

# Pirkei Avot 1:1

## Translation

**Avtalyon says: Sages, be careful with your words lest you incur the penalty of exile and are exiled to a place of wicked waters and the students that come after you drink and die; and the Heavenly Name is consequently profaned.**

## Maimonides

*Wicked waters* is a figurative expression for heresy. He said, be vigilant of your words in the midst of the multitude, lest there be among your words an area which would bear another interpretation. For if there were skeptics there, they would interpret them in accordance with their belief. The disciples, having heard them from them, would turn to heresy and would think that this was your belief, and through this there would be profanation of the Name, as happened to Antigonus with Zadok and Boethus.

## Rav Chaim of Volozhin

(Translation: Chanoch Levi in *Ruach Chaim*)

*Be Careful.* Do not be hypocritical; make sure that your actions are compatible with what you teach. Do not think that the prohibition against suspecting a Torah scholar of any sin (*Berachot 19a*) will prevent the truth from surfacing. Eventually you will be exiled because of your sins to a place of evil waters, a place of sinners. They will surely scrutinize your every action and be quick to denounce you when they realized that your actions do not follow the dictates of the Torah, thus causing a desecration of the Name of Heaven.

## Reuven Bulka

(*"As A Tree by the Waters"*)

Although one should not seek to join the high society of rulership, this does not mean that one should publicly denigrate the ruling authorities or even be insensitive to their potential reactions. Precisely because the rulers are likely to legislate laws which are unfair and even cruel, as they are removed from the grass roots, precisely for this reason the scholar who is committed to communal concern likely to rebel or protest. Scholars, however, carry on their shoulders a heavy responsibility. They have a community which follows them, the community of people thirsting for knowledge. The scholars must therefore weigh very carefully any remark of protest

אַבְטָלְיוֹן אוֹמֵר, חֲכָמִים,  
הִזְהָרוּ בְּדַבְרֵיכֶם, שֶׁמָּא תַּחֲוִּבוּ  
חוֹבֵת גְּלוֹת וְתִגְלוּ לְמָקוֹם מַיִם  
הָרָעִים, וַיִּשְׁתּוּ הַתַּלְמִידִים  
הַבָּאִים אַחֲרֵיכֶם וַיָּמוּתוּ,  
וְנִמְצָא שֵׁם שָׁמַיִם מְתַחֲלָל:

before making. If there is a chance the protest will awaken the slumbering authorities to what is just, the protest should be made. But if the protest is likely to be met by a violent reaction, the exile of the scholar from the community to an isolated area removed from the immediate pale, then second thought must

be given. It is good to be a hero, but irresponsible to be a hero when other people are likely to suffer. The students of the scholar, dutifully following even to a *place of evil waters*, a place divorced from communal roots and lacking in spiritual vibrancy, are still in a developmental phase. The disparity between what they are taught and their new environment may create conflict in them, and lead them away from their tradition. Though they will be thought of as students of the scholar, they will go a different way, even possibly *profaning the Name of Heaven* through their misrepresentation. This scenario may seem a bit far-fetched, but it is not outside the realm of possibility. The ethics of protest demand that the scholar-protester be concerned with more than getting an opinion expressed to rid the self of guilt. The scholar must weigh with meticulous care the full implications and possible ramifications of the outburst.