Rabbi Mayer Twersky

"U'Shmor Nafshecha Me'od[1]"

Rambam writes in Hilchos Rotzeach U'Shmiras Nefesh, (Laws concerning murder and preservation of life) 11:4:

וְכֵן כָּל מִכְשׁל שֶׁיֵּשׁ בּוֹ סַכָּנַת נְפָשׁוֹת מִצְוַת ﬠֲשֵׂה לַהֲסִירוֹ וּלְהִשָּׁמֵר מִמֶּנּוּ וּלְהִזָּהֵר בַּדָּבָר יָפֶה יָפֶה. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר )דברים ד׳:ט׳( הִשָּׁמֶר לְ וּשְׁמֹר נַפְשְׁ מְאֹד.

Similarly, any obstacle which has the potential to endanger life -- we are charged[2] to remove it, to be watchful of it, and to be very, very vigilant in this matter. As the Torah says[3] (Devarim 4:9): "take heed and watch yourself (me'od)[4]

Rambam's formulation is subsequently codified in Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Mishpat 427:8). The Vilna Gaon ad loc. (s"k 6), sourcing Rambam's formulation, cites a relevant passage in Maseches Brachos 32b concerning a certain chasid who had been in the middle of his amidah when a passing potentate greeted him. The chasid, loath to interrupt his amidah, did not reply in kind. The Gemara recounts that when the chasid concluded the amidah, the potentate confronted the chasid: since the chasid was cognizant of the potentially fatal consequences of such conduct, charged the potentate, he was violating both (Devarim 4:9): "take heed and watch yourself", and (Devarim 22:8): "Do not allow a dangerous situation to remain in your house.

To fully appreciate Rambam's treatment of the pasuk "take heed and watch yourself very carefully (me'od)", let us consider some other relevant passages from the Mishneh Torah.

Rambam, Hilchos Deos 2:3 writes:

The proper way is not only for one to be humble; he should be submissive, and his mien should be very (me'od) diffident. For this reason [the Torah] says regarding Moshe Rabbeinu [that he was] "hyper humble" and not merely "humble"; therefore our Chachamim instructed "be excessively (me'od) diffident".

It is readily apparent from this passage that "me'od" connotes increase/intensification as well as following a course of action to its extreme[6], ultimate end.

Rambam himself makes this point explicitly in the Peirush HaMishnah (4:4):

"And the man, Moshe, was exceedingly [me'od] humble"; [Chazal] comment that "me'od" connotes an alignment to the extremes.

This understanding of "me'od" is further born out in Hilchos Teshuvah (10:3):

What manner of love (of God) is fitting? One in which one loves God with a very great, mighty, immense love exceedingly ("ad me'od")...as we are commanded [in the Torah]: [and you shall love Hashem, your God] with all your heart, with all your being (nafshecha), and to your fullest capacity ("me'odecha").

Once again, in presenting the Torah's charge of "me'odecha", Rambam prescribes loving God "with a very great, mighty, immense love exceedingly ("ad me'od")"; me'od, once again, clearly plots an extreme path.

One additional example of the sheer extent of the prescription of me'od can be found in Rambam, Hilchos Brachos (10:3):
One is obligated to bless on the negative with the same positive spirit (tovas nefesh) with which he joyously blesses on the favorable, as it says [in the Torah]: And you shall love Hashem, your God with all your heart, with all your being (nafshecha), and to your fullest capacity (“me’odecha”). Included in this immense love that we have been charged with is [our obligation] that even in distressing times, one should thank and praise God joyously.

Clearly, “me’od” indicates an obligation which demands, in a deliberately extreme manner, both exceptional dedication and supreme effort.

Moreover, upon close examination, it becomes apparent that all the mitzvos whose fulfillment is characterized as “me’od” are, in fact, fundamental and axiomatic ones.

Let us consider the relevant examples:

- We are enjoined to not forget Torah and/or the Sinaitic experience (Devarim 4:9):

> Only take heed and watch yourself very (me’od) carefully, so that you forget not the things that your eyes saw

While the fundamental importance of this mitzvah is readily apparent, Ramban’s comments[7], by dint of their sheer significance, bear quoting in full:

> The second mitzvah: we have been enjoined not to forget the Mt. Sinai episode or to remove it from our conscious awareness ... the intent here is very significant ... and it is an important principle of the Torah, namely the injunction which emerges from the verse “lest you forget that which your eyes saw...”.

- The mandate to conduct ourselves with diffidence and to avoid any vestige of arrogance and egotism, which is reflected in the description of Moshe Rabbeinu as (Bamidbar 12:3) “excessively (me’od me’od)

> and the man, Moshe, was exceedingly (me’od) humble”. Though we have already partially addressed this mitzvah, we would do well to reinforce just how fundamental this directive is through the lens of several illustrative citations.

Ramak Hilchos Deos 2:3:

> The all-encompassing character attribute is humility, for it is dependent on [the Divine attribute] of Keser, which is an important attribute above all [other Divine] attributes...

