



Parashat Matot  
Rabbi David Silverberg

Parashat Matot tells of the request submitted by the tribes of Reuven and Gad to permanently settle in the newly-captured region east of the Jordan River, rather than joining the other tribes in settling their ancestral homeland west of the river. Moshe grants their request on condition that the men of Reuven and Gad participate in the campaign to conquer the Land of Israel. He instructs that if Reuven and Gad fulfill this condition, “then you shall be pure [of guilt] before the Lord and Israel” (“*vi-hyitem nekiyim mei-Hashem u-mi’Yisrael*” – 32:22).

The Sages famously interpreted this clause as a command to ensure “purity” – or innocence – in the eyes of both God and man. Thus, for example, the Mishna in Masekhet Shekalim (3:2), citing this verse, establishes certain guidelines concerning the handling of public funds. The *kohen* who takes coins from the Temple treasury must not enter the chamber with any pockets or articles of clothing in which he could hide coins, in order not to arouse any suspicion. The Torah requires a person to not only fulfill his obligations toward God, but also avoid suspicion on the part of other human beings.

Maimonides, in his *Iggeret Ha-shemad* (chapter 4), elaborates on this *halakha*, viewing it within the context of *chilul Hashem*, the prohibition against bringing disgrace to God and His Torah:

The second type [of *chilul Hashem*] refers to a person who displays a cynical disregard of public opinion with reference to his physical behavior and thereby is held up to public ridicule and slander. Such an individual, although he committed no sin, has nevertheless desecrated the Holy Name. Every person should be sensitive to public censure, just as one has to guard against sins committed against the Creator, as we read, “And you shall be pure before God and Israel.”

Maimonides then proceeds to describe the two manifestations of this kind of *chilul Hashem*:

The first, represents a self-respecting pious individual who performs an act which while legally defensible is unfit for a man of high repute, of whom generally more is expected than of an ordinary person. Such a man is guilty of having desecrated the Holy Name... The second type...delineates a learned person who conducts his commercial affairs with his fellowman with disdain and in an unseemly, hideous manner. He receives people in an irascible, contemptuous manner, devoid of any display of affable social behavior or the usual discreet and courteous amenities. Such an individual is guilty of desecrating the Holy Name.

Obeying social norms of courteousness and manners is of such critical importance, Maimonides asserts, that he considered composing an entire treatise delineating the acceptable modes conduct that we are to follow:

If not for my apprehension at unduly prolonging this essay and deviating from the intending theme, I would expound upon the proper social amenities incumbent upon us to observe, as well as delineate the proper kind of activities, the kind of conversation to engage in, and above all the art of greeting our fellowmen in a manner that would evoke the praise of everyone we communicate and come in contact with. I would also like to further elucidate upon the rabbinic dictum “to be honest in business transactions, and gentle in his conversation with his fellow creatures.” But this would require a long treatise.

At a time when, sadly, observant Jews live under constant, rigorous scrutiny and are subject to the unforgiving judgment of our fellow Jews and general society, it behooves us all to act not only correctly, but in a manner that does not invite any suspicion. As Maimonides here emphasizes, this requirement applies to all modes of conduct, including business ethics and general social etiquette. By adhering to the very highest ethical and social standards, we avoid *chilul Hashem* and ensure that our conduct brings respect and admiration for the Almighty, the Torah, and the Jewish people.