

BEN AZZAI:

*Run to do a small mitzvah, and flee from sin.
For mitzvah leads to mitzvah, and sin leads to sin.
For the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah,
and the punishment of a sin is a sin. (4:2)*

בְּן עֲזַאי אוֹמֵר: הָיוּ רַץ לְמִצְוָה קְלָה, וּבוֹרַח מִן הָעֲבֵרָה. שְׂמִינְיָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה,
וְעֲבֵרָה גּוֹרֶרֶת עֲבֵרָה, שֶׁשָּׂכַר מִצְוָה מִצְוָה, וְשָׂכַר עֲבֵרָה עֲבֵרָה.

RABBI:

*Be as careful with a minor commandment as with a major
one, for you do not know the rewards of the commandments.
Weigh the losses in doing the right thing against the gains,
and the gains in committing a sin against the losses. (2:1)*

וְהָיוּ זְהִיר בְּמִצְוָה קְלָה כְּבַחְמוּרָה, שְׂאִין אֶתָּה יוֹדֵעַ מִתַּן שְׂכָרָן שֶׁל מִצְוֹת.
וְהָיוּ מַחְשָׁב הַפְסָד מִצְוָה כְּנֶגֶד שְׂכָרָה, וְשָׂכַר עֲבֵרָה כְּנֶגֶד הַפְסָדָה.

SIN LEADS to sin. Other passages of the Talmud vividly describe how one sin leads to another.

☛ Sins repeated seem permitted. (YOM 86b)

☛ At first the impulse to evil is as thin as a spider's thread, but in the end it is as thick as a cart rope. (SUK 52a)

☛ The impulse to evil is first called “passer-by,” then “guest,” and finally “master.” (SUK 52b)

The first passage says that we become desensitized to the wrong we do, and to the harm we cause, and thus tend to repeat sins. The second two describe how our character can become warped, a fact especially exemplified by addictions, and by any habit destructive to oneself or others (see also *Avot* 3:14).

A third way one sin leads to another is described in Scottish poet Robert Burns' famous couplet: “Oh what a tangled web we weave/When first we practice to deceive.” Here, the idea is that in order to cover up one deception—and almost all wrongdoing involves deception—we have to practice further deception, so we become trapped in a web of lies and sins. This idea is implied by the Hebrew, as *goreret*, here translated as

“leads to,” literally means “drags.” Rabbi Joseph Hertz translates ben Azzai's mishnah as: “One good deed draws another good deed in its train, and one sin, another sin.”

Mitzvah leads to mitzvah. How does one good deed lead to another? A dramatic example of this linkage is the deeds of the “righteous gentiles” who hid Jews during the Holocaust. Very often they would first agree to hide their neighbors briefly because they couldn't conceive of giving them up to be murdered. But once having helped them, they grew more courageous and hid neighbors for a long period of time, at the risk of their own lives. In a decent society, doing acts of kindness and being fair to others engenders trust, and encourages people to ask for your cooperation in efforts that enable you to help people further. In other words, your mitzvah will lead to doing other mitzvot, including those that benefit you. So your mitzvah leads not only to doing more mitzvot, but also to influencing others to do mitzvot.

The reward of a mitzvah. This may refer not only to the opportunity to do more good, but also to the emotional and spiritual reward of doing the right thing, of “serving out of love.” This idea resembles the Stoic idea that virtue and happiness are identical, or as it is usually put, “Virtue is its own reward.” The sins that follow sin may be not only those of the original sinner, but also those of the person who is induced to sin against the sinner in revenge.

BE AS careful with a minor commandment. Whereas the first part of *Avot* 2:1 is a guide to choosing the right path, these next three parts concern our motivation to keep to that path. In the Torah, punishments are laid out for violating negative commandments, but the rewards of following positive ones are often not clear. Here “Rabbi,” Yehudah haNasi, seems to be assuring us that God will give great rewards, whether in this life or the next.

Weigh the losses in doing the right thing against the gains. “Doing the right thing” here is the translation of *mitzvah*, also “commandment.”

Because Yehudah haNasi is speaking of losses and gains that we can reckon, in this sentence he seems to be referring to benefits and losses in this life, and is urging us to think more deeply of long-term consequences when we face temptation, consequences which can motivate us to do the right thing. If it is obvious that we will have to sustain a loss

to do the right thing, then an understanding of the long-term benefits to ourselves and others may keep us on the right path. And if it is obvious that we can gain something by doing wrong, an understanding of the long-term pain that we will cause others and suffer ourselves may again keep us on the right path.

MODERN LIFE

WEIGH THE losses. What are the benefits and risks of acting as a mentsh—a caring, responsible person? Living as a mentsh promotes strong, loving personal relationships. Though there is no guarantee of success, as relationships take two, being selfish and devious is almost certain to destroy trust. Thus, in personal relationships, we have very strong motivation for at least appearing to be caring and to have integrity.

Unscrupulous, ruthless people do sometimes get ahead in business, but at the cost of harming their relationships and reducing respect and love from others. With courage and creativity, the honest can succeed in business, as the case of Aaron Feuerstein illustrates (see 2:6b). Being ethical does not mean being naïve, and an ethical person needs to be just as shrewd a strategist as an unethical person in order to succeed.

Thus in weighing losses and gains, it is important to explore ethical strategies for achieving our goals. Indeed, the commitment to living according to the ethical mitzvot (commandments) means that we focus on ethical options when we look for ways to further our goals and solve our problems. When we are tempted by obvious unethical paths—usually having to do with sex or money—Rabbi’s reminder is to recall why we take the ethical path, and the gains we reap from doing so.

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