be noted, such as lying for shalom bayis, peace at home. This is permitted as it fosters a state of mind where family members have reduced conflict and greater harmony, which enhances one's life and pursuit of the good.

Rabbeinu Yona now addresses "peace," the last pillar in our mishna:

*Peace includes all good in the world, and there is no objective: It is the objective.*

When man functions in peace, internally and in society, there cannot be any further improvement in his state. When man's mind, emotions, body, and society work perfectly, there is nothing left upon which to improve.

The one question is why peace is one of the three pillars ("The world stands on justice, truth, and peace"). Peace is everything. It is the universal that includes everything, so why are justice and truth also included? (The existence of peace predicates the existence of justice and truth.)

Man's ability to attach himself to some abstract idea of the good is what preserves him. This is peace. But that is insufficient; man needs to be attached to truth. If he isn't, he can't arrive at any good. He would not be able to set up objective standards of reality, to gain knowledge and know

what the good is. He would be stranded with a desire for the good but with no knowledge of it. Thus, these two entrances of the desire for the good (peace) and knowledge of the good (truth) enable man to properly exist.

