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## BEARING THE WEIGHT OF A COMPLEX WORLD

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One of the first times I had the *zekhut* to learn Torah from Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt"l*—I believe on a Friday night in YU—his base text was *Avot* 1:2:

The world stands on three things: Torah, a*vodah*, and *gemilut chassadim*.

In his endlessly imitable style, Rav Aharon asked:

1. whether the world falls if any of these three is lacking, or only if all three are lacking; and
2. if all three are necessary, is it because of their interaction, or rather because each has a wholly independent task?

Those deeply familiar with his methodology know that, given the opportunity for a comprehensive *shiur*, Rav Aharon would surely have considered as well the possibility that any two of three would be sufficient, or perhaps even one plus more than half of another. This might—here I say *might*—in turn have led him to ask whether or how one might evaluate quantitatively the extent to which these pillars exist in our world.

I want to ask instead: What precisely would happen were the world no longer to stand? Would we know it had fallen, or remain unaware until a stray hint of G-d's Presence sent us scrambling to hide, overwhelmed by shame?

Keeping that question in mind, let us move to (my radical oversimplification of) an article by Rav Lichtenstein, found in *Minchat Aviv* that is relevant to this week's *parashah*. (My thanks to the ever-wonderful Dov Weinstein for the *sefer*.)

In *Vayikra* 15:4 we read that anything that a *zav* (male with genital emissions) lies on becomes *tamei*. *Mishnah zavim* 4:7 records a dispute regarding a case in which a *zav* sits on a four-legged bed, with each leg resting on a garment. The anonymous initial position holds that all four *tallitot* become *tamei*, since the bed cannot stand on only three legs. Rabbi Shimon holds that none of the *tallitot* become *tamei*.

What is Rabbi Shimon's logic?

Rambam suggests that Rabbi Shimon regards each of the *tallitot* as bearing only one quarter of the *zav*'s weight, whereas bearing a majority of a *zav*'s weight is necessary for them to become *tamei*.

Rambam thus assimilates this case to Rabbi Shimon's explicit logic in a dispute in the previous *mishnah*. The case there is as follows: If a *zav* is in one palm of a scale, and multiple objects in the other, such that they collectively outweigh the *zav* even though individually each of them is lighter, the objects do not become *tamei*, since "no one of them is lifting the majority of his weight."

Rashi uses a different analogy, drawn from the laws of Shabbat, to explain Rabbi Shimon's position in 4:7. According to a *beraita* (*Talmud Shabbat* 92b), if an object too heavy to be carried by one person is carried by two people (from inside to outside or vice versa), Rabbi Shimon holds that neither is liable. Here too, the *zav* is being lifted by multiple objects, none of which is capable of lifting him independently, and so neither becomes *tamei*.

Rambam's model seems superior for four reasons:

First, his analogy is drawn from within the field of *tum'ah vetaharah*, whose rules are often not generalizable to other halakhic fields.

Second, in the Shabbat case Rabbi Shimon exempts a carrier who bears 99% of the object's weight, so long as s/he could not bear 100%, but as Rambam notes, in *Mishnah zavim* 4:5 Rabbi Shimon explicitly makes "majority" a relevant factor. (I do not see this point in Rav Lichtenstein, so perhaps it is mistaken.)

Third, the Talmud explicitly states that the rule regarding Shabbat is based on a Biblical verse that applies only to the transgression of negative commandments whose accidental violation compels the

bringing of a sacrifice; it cannot be generalized to cases of *tum'ah vetaharah*.

Fourth, the rule in Shabbat relates to the responsibility of persons, whereas the rule regarding *zav* relates to inanimate objects.

So why did Rashi not adopt Rambam's approach?

The simplest answer is that Rashi thought Rambam's approach begged the question. Saying that Rabbi Shimon' position in 4:7 depends on his position in 4:5 leaves us to ask: Why does Rabbi Shimon think all the *tallitot* remain *tehorot* in 4:5? Rashi's answer is that he presumably derives this from Shabbat.

But how can rules of *tum'ah vetaharah* be derived from a verse that relates only to prohibitions? Rashi understands the verse as recording a halakhic outcome that depends on an abstract "prehalakhic" point, namely that an action with multiple necessary immediate causes is considered to be caused by none of them rather than by each of them. This naturally leads to Rabbi Shimon's positions regarding the *zav*, and the verse comes to prevent us from thinking that we should not apply the same principle when we are dealing with human responsibility.

Those who disagree with Rabbi Shimon, if they disagree regarding both Shabbat and *zav*, hold that an action with multiple necessary immediate causes is caused by each of them. If they disagree regarding *zav* only, they believe that the rules for human responsibility are not the same as those for causality per se.

So why isn't Rambam begging the question, or: from where does Rambam derive for Rabbi Shimon a principle that applies specifically to *tum'ah vetaharah*?

This requires us to investigate on what basis Rabbi Shimon introduces the category of "majority." It turns out that we can ask the following question, is *tum'ah* created in an object by:

1. the condition of supporting the weight of a *zav*, or rather by
2. the action of a *zav* in putting his weight on something?

Put differently, is *tum'ah* the result of:

1. being a *zav*'s *mishkav*, or
2. having been sat on by a *zav*?

If the relevant factor is "sat on by a *zav,*" the parallel to Shabbat works, because in both contexts we are discussing the character of an action.

But if the relevant category is "a *zav*'s seat," the parallel breaks down. The violation of carrying on Shabbat clearly inheres in the human action of carrying the object, not in the object becoming something that has been carried by a human.

Now perhaps we can say that an object can be defined as "the seat of a *zav*" only if most of a *zav* sat on it. But if the question is whether it was "sat on by a *zav,*" the answer is yes if any part of a *zav* sat on it .

I suggest that we can apply the same analytic framework to our *Mishnah* from *Avot*.

Must the world be defined as "resting on Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chassadim*" in order to stand? In that case, each of these three pillars must relate to at least a majority of the world. Or is it enough for the world simply to rest on those three pillars, in which case each can support its own third of the world with no participation from the others?

Put differently, is the religion necessary for the world's continued existence:

1. a simple unity (like G-d), or rather
2. a complex unity (like the human being)?

In our own day, there is a growing socio-religious gap between the realms of profoundly rigorous study of Torah, spirituality (*avodah*), and the aspiration for social justice (*gemilut chasadim*). Perhaps Judaism, *medinat Yisrael*, and the world can survive this trifurcation, as they certainly cannot survive if any of these three disappear. Perhaps complex unity is sufficient.

But Rav Aharon Lichtenstein modelled and created for us the gold, the vision, and the dream of a fully integrated religious life, in which Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chasadim* could never be pried apart.

Perhaps that simple unity never was a viable religious aspiration for everyone. But I suggest that the world requires the possibility of such unity to survive, or at least the genuine world of Torah. If that world yet stands, it is and will be in his merit. זכר צדיק לברכה

*Shabbat Shalom!*