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## HOW TO MAKE A CHILLUL HASHEM

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Before every class trip to the great world outside, my Modern Orthodox day school teachers warned us “not to make a *chillul Hashem*” (=desecration of G-d’s Name) by misbehaving. Since we were recognizably Jewish, it followed that the Jewish G-d’s public image was inextricably bound up with our own. Sometimes they were more optimistic and asked us to make a *kiddush Hashem*, but “first do no harm” was generally the spirit.

I think we understood what was wanted and why. We knew that people judged our parents by our behavior. Many or most of us felt judged as Jews everywhere we went, all the time. This was just a more concentrated form of being on display. We also knew that most or maybe all of us would let the family and religious team down on occasion. But we generally tried hard.

Was this a fair burden to impose on children? Is it really possible for children to make a *chillul Hashem*?

Rambam Sefer Hamitzvot DON’T #63 declares that the prohibition against *chillul Hashem* can be divided into three parts. Two of them relate to all Jews in the same way. These universal violations are

- 1) transgressing a mitzvah in submission to a religiously motivated thug, and
- 2) transgressing a mitzvah with no motive other than to spite G-d.

These cases may seem very different from each other – one involves surrendering to ultimate self-interest, while the whole point of the other is that it involves no self-interest. But the common denominator is that the thug in the first case has exactly the same motive as the subject in the second case. G-d’s Name is desecrated when His will is flouted successfully by someone whose only goal is that it be flouted.

Rambam sets out the third category as follows:

והחלק המיוחד הוא  
שיעשה האדם ידוע במעלה והטוב  
פעולה אחת  
תיראה בעיני ההמון שהוא עבירה  
ושאין דמיון הפועל ההוא ראוי לנכבד כמוהו לעשות  
אף על פי שיהיה הפועל מותר  
הנה הוא חלל את השם.  
והוא אמרם (יומא פו א)  
היכי דמי חלול השם  
כגון אנא דשקילנא בשרא מבי טבחא ולא יהיבנא דמי לאלתר  
רבי פלוני אמר:  
כגון אנא דמסגינא ארבע אמות בלא תורה ובלא תפלין.

The part that depends on the individual is when a person who is known for elevation and goodness does an action that appears in the eyes of the masses to be a transgression

and that an action of that type is not proper for someone as respected as he is to do

even though that action is halakhically permitted behold he has desecrated the Name.

This is what is intended by their saying (Yoma 86a)

What is a case of *chillul Hashem*?

Like me, who takes meat from the butcher and doesn’t give him the money immediately.

Rabbi Ploni said:

Like me, who walks four cubits without Torah and without tefillin.

Rabbi Chaim Heller (footnotes to his Hebrew translation of the Sefer Hamitzvot) contends that Rambam regularly leaves names out of his citations, and that “Rabbi Ploni” is just an instance of such anonymization. However, this seems to be the only time Rambam uses “Rabbi Ploni” to substitute for the name of a specific rabbi in a citation.

In the Vilna Talmud, the first example is attributed to Rav, and his phrasing is אִי שְׁקִילְנָא, if I were to take meat from a butcher without paying immediately. Many manuscripts leave the subjunctive אִי out, as does Rambam, so that presumably was Rambam’s text. Perhaps Rambam thought it would be disrespectful to mention a great rabbi by name when describing him as desecrating the Name. Perhaps that same reason drove a scribe or reciter to insert the subjunctive.

This approach may help explain the very peculiar section of Talmud that follows Rav’s statement.

Abbayay said:

They only taught Rav’s statement about a land where the butchers don’t dun,

but in a land where the butchers dun – we have nothing against the one who behaves like Rav.

Said Ravina:

And Mata Mechasya is a land where the butchers dun.

The text is very unstable here (the first statement is most likely anonymous rather than by Abbayay, and Rambam almost certainly had a version in which Rav’s statement was specifically about a land where butchers do dun) and commentators have

struggled to clarify its meaning. Their basic problem is that Rav has to do something very wrong, in order to desecrate the Name, but not too wrong, or else he would be in violation of *lo tonu*, the prohibition against unjustly delaying payment. Anyone who would violate *lo tonu* does not cause a desecration of the Name when they misbehave. The calibration required is very fine.

