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The Concept of Chumros\Halachic Stringencies

In the blessing of **ועל הצדיקים** in *Shemoneh Esrei*, after we ask Hashem to protect our elders, we ask Hashem to protect our scholars – **ועל פליטת בית סופריהם**. Our Sages were the ones who enacted many *chumros* (stringencies) which were not written in the Torah.

There are different levels of Rabbinical commandments – there are “*Divrei Sofrim*” (“words of the scholars”), as well as *chumros* – stringencies. Sometimes we are *machmir* (stringent) on ourselves when we don’t know what the *halachah* is, and sometimes we are stringent when we are not sure which opinion to follow.

In the last half of the century, a movement of “*chumros*” began, in which people have become very scrupulous with their *dikduk hadin* (strict adherence to keeping *Halacha*). This was due to the fact that many people learned by the Brisker Rav zt”l, as well as other Gedolim, who conducted themselves with *chumros* and *dikduk hadin*. People began to take upon themselves *chumros*, and the *chumros* served to help people keep the *mitzvos* properly and stay away from any sin.

The Problem With Chumros

But in the last couple of years, many people have taken upon themselves “*chumros*”, and not necessarily with the motivation of being careful in *Halacha* and to protect themselves from sin. Often, the *chumros* a person takes upon himself are being done by rote, as a habit, and people are instead doing *chumros* in a superficial manner. It has become a movement of “*chumros*” that are all about “*chumros*”, and not necessarily about the purpose of what of all these *chumros* are supposed to lead to.

There are people who take upon themselves many *chumros*, and they will even transgress *Halacha* along the way! Examples include causing pain to others so that the person will be able to keep his *chumra*, as well as embarrassing others who don’t have those *chumros*. Or it can be because he wants to gain honor in other’s eyes and appear prominent by having all these *chumros*.

In essence, the concept of *chumros* is constructive. It protects the generation from sin, and this is something very commendable. In previous generations, there always existed a problem of doing things “*melumadah*” (by rote), that we are admonished to perform the *mitzvos* with awareness, as opposed to doing them perfunctorily, mechanically, by rote. The “*melumadah*” issue was always a problem, but, it was still wonderful that people were practicing *chumros*, even if they were doing it

somewhat mechanically and not with enough concentration. The *chumros* which people practiced protected them from sin.

But today, keeping *chumros* has become a problematic and disturbing thing. The new generation lacks the *Yiras Shomayim* (fear of G-d) that the previous generations had, and therefore, doing *chumros* today out of habit is destructive.

How Kashrus Has Changed

To illustrate the problem, up until recently, people always had *chumros* when it came to areas of *Kashrus* (kosher). Nowadays, you can find Kosher certifications on almost any food on the market, and since people rely on all the *hechsheirim* (kosher certifications), they find no need to be so stringent when it comes to *Kashrus* matters.

For example, until recently, any frum Jew who kept Torah and mitzvos would never dream of going to a hotel on Pesach. But nowadays, they offer “Glatt Kosher” *hechsheirim* in hotels (and now they even hotel programs for *Rosh HaShanah*...!), so people who once used to be so stringent when it came to *Kashrus* don't see any need nowadays to be that stringent anymore. As a result, people are less careful when it comes to matters of *Kashrus* -they have lost the concept of being careful when it comes to *Kashrus*.

The very fact that a person knows that he can find Kosher food in almost any place in the world today is, itself, something which weakens a person's attitude towards being careful with *Kashrus*. (This is besides for the fact that it has also caused people to become very gluttonous in their desires, which is a separate problem).[\[1\]](#)

Until about twenty years ago, it was clear to many people that there are certain places where a Jew just doesn't eat there, period. But nowadays, the whole concept of *dikduk hadin* (being careful with keeping *Halacha*) has been weakened, due to the fact that people rely on how every areas in which they keep kosher there.

Technology And Guarding Our Speech

This is not only true with regards to being careful in *Kashrus* matters. There are other areas as well in *Halacha* which have been compromised, in the recent years.

