

CHAPTER 2, LAW 2(B) - FROM EXTREME TO EXTREME

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

How are such people [who are spiritually "sick"] healed? A person who for example has a bad temper should act as follows: If he is struck or cursed, he should not take it to heart at all ('lo yargish' -- he should not feel it). He should continue to act in this manner for a long period of time until his trait of anger is uprooted from his heart. [So too] one who is arrogant should degrade himself greatly. He should sit in the least honorable seat and wear worn-out clothes which shame their wearer. He should do the above and the like until the arrogance is uprooted from him. Such people may then return to the middle path which is the proper one, and continue in it for the rest of their lives. So too should a person behave regarding all character traits. If he is on one extreme he should move to the opposite extreme and accustom himself to such behavior for a good while until he may return to the proper middle path.

Last week we began discussing the Rambam's advice. Someone who has a severe character imbalance must go to the opposite extreme, staying there a while till he is ready to return to the Golden Mean. As we noted, extremism in any form is not healthy behavior. However, the subject of our mishna requires drastic measures. He must adopt extreme behavior -- one which would literally not be correct for the rest of us -- entirely denying his previous identity -- until he is ready for healthy living.

We illustrated this with the Scriptural example of the extremist. The Nazir (of Numbers 6) is one who takes a vow not to partake of any products of the vine. He is one who recognized he has a problem -- he cannot handle his liquor. He cannot be "normal" about such pleasures, drinking in moderation as the rest of us.

And the Torah provides him with the only prescription which will truly be effective: Take an oath, go to the opposite extreme. He must forbid wine upon himself -- as well as all products of the vine (grapes, raisins, grape juice, etc.). He will never straighten out through modest, incremental improvements. He must take drastic measures. The Torah generally frowns upon our denying ourselves the beautiful gifts of this world -- as well as unnecessary oath taking. And it certainly frowns on our going off the deep end. But the Nazir must do that which would literally not be correct for the rest of us: he must go to the nearly-as-dangerous opposite extreme. It is not unlike undergoing chemotherapy in order to wipe out cancerous tissue. Take poison in order to counteract an even more dangerous threat. And in the end -- hopefully -- the patient will return to full health.

There is a final lesson I'd like to bring out from this paragraph of the Rambam -- one I find most

fascinating of all. After the Rambam stated that the person under discussion should go to an extreme, he makes certain to say that he should return to the middle path afterwards. And he takes great pains to emphasize that this middle path is the proper one: "Such people may then return to the middle path which is the proper one, and continue in it for the rest of their lives."

This seemed to me a little undue emphasis. The Rambam already told us that the middle path is the ideal one -- this was one of his great themes of the first chapter. Why the repetition? Why tell this repentant extremist that this is the proper path for him as well -- and that he must continue in it for the rest of his life? (Students of the Rambam's writings will appreciate that I'm not being a nitpick here. The Rambam virtually never wastes words -- this is part of the beauty of his style. Any redundancy on his part raises flags for the many commentaries the Rambam's works have spawned.)

I believe the message here is that there is a strong tendency for the recovered extremist -- once he goes to the opposite extreme -- to want to remain there. The Rambam must remind him that his place is back in the center: it is best for him and he should remain there for the rest of his life. Now this is of course curious. Last year the fellow was arrogant -- extremely arrogant. Since then he's treated himself like a doormat (*shmattah* in Yiddish) :-) -- and we're afraid **he'll** want to stay there?! If anything, he's the **least** likely to degrade himself so! Only recently he was the world's most egotistical megalomaniac! So why the Rambam's warning?

But there's the rub. If yesterday I was an extremist in one direction, I am far more likely to embrace extremism of the opposite sort. Because it's not simply the aberrant behavior which drove me to extreme #1. It was as much the sickly-satisfying feeling that I'm different from everyone else. **They** are all so **ordinary** and beneath my contempt. Yesterday I was far higher and mightier than they. Today I'm far more **humble**: no one approaches my level. If you've gotten used to the thrill of living on the edge, of standing out and looking down on others, you may find it very difficult to return to healthy average living. We have a sick but fully self-satisfying drive to stand out, to be different, even crazy different. It would be nice if we'd satisfy that drive with acts of accomplishment and distinction. But far easier to do so by just rejecting the rest of the world -- somehow imagining they just don't deserve our attention.

And this is because extremism is unhealthy -- and it feeds on itself. Cure yourself of one extreme tendency and another -- even its precise opposite -- may come to take its place. I don't want to be "normal". I don't want to be some nonentity -- just like everyone else. I'm different -- and of course better. One way or the other I'll show them all.

(It's been noted that many famous historical figures -- generally opportunists -- have been known to alternate from one extreme to the other basically at the drop of a hat, whether it be liberalism vs. conservatism, fascism vs. communism, pro-labor vs. anti-labor, criminal rights vs. draconian justice. It's not the issue; it's the thrill of the fight -- as well as the desire to be contrary and outspoken (or to

be popular and current). I've heard R. