



Parashat Shelach

In Parashat Shelach, the Torah discusses the laws governing an unintentional violation of *avoda zara* (idolatry), which resulted from a mistaken ruling by the Sanhedrin concerning an idolatry-related issue. The Torah concludes this discussion by reiterating the warning against willful transgressions of *avoda zara*: "But the individual who acts with intention...that soul shall be excised... For he has scorned the word of the Lord and transgressed His command..." (15:30-31).

Maimonides, in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (3:13), comments on the clause, "For he has scorned the word of the Lord," claiming that it refers not only to intentional idolaters, but also to those who neglect their obligation to study Torah:

"For he has scorned the word of the Lord" – this refers to one who has no concern for the words of Torah at all. Similarly, whoever has the ability to occupy himself in Torah and does not occupy [himself in Torah], or who read and studied [Torah] and then withdrew to the inanities of the world, leaving and neglecting it [Torah study], is included under [the category of] "scorning the word of the Lord."

Maimonides here applies the phrase "scorning the word the Lord" to three types of people:

- 1) one who "has no concern for the words of the Torah at all," meaning, who gives no regard to the obligation of Torah study;
- 2) one who has the ability to study Torah but chooses not to;
- 3) one who devoted himself to study and then turns his attention exclusively to "the inanities of the world."

All these three individuals have "scorned the word of the Lord" by disregarding Torah study.

The question immediately arises as to the difference between the first two kinds of people whom Maimonides here describes – the person who "has no concern for the words of the Torah at all," and the person who has the opportunity to learn and fails to do so. Presumably, the one who "has no concern for the words of the Torah" also had the opportunity to study; otherwise, he cannot be said to have "scorned" the Torah through his failure to devote himself to learning. What, therefore, is the difference between these two categories?

The *Lechem Mishneh* commentary offers the following explanation to the second category, of one has the ability to learn but fails to do so: "Meaning, he fails to do so not because he has no concern, but rather because he does not want to occupy himself in Torah because he is lazy." According to the *Lechem Mishneh*, these two categories refer to two entirely different kinds of people. The first includes those who simply fail to acknowledge the importance of Torah study, who do not look upon it as a valuable and meaningful pursuit. The second kind of person that Maimonides describes indeed acknowledges the value in Torah learning, but is plain lazy. He resigns himself to a life of comfort and relaxation that includes Torah study only to extent to which it does not interfere with this comfortable lifestyle.

According to this reading, Maimonides here emphasizes that one need not oppose Torah study on ideological grounds to be described as "scorning" Torah. Even if a person has the highest regard for Torah study and Torah scholars, he still bears the obligation to devote some time to personal engagement in Torah study. Laziness in Torah is deemed equivalent to disregard for Torah, and it therefore behooves every Jew to make a proactive effort to designate some time from his daily schedule to involve himself in Torah study. Anything short of a concerted, proactive effort to learn Torah amounts to "scorning the word of the Lord," showing disgrace to the Torah by failing to afford it the priority it deserves within one's daily routine.