

Lesson 10 – Perek 4 Pasuk 6 – Wise Nation

Background: Moshe here tries to encourage Bnei Yisrael to keep the Torah by explaining that the laws of the Torah are something they can be proud of in front of all the other nations. If you keep the Torah then everyone else will honor you for your great wisdom. Rambam made this pasuk into a cornerstone of his philosophy. This is a good example of how one seemingly innocuous pasuk can inspire an entire system of thought.

Objective: To appreciate how this one pasuk has profound impact on the Rambam's thought concerning reasons for *mizvot*, and understanding *midrashim*. Rambam felt it was important to make a good impression upon other nations. Since all people agree with reason and honor that which promotes goodness, Rambam felt it necessary to explain that all *mitzvot* and *aggadoth* can be explained through reason and universal values. Students can learn two important lessons from this: (1) As a Jew, we should always seek to make a good impression on other people. (2) We should always use reason to understand the Torah. If something does not make sense then we should continue searching until it does.

Activity: Discuss the following points:

What does Hilul Hashem mean? What does Kiddush Hashem mean? What are examples of ways in which we can cause Kiddush Hashem?

Why is it important to make a good impression on others? Why can't we just do what we think is right and disregard other people's opinions?

Rambam applies the concept of Kiddush Hashem even on a national level. Our Torah, both its commandments and stories, should make a good impression on non-Jews. Handout source sheet.

Source 1 presents Rambam's opinion that all *mitzvot*, even *hukim*, have reasons. This is not the time to get into what all those reasons are, but this is just an important principle to keep in mind. After reading source 2 discuss what Rambam presents as the proper way to understand Midrashim.

Perek 4 – Wise Nation

Rambam's Use of Debarim 4:6

וְשִׁמְרֵתֶם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם כִּי הוּא חֻמַּתְכֶם וּבִינְתְּכֶם לְעֵינֵי הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמְעוּן אֶת כָּל הַחֻקִּים
הָאֵלֶּה וְאָמְרוּ רַק עִם חָכְם וְנָבוֹן הַגּוֹי הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה :

1. On Reasons for the Mizvot – The Guide of the Perplexed III:31

The sole object of the Torah is to benefit us. Thus we explained the verse, “for our good always, that He might preserve us alive as it is this day” (Debarim 6:24). Again, “**which shall hear all those statutes [hukim], and say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people**” (Debarim 4:6). He thus says that even every one of these statutes [hukim] convinces all nations of the wisdom and understanding it includes. But if no reason could be found for these statutes, if they produced no advantage and removed no evil, why then should he who believes in them and follows them be wise, reasonable, and so excellent as to raise the admiration of all nations? But the truth is undoubtedly as we have said, that every one of the 613 precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good opinions, moral, and social conduct.

2. On Interpreting Midrashim – Introduction to Perek Helek

You must know that the words of the sages are differently interpreted by three groups of people. The first group is the largest one. I have observed them, read their books and heard about them. They accept the teachings of the sages in their simple literal sense and do not think that these teachings contain any hidden meaning at all. They believe that all sorts of impossible things must be. They hold such opinions because they have not understood science and are far from having acquired knowledge...They understand the teachings of the sages only in their literal sense, in spite of the fact that some of their teachings, when taken literally, seem so fantastic and irrational that if one were to repeat them literally, even to the uneducated, let alone to sophisticated scholars, their amazement would prompt them to ask how anyone in the world could believe such things true, much less edifying.

The members of this group are poor in knowledge. One can only regret their folly. Their very effort to honor and to exalt the sages in accordance with their own meager understanding actually humiliates them. As God lives, this group destroys the glory of the Torah and extinguishes its light, for they make the Torah of God say the opposite of what it intended. For He said in His perfect Torah, “**The nations who hear of these statutes shall say: Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people**” (Debarim 4:6). But this group expounds the laws and the teachings of our sages in such a way that when the other peoples hear them they say that this little people is foolish and shameful.

[L10 Perek 4 - Wise Nation - Source Sheet.doc](#)

Further Reading:

Isidore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 385-7.

For the full quotation of source 2 see Isidore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 407.