

## From the Gush

Rav Moshe Taragin

Matos Masei - The Prison of "Public Perception"



**It never ends!! If it's not one thing, it's another.** At the tail end of his life, having weathered forty years of complaints, rebellions, and near-disasters, Moshe had every reason to expect a tranquil conclusion to his legendary career. Having appointed his successor and eased the Jewish people to the border of Israel, he can now focus on writing the final book of the Torah. The new generation, which would ultimately inherit the land of Israel had been counted, the 'lottery' mechanism for land allocation had been established and, finally, the order of family inheritance had been institutionalized. Everything was ready for the final and long-awaited entry into the Promised Land....until it wasn't!!

Two and a half tribes approach Moshe proposing settlement on the East bank of the Jordan river. Moshe is initially troubled, fearing a sequel to the meraglim rebellion when Jews balked at entering Israel, forever wrecking history. Ultimately, though, Moshe is reassured of the sincerity of these tribes and he relents- authorizing their plan under very detailed conditions. The two and a half tribes can only settle the East bank after they first assist the rest of the nation in conquering Israel proper. Though these terms are agreeable to all parties, Moshe stipulates them explicitly and unambiguously. His detailed wording of these conditions serves as the template for all halachik contractual contingencies. Halacha only allows a "tenai" or a halachik stipulation if it is worded exactly as Moshe formulated his own pre-conditions. Moshe was determined to prevent any future misunderstandings- especially those which may arise after his death when he could no longer personally mediate.

When issuing these stipulations and urging compliance, Moshe encourages these tribes to satisfy their obligations both to "G-d and to man (v'heyitem neki'im mei'Hashem U'mi'Yisrael)". It is insufficient to merely act properly and honestly in a purely legal sense, if their behavior arouses social suspicion or strife. The question of their allegiance to the Jewish people or to the land of Israel, is a potentially charged issue and these tribes must placate any concerns through squeaky clean, morally transparent behavior.

**This demand serves as the basis for an intriguing halachik category known as the laws of "marit ayin", which mandate that a person avoid any suspicion of halachikally unlawful behavior.** Actions which are legal in a strict sense are banned if they provide the appearance of halachik violation. For example, coconut milk cannot be consumed along with meat (even though it isn't included in the classic prohibition of meat and milk), since it provides the appearances of halachik violation.

The value underlying marit ayin provides a delicate and complex challenge for religious people. Authentic religious growth and experience can best be achieved when liberated from suffocating social pressures. Religious excellence and passion can best be achieved when a person releases himself from the strangulating limitations of public perception. Sometimes social pressures are antagonistic to religion; other times they cap religious growth by setting certain tolerable limits of religious growth while frowning upon more surpassing levels of religious excellence. Either way, social attitudes can sometimes impede passionate and authentic religious growth.

Many of the celebrated mussar movements in Europe selected a 'primary' middah or trait as the baseline for moral and religious development. The school of "Novhardak" was

renowned for its emphasis upon breaking human will, and in particular, its aim to build resistance to social pressure. Talmidim of the yeshiva were encouraged to behave in bizarre fashion to elicit scorn and ridicule; rebuffing this derision would train these students to brace themselves against hostile social pressures. By ignoring social contempt, these students would develop greater devotion and piety.

**Beyond the potential throttling of religious passion, excessive sensitivity to public opinion can corrupt the caliber of our religious experiences.** Sadly, religious performance is sometimes driven by a desire for public approval. My Rebbe, Rav Amital – whose 10<sup>th</sup> yahrzeit is this week- once remarked: Imagine a situation in which marmor was eaten in shul while an etrog was hoisted at home. People would spend hundreds of dollars upon marmor, aiming to receive better "grading" of their lettuce in shul. People would brag about their beautiful stalks and would boast about the veiny leaves of lettuce. Exhibitionism of any type is morally troubling and severely degrades human dignity. Ostentatiousness in religion is particularly repulsive as it employs religion for personal aggrandizement and pretentiousness. Dissociation from public opinion preserves the purity of mitzvot and of Torah learning. The quiet moments of religious devotion – shared by none other than G-d- resonate with spiritual depth and soulful authenticity.

Thirdly, preoccupation with public opinion can create a general imbalance between our investment in the public arena and our focus upon the private domain. The public arena is a showground of adulation and admiration; it showers us with approval and thereby inflates our ego. By contrast, our private worlds offer little veneration and ego augmentation. However, these private realms do challenge us to be real and authentic, to admit our flaws and to work toward substantive improvement. Too much concern with public perception can distract us from the pursuit of real identity, placing us at great risk of becoming mannequins.

Yet, despite the dangers of excess sensitivity and vulnerability to social opinion, we are none the less, commanded to behave in a manner which doesn't directly arouse suspicion of halachik wrongdoing. As much as we seek to liberate ourselves from the confines of social convention, we are still obligated to shape our behavior toward social perceptions. Social expectations can be stifling but they can also nurture and foster religious growth. Social expectations can also provide moral barriers which shouldn't be breached and can silently police against errant behavior. A few years ago I discussed the "agunah" issue with a friend who lived in a relatively small Jewish community. Surprised that there was even a crisis, he assured me that no man in his own community would ever dare refuse his wife a 'get'. The community was so tightly woven that this person would be ashamed to show his face in public.

Ideally, communities built upon religious passion can provide guidance, orientation and religious aspiration. By behaving in halachikally suspicious fashion, a person may be unwittingly assisting or even tacitly condoning halachik violation. People who witness suspicious behavior may errantly assume that a halachikally forbidden action was violated and may engage in similar behavior. Other people may fraudulently justify their own religious weakness based on perceived weaknesses in others.

We all possess mutual responsibility to avoid transmitting messages which erode halachik authority. The principle of *marit ayin* challenges us to balance between autonomous religious growth which is disinterested in public perception, alongside our responsibility to fashion an environment of religious seriousness, halachik fidelity and moral integrity.