I suspect there is another basic problem. Is Rav's statement intended as straightforward halakhah, or does it have an element of humor?

On Sotah 49b, a beraita teaches that "once Rebbe was dead, humility and fear of sin ceased to be". But Rav Yosef said to a reciter of that beraita:

לא תיתני ענוה, דאיכא אנא

Do not teach "humility", as there is me!

Oceans of ink have been spilled to explain how Rav Yosef could have made this statement humbly. Benjamin Franklin, by contrast, recognized that the paradox is inescapable. "There is perhaps no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive. Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility". It seems to me likely that Rav Yosef understood this as well, and that his comment included a significant element of self-satire.

Perhaps there is a line from *לכונן אנא* to *דאיכא אנא*. If Rambam is correct, the third kind of *chillul Hashem* applies only to renowned scholars. Giving oneself as an example is therefore inherently an act of hubris, and the best way to counteract that is by presenting oneself as actually violating the norm under discussion. "What is an example of *chillul Hashem*? For example, when I . . ."

But subsequent generations could not leave that presentation untouched, lest it be taken literally. So they explained that Rav did not actually desecrate the Name; rather, he acted in a manner that would have desecrated the Name in a society with different expectations. Expectations are always variable, so there was likely an element of ruefulness in Rav's example – perhaps he wished to hold himself to an even higher standard, or worried that his butcher was already doing so. Ravina rushes in to disambiguate further – Mata Mechasya, **where Rav lived** (according to the Letter of Rav Sherira Gaon, Mata Mechasya = Sura), was the kind of place where Rav's behavior raised no eyebrows at all.

What about Rabbi Yochanan? He speaks of walking four amot without Torah and tefillin – why would he do that, if that desecrated the Name?

The simplest answer, perhaps found in Rashi, is that Rav Yochanan was old, and no longer capable of maintaining the sort of concentration that people expect of him. He was also not capable of sitting still the entire day. So his reply is a different form of rueful humor – his greatness has led to a situation in which he has no way of avoiding desecrating the Name. Publicly proclaiming his frailty would solve that problem. But is that a cost he should be obligated to bear?

Rambam in Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah 5:11) provides more detail:

There are other things also within the category of chillul Hashem. Namely when a person who is great in Torah and famed for his *chassidut*/piety does things that cause the people to gossip negatively about him,

even though they are not transgressions –  
behold he has desecrated the Name.

For example, if he took without paying for his purchase immediately,  
assuming that he has the money, and the sellers are dunning, and  
he insists that they give him credit,  
or if he spends too much time in play or eating and drinking with  
or among ignorami,  
or similar things.

In everything, according with the greatness of the sage,  
he must be strict with himself and act beyond the line of the law.

The statement "In everything, according to the greatness of the sage" seems to leave children, and perhaps the rest of us, out of the equation entirely. However, R. Yosef David Azulai ("CHIDA": Shu"t Chayyim Sho'al 2:43) contends that this makes little sense. Whether an action is a chillul Hashem depends on the observer, not the actor. He therefore concludes that:

It seems obvious that the same is true regarding someone who is  
reputed in his city to be great  
even though he is not actually great, and recognizes this about  
himself,  
nonetheless, since he is considered by the masses to be great – he  
desecrates the Name.

R. Azulai uses this approach to get Rav out of the humility paradox. Rav thought his public reputation undeserved, but could not deny that it existed. Therefore, using himself as an example of chillul Hashem was not arrogant.

I wonder whether there is a transactional element to the way Rambam conceives of this mitzvah. To violate chillul Hashem, you have to be a person held in great public esteem. Whether you deserve the honor, and whether you want it, are irrelevant. With great *kevod* comes great responsibility. And also – great public scrutiny, because people both want moral heroes and resist them.

All of Rambam's examples stay within the Jewish community, though. What are the standards for chillul Hashem outside the community? I think my teachers assumed that all Jews – children, also institutions and states – bear the kind of responsibility outside the community that great sages bear inside it.

The way to avoid that responsibility is to lower expectations. But I think that Rav and Rav Yochanan's humor can do well for us here. With a certain amount of genuine ambivalence, we should aspire to be the kind of people and nation that is capable of making a chillul Hashem.