CHAPTER 1, LAW 2 - CONTROLLING OUR DESTINY

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

There is between each extreme of disposition more moderate dispositions, each different from the other. There are some dispositions which a person has from birth, according to the nature of his body. And there are some for which a person by nature is inclined towards, and which he will adopt quickly. And there are those which a person does not have from birth but which he learns from others, or which he himself adopts through conscious effort. Alternatively, a person might adopt a quality which he has heard is fitting and commendable, and he will accustom himself in it until it becomes instinctive.

Last week the Rambam listed just a few of the many basic personality types. We noted that although the Rambam advocates following the middle path in life -- as he'll state later in this chapter, he did not simply begin by telling us how we **should** behave. He began with that most critical first observation: that people are different. We must first recognize who we are **now** before we may begin to strive toward the center. For the "center" is not the same for any two individuals. We must first recognize our talents and natural predilections and develop them, and only then should we temper them by easing ourselves towards the middle.

This week the Rambam continues to define the types of personalities known to man. He notes firstly that individuals exist at every conceivable point in the spectrum. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle, even in traits in which we veer closer to one side or the other.

Second, the Rambam distinguishes between those traits which are inborn and those which are later adopted. Some traits we are simply born with. One person may just be born with a beautiful voice, or be an organizer by nature. (One of my favorite stories is that years ago I had a roommate who could not be untidy, no matter how hard he tried. He was once beginning to study for an exam, and then stopped, saying he just couldn't focus on the material until he makes my bed (which, being in its typical disarray, was to him an unbearable eyesore). I good-naturedly agreed to have him make my bed (though I find it hard to think in such a organized room).)

Other traits are not inbred but come to a person as second-nature. A person might have a predilection towards certain good or evil traits. Very few of us are **born** generous, but some of us are willing to give charity with little conditioning -- while for others, parting with their money comes as natural as pulling teeth. Some people can easily train themselves to do with less, to be more sensitive to others, to focus for longer periods, etc.

Lastly, there are traits not natural to a person at all, but which he consciously adopts for one reason or another -- most often because of his environment and the values of the society in which he lives. Usually the majority of the citizens of a given country will share many of the same basic values -- sometimes ones in sharp opposition to the Judeo-Christian ones Western man has been taught to hold dear (whether or not he actually adheres to them). Transplant them to America, and suddenly they believe in democracy, personal liberties, capitalism, etc. Some believe that the land itself exerts an influence on the individuals residing there -- and this is certainly plausible (I don't offhand know of a Jewish source for this), but in part this is certainly true because we absorb the values and ideals of the society around us. The same person (or at least his children), placed in a different land and environment, will just as passionately adopt an entirely different worldview and value system.

(Interestingly, the only land where this does not seem to happen is the Holy Land itself. That Land seems to have a nature all of its own. Rather than molding its inhabitants into a specific form, it seems to heighten the pre-existing passions of all who live there -- unless, perhaps, we consciously raise ourselves into the mold it has for us. One who's passionate about religion will become even more pious (and extreme); one who is against it (or indifferent) will become vehemently anti-religious. Thus, rather than homogenizing its citizens, blending them into a harmonious whole, differences are further exacerbated and brought to the fore. It certainly makes the Holy Land an exciting (if exasperating) place to live in. Perhaps more on that in some future installment, G-d willing.)

I feel all of the above raises another fascinating angle to this discussion. There is one underlying question to this entire section of the Rambam which we have not yet addressed. The Rambam names this section "de'os" (DAI-oas), which literally means knowledge, attitudes, perspectives, opinions (it's not an easy word to translate). Yet the Rambam actually discusses the character traits of man. Why describe character traits as "opinions"? Was the Rambam simply hampered by a limited medieval vocabulary?

This in itself, however, is perhaps one of the great lessons of the Rambam here. Our personality traits are not simply the baggage we carry with us in life. We are not just stuck with a temper, arrogance, recklessness, laziness, etc. These are our "opinions". Perhaps some traits were even ours from birth. Yet ultimately, they are ours to control: it is not they that control us. Just from the Rambam's choice of wording, it is clear that he sees humanity as the master of its character traits and so the master of its fate. True, we have certain natural predilections -- which in fact must be harnessed and sublimated rather than ignored. Yet ultimately our behavior is our own choosing. We and only we are responsible for our behavior and our life choices.

This in a word is our second great lesson from the Rambam. Man has free will -- not only in his actions but in his very disposition. Anger, bashfulness, stinginess, callousness: all such traits are ours to control. Although even at this early stage of our studies we have observed that we should never work against our natural predilections, neither are they givens we can never alter or modify. To be

sure, there are individuals with real chemical disorders beyond the bounds of ethics to cure. But most of us know quite well in ourselves that we can control our behavior. We must never feel that we are controlled by forces beyond the ability of puny man to control (as many philosophical and even religious worldviews in fact do believe) -- neither on the cosmic level nor the personal. G-d created the world and surely controls its ultimate destiny. But we and only we control our behavior -- and ultimately our fates.

Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and **Torah.org**