A few years ago, a *Shemiras HaLashon* movement began, in which people all over the world resolved to be careful with guarding their speech. But nowadays, cellphones and technology have made it possible for a person to chat with anyone, in the blink of an eye, and speak freely about whatever comes to his mind. As soon as someone thinks of something, it is sent as a message to another person, in a flash. It has become so easy to speak *lashon hora* (gossip) because of all the technology nowadays, and it is appalling! These days, if someone can say on himself that he doesn't hear *lashon hora*, he's considered to be an outcast of society...

Dikduk hadin and *Yiras Shomayim* has become greatly weakened in the recent years. As a result, even the “*chumros*” which people have are not able to protect a person from stumbling to sin.

The “*chumros*” don't have an effect like they used to, because the whole concept of *dikduk hadin* is missing in the first place by many people. In the previous generations, the *chumros* which Jews lived with were a great protection on them. Although they also had the tendency to act by rote and do the *chumros* only mechanically, they still had *dikduk hadin*, and therefore, their *chumros* were able to protect them. But in our generation, every boundary has been broken. All of the outside influences have entered, and therefore our *chumros* can't offer the protection that they used to have.

The Prerequisite To Keeping Chumros

That is one part of the issue. Another part of the issue with keeping so many *chumros* nowadays is, that in order to keep *chumros*, you have to be on the level.

If a person has *Yiras Shomayim*, then doing *chumros* can uplift him even more. When a person is careful with *Halacha*, this is called *zehirus* (watchfulness), and *zehirus* comes from the word “Zohar”, “to shine”. When a person is careful with *Halacha* because he has *Yiras Shomayim*, the light of his *neshamah* is shining, and that is why he is able to take *chumros* upon himself. The more *Yiras Shomayim* a person would have, the more *chumros* he can take upon himself.

But these days, many people take upon themselves *chumros* even though they are not on the level of keeping to them. They still have room to grow in their *Yiras Shomayim*, and they are not on the level of keeping certain *chumros*, yet they take upon themselves these *chumros* anyway, which is misguided.

On a higher level, a person does *chumros* out of his great love for Hashem. As the *Mesillas Yesharim* writes regarding how we acquire *Chassidus* (piety),^[2] a person is stringent and careful to do all the mitzvos when he feels a great love for the Creator.

If a person does not have *dikduk hadin* (if he isn't careful to keep *Halacha*), then trying to increase his *Yiras Shomayim* through *chumros* will only serve to be detrimental to him. It will imprison his soul.

Chumros require both *Yiras Hashem* (fear of Hashem) and *Ahavas Hashem* (love of Hashem). Some people are closer in their soul root to Shamai, who was always stringent; some are closer in their soul root to Hilel, who was less stringent. But all people, no matter what their soul root is, need to purify themselves internally and have both love for Hashem as well as *dikduk hadin*.

On one hand, a person must have a burning love for Hashem in his heart, and along with this, a person needs to be careful when it comes to keeping *Halacha*. If a person has one of these factors without the other, he is living a rebellious kind of life – “a slave is free to do as he pleases.”

Thus, a practical outcome of this is that if a person feels a burning love for Hashem and as a result he wishes to be involved with Kiruv (drawing other Jews closer to religion), he must make sure first that he is very careful when it comes to being careful with *Halacha*.

In Conclusion

This is what we ask for when we say the words **ועל פליטת בית סופרים** – that the *chumros* which received from our Sages and Halachic authorities should be lasting and permanent, when we keep them on condition that we have a burning love for Hashem along with it.^[3]

^[1] See **Fixing Desires # 005** and **Fixing Laziness #002** to learn about how you can control the desire to indulge in food.

^[2] ‘Chassidus’ here does not refer to being “Chassidic” or to be affiliated with the ‘Chassidic’ movement, but rather to be strict in one’s observance of the mitzvos, out of great love and attachment to Hashem.

[3] See also ***Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh Vol. V., p.153, "Chumros"***.

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