Tomer Devorah (Chapter 2):

> Furthermore, [Chazal] said that one who is prideful has denied the fundamental beliefs [of Torah], as [the Torah says]: But your heart may then grow haughty, and you may forget Hashem your God.

We find a truly remarkable passage in S’mag (mitzvos lo sa’aseh 64):

> The Torah lauds humility (Bamidbar 12:3): “and the man, Moshe, was excessively (me’od) humble”; our Rabbis said [Avos 4:4]: “Be excessively (me’od) difflident.”

I had spoken in public reprovingly about humility, but I had never intended to either write about it [in the present work] or include it in the tally of mitzvos ...

When I was reaching the conclusion of my list of the negative prohibitions, I perceived in a nighttime dream [a communication]: “You have forgotten the fundamental mitzvah “Be careful that you do not forget God your Lord (Devarim 8:11)”.

> “Be careful that you do not forget God your Lord (Devarim 8:11):” is a proscription, so that Bnei Yisrael will not be prideful. The Torah lauds humility (Bamidbar 12:3): “and the man, Moshe, was excessively (me’od) humble”; our Rabbis said [Avos 4:4]: “Be excessively (me’od) difflident.”

The mitzvah to love God (Devarim 5:6): “And you shall love Hashem, your God with all your heart, with all your being (nafshecha), and to your fullest capacity (“me’odecha).” Earlier, we discussed the dynamic of “me’od” in this mitzvah; for our present purposes, we will take the description of this mitzvah found in Chovos Haleevos as a representative treatment of this mitzvah:

> Love of God, blessed is He, is the ultimate attribute and final rung in the stages of those who are devoted to service [of God] ...and it is their goal and ultimate objective, for there is no level above or beyond it. It is for this reason the prophet [Moshe Rabbeinu] juxtaposed [love of God] with God’s essential unity in Mishneh Torah, as it says “Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hasehem Echod. Ve’ahavta es Hashem Elokecha...”
It is both extraordinary and awesome, then, when we note that along with the aforementioned mitzvos, the mitzvah to take precautions in the face of potential danger is also accentuated with the word me’od (u’shmor nafshecha me’od). Moreover, the fact that the Torah requires the very same exceptional dedication and supreme effort indicates that the mandate of pikuach nefesh belongs in the same class of fundamental, axiomatic mitzvos.

All of the above, in truth, is explicated and accentuated by Rambam in our opening citation from Hilchos Rotzeach; Rambam, famously succinct and judicious, is --by his standards-- unusually expansive, almost prolix, when discussing the obligation to take precautions in the face of potential danger: "we are charged to remove it, to be watchful of it, and to be very, very vigilant in this matter." Rambam's compound structure: "remove," "watchful," and "vigilant" mirrors the Torah's repeated stress (Devarim 4:9) "take heed and watch yourself"; Rambam's emphasis "very, very (yafeh, yafeh)" reflects the Torah's intensification "and watch yourself very(me’od) carefully."

All of the above cumulatively indicates that the Torah requires supreme effort and abundant, multi-faceted precautions if we are to be in compliance with the prescribed "very, very vigilant" course of action.

Tosafos (Yoma 85a) comment:

'אָוִּית בָּהֶם וָלֹא שֶׁיָּמוּת בָּהֶם, 'You shall live through them and not die due to them' [means] that we must under no circumstances allow for the death of a Jewish person.

In other words, per Tosafos, the mandate of"וְחַי בָּהֶם, you shall live through them" obligates us to actively defer fulfilling other mitzvos in order to adopt the aforementioned abundant, multi-faceted precautions.

Accordingly, it is abundantly clear that we are to evaluate every potential course of action by this exacting standard. There is clearly no place to pursue or accomodate a perfunctory, pro forma compliance with relevant standards. It is therefore wholly illegitimate to attempt to organize minyanim or re-open yeshivos through various legal manipulations as long as we are confronting even potential danger.

In truth, the very fact that presently the only possible avenue for re-opening our batei k'neses and yeshivos entails such obvious contrivances is, per se, an unmistakable indication that we are, in fact, still confronting a very real danger, r''l. Categorically, there can be no dispensation to take any steps which interfere with our discharging our obligation to take all possible precaution and to expend great efforts to those ends.

May Hashem guide us along the path of truth.

[1]We thank Rav Twersky for allowing us to attempt a translation of the Hebrew original (talmidim).

[2]"Mitzvas asheh"

[3]Many translations of Chumash herein follow, or are adaptations of, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's The Living Torah.

[4]In the standard printed editions of the Mishneh Torah, the citation concludes before the word "me’od very." However, the Yemenite manuscripts all include the word "me’od"; those interested in researching this point further should consult the textual variants catalogued in the Frankel edition.

[5]See Minchas Chinuch (Mitzvah 546) and, subsequently, Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky zt''l (Emes l'Ya'akov, introduction).


[7]Commentary to Sefer HaMitzvos, Sh'ch'chas Ha'la'avin 2

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