

CHAPTER 1, LAW 7 - JEWISH PSYCHOLOGY

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

And how does a person accustom himself in these qualities (i.e., the middle path of each character trait) until he acquires them? He should act in accordance with the middle path multiple times, repeatedly behaving in such ways until such deeds become easy, effortless, and ingrained in his soul.

Since the attributes by which G-d is described (see earlier, Law 6) constitute the middle path which we must follow, this middle path is known as the 'way of G-d' ('derech Hashem'). This is the path our father Abraham instructed his descendants in, as the verse states, 'For I cherished him, for he will command his children and his household after him, and they will observe the 'way of G-d' to do righteousness and justice' (Genesis 18:19). And one who follows in this path brings goodness and blessing to himself, as the verse states (ibid.), 'in order that G-d bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken regarding him' (i.e., the rewards He promised to bring).

We are now up to the final law of the Rambam's first chapter. The Rambam first states how one acquires good character traits -- simply by practicing and accustoming himself to act according to them. The Rambam then broadens his discussion by stating that such is the way of G-d and the way our forefather Abraham instructed us to behave.

Before we begin discussing this law, it should be noted that the Rambam is not discussing someone who has a problem. The person who finds he has a strong propensity to one extreme of a given trait -- say he knows he has a temper or he finds himself extremely tight-fisted -- requires a much stronger cure than simply following the middle path a number of times. Such a person is the subject of the beginning of Chapter 2; we will discuss it G-d willing in future classes.

Today we are discussing the average individual, who say isn't extremely angry or tight-fisted, but who requires some conditioning to truly make the healthy, middle path instinctive to him.

The Rambam this week is based on a fundamental concept, one which has important ramifications in the world of psychology: We can change ourselves through our behavior. Act in a certain way -- whether we feel it or not -- and it will become second nature. We will not only accustom ourselves to act that way, but it will become who we are as well. It is in our hands to change our hearts.

This, as we know, is a basic issue of debate among schools of psychology. To what extent is man a product of conditioning and environment? Can a person train himself to behave a certain way -- and actually become that way? Or is man a product of more basic and primordial forces? And forcing

himself to behave a certain way is merely a dishonest and futile charade, and a denial of his true nature?

Regarding this Jewish tradition is fairly clear -- although with an important qualifier. The Rambam states it here simply: Behave a certain way and it will be you. And further, there is nothing dishonest about not being true to your nature -- or by pretending to be something you are not until it becomes ingrained. One day, after 120, we'll be judged on what we did with our lives, not in how "honest" we were about being ourselves. Train yourself, sublimate your baser desires, and you will be happy and fulfilled both in this world and in the Next.

The Sefer HaChinuch is a classic Jewish work on the 613 Commandments. ("The Book of Instruction," written by a 13th Century Spanish scholar; the precise authorship is uncertain.) He coins one of the famous expressions in rabbinic writing regarding this phenomenon: "A person is 'acted upon' by his actions" (Mitzvah 16). We are who we feign to be -- certainly not immediately, but slowly, as the years progress and our behavior becomes ingrained. Nazi officials, under the pretext of following orders, quickly became the most bestial and sadistic of killers. And we too, if we act a certain way, whether better or worse, become how we act -- almost regardless of what's in our hearts. Ultimately, we are our deeds, not our guilt-ridden hearts.

The Sefer HaChinuch uses this principle to explain why Judaism, unlike many other religions, is so commandment-heavy. Virtually every aspect of our lives is guided and regulated. We are constantly occupied with and surrounded by mitzvos (commandments) -- in our dwellings, our dress, our eating habits. Why such an emphasis on form over spirit? Isn't man naturally good? Why can't we just be ourselves and let our natural goodness shine through?

The answer is that we are naturally good, but goodness does not exist in a vacuum. We can easily ruin it, and having a good heart -- which the vast majority of us certainly do possess -- will not do us an ounce of good if our deeds corrupt and pervert. Instead, our Torah gave us the true recipe for improvement and self-fulfillment: act as if you're noble -- tell your body to fake it. For it will not long be a fake. Ultimately, both mind and body will follow suit.

Thus, much of self-improvement according to Judaism requires training our bodies. Don't spend a lot of effort trying to reach your soul -- intellectually convincing yourself that the ethical life is the one most fine. Our souls are not really within our reach; they're untouchable and difficult to influence. And most important, even if we develop our intellects to appreciate certain values, it will do us very little good if our bodies just aren't interested.

A probably apocryphal and of course impossible-to-verify story I once heard about Aristotle is that he was once caught behaving in a way utterly inconsistent with his philosophical beliefs. When questioned about his behavior, he shrugged it off: "I'm not Aristotle now." Of course, I take no responsibility for the story (it sounds too "convenient" to be true), but it can certainly be said that all the profound, well-developed philosophical beliefs in the world together with a subway token will

get a fellow one ride on the subway and nothing more.

Equally significant, we don't really need to "teach" our souls how they should behave. They know. Intellectualism is not really the path to self-improvement -- simply because our souls deep down know what is right. Most of the time, if not all of the time, the enemy is our bodies. They have to be forced, to be trained and housebroken, and then it will all begin to jell.

And even further, if we let our bodies run wild -- claiming we are being "honest" with ourselves (in acting like animals -- which we've just "honestly" become), our souls and intellects will quickly fall into step. We'll concoct all sorts of wild theories rationalizing our behavior. Our minds will adopt any and all absurd and intellectually-shoddy notions available in order to justify how we want to behave. We once talked about this concept in Pirkei Avos (2:13) -- how our minds and opinions are ultimately shaped by our desires. Holocaust denial and the theory of Evolution are two excellent examples of this.

The Talmud likewise states it succinctly: "The Children of Israel knew idolatry has no true substance; they served it only in order to permit public promiscuity" (Sanhedrin 63b). Intellectual rebellion was nothing more than a front for illicit sex -- both in mankind's ancient and rather recent history, as well as probably very many times in between.

Thus, to conclude, Judaism believes very strongly in behavior as the primary determinant of who we truly are. Of course, we must keep in mind some of the lessons of past weeks -- that our goal is to discover our natures, working with them rather than against them. Yet our goal must be sublimation -- discovering our strengths and predilections and devoting them heavenwards, rather than letting our bodies call the shots for us. For this truly is the determining factor between man and animal. We call the shots; our minds and intellects determine how we behave. And not long after, our bodies too will achieve serenity.

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