

CHAPTER 2, LAW 1 - ARE WE REALLY HAPPY?

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Those who have physical illnesses taste bitter things as sweet and sweet as bitter. There are likewise ill individuals who hunger for inedible substances such as dirt and ashes, and who are repulsed by good food such as bread and meat, depending upon the acuity of the illness.

The same is true of people suffering from spiritual illness. They may love and admire evil qualities, while detesting the good path in life, being too lethargic to follow it. The good path to them appears burdensome, depending upon their illness. So too did Isaiah say about such people: 'Woe to those who say of evil [it is] good and of good [it is] evil, who take darkness for light and light for darkness, who take bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter' (5:20). Regarding them it also states, 'Those who forsake the straight path to follow the paths of darkness' (Proverbs 2:13).

What is the cure (lit., 'fix', 'takkanah') for those with spiritual illness? Let them go to the sages, who are soul healers. They will heal their illnesses with 'de'os' (wisdom / good qualities) which instruct them, until they bring them back to the good path. Regarding one who recognizes his bad qualities but does not go to the wise for healing, King Solomon said, 'Ethical instruction ('mussar') fools despise' (Proverbs 1:7).

This chapter begins with a discussion of people who have more serious spiritual shortcomings or imbalances in their character traits. (The end of the first chapter dealt with the average person, who needs only improve his ways moderately.) The Rambam equates such people to the physically ill -- who at times are so delirious from sickness that they are not even aware of what is beneficial for them. Their temperature is off, their appetite is off, and they often desire the worst possible things for their health. (Some of us have been in the unfortunate situation of tending to people unaware of their condition -- who attempt to pull out the very tubes and IV's which are preserving their lives.)

So too, continues the Rambam, is the situation regarding people who suffer from spiritual ailments. Their spiritual bearings are so confused that they view good qualities as weak-willed and wimpy, while admiring traits which are objectively speaking evil. For them religious behavior is a burden and inconvenience -- at best a sacrifice one must make for a share in the World to Come. It's more "fun" to rip others off than to help them, to love 'em and leave 'em rather than build lasting relationships. And again, they might surmise that it's worth passing up what is enjoyable in this world for the next one. But in their eyes it is a sacrifice. And this is a terrible misconception the Evil Inclinations foists upon us. Tragically, the Rambam's metaphor is relevant to far too many of us.

Just as an introductory note, the Rambam was a doctor by profession. (Much of his career was in the personal employ of Saladin, the 12th Century sultan of Egypt, who participated in both the Second and Third Crusades.) Clearly here, he drew from his own medical experiences to derive an important moral lesson. Spiritual sicknesses are no less dangerous than physical ones. It can ruin our lives much the same.

I personally feel that this is one of the most difficult aspects of spiritual growth -- and one of the most powerful tricks of our Evil Inclination. People whose lives lack meaning and spirituality will not know they're sick. They will **think** that they're enjoying themselves, that life is wonderful -- or at least bearable enough not to require looking elsewhere for inspiration. (Deep down, they **will** feel a gnawing sense of lacking -- but it will be too vague to identify. It will be easier to suppress it (perhaps with antidepressants) and to keep moving.) And it's very difficult to convince someone he is not truly happy, that his life is predicated on falsehood -- and that he's merely using an endless array of empty diversions in hopeless attempt to cover a terrifying void.

Often, the "crash" has to occur before the person wakes up and realizes he was fooling himself all along. How often do we meet people who only "got into religion" after their marriage went sour or their business belly-up? When all else is exhausted -- when they have little to show for themselves in this world -- then they're ready for G-d, then they realize all along it was merely the bitter tasting sweet. And unfortunately, as we all know too well, the "sweet" leaves a very bitter aftertaste. Your taste buds may well be damaged for life.

But in a sense, then it's too late. **Now** you turn to Me?! After spending a lifetime trying out everything else on the planet and only then realizing all else is futile? Says King Solomon, "Rejoice, young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth, and go in the ways your heart desires and your eyes see. And know that for all these the L-rd will bring you to judgment" (Ecclesiastes 11:9). Rather, Solomon continues, "...remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the arrival of the bad days and the years regarding which you will say 'I have no desire for them'" (ibid., 12:1).

Don't wait till it's too late or almost too late. How often do we hear the refrain, "Yes, I should have done things differently, but now I'm too old to change." As the Rambam advises, go to the wise before it's too late -- before you become too depressed and wasted to do anything about it. (To be sure, G-d does accept even a belated repentance as better than nothing -- see Rambam Laws of Repentance [2:1](#), but it really isn't the same...)

But this is our great challenge. Don't wait till you hit rock bottom, till the awful reality of a wasted life sinks in. The Talmud writes that the highest form of repentance is when you are in the exact same situation -- with the exact same strength and desire -- and **then** refrain (Yoma 86b). Try to reevaluate before anything goes wrong -- before G-d has to send you stern messages that things have got to change (if He sends them at all).

And finally, don't judge happiness and fulfillment based on what appears most gratifying and rewarding to you right now. Perhaps our sense of taste is a little skewed, perhaps we've adopted ideals and values that come from decidedly unholy sources. Don't decide based on what **you** think is best today -- who **you** think must be happiest people today -- because they may very well be drugged with antidepressants just to survive. In fact, you may well be an outsider to true happiness yourself. How often do we hear people who embraced religion late in life wondering out loud how they ever survived life without the Sabbath, or without Torah study. But at the time, they **thought** they were happy -- that Sabbath observance would be an intolerable burden, or Torah study a dull recitation of archaic texts.

Rather, use a different criterion to determine happiness: How happy are the practitioners of a given lifestyle themselves? Who appears most happy and fulfilled in life? Whose happiness does not fade -- but rather grows -- with age? And further, which societies are most vibrant? Which way of life carries on to the next generation?

And for this, the Rambam advises we go to the wise. Our own judgment is notoriously inaccurate. Anyone can fool himself into thinking he's living it up. There is no one we can fool better than ourselves. But the sages have transcended this. They see life through the prism of G-d's wisdom and our immortal Torah -- not through their own cockeyed notions. People can convince themselves anything is good and holy if their personal agenda is strong enough. The sages, however, have no false pretenses about what this world has to offer. And they can truly and clearly advise people as to what brings fulfillment and what is an empty narcotic. For only the Torah, G-d's blueprint for creation, contains the true and unbiased formula for human fulfillment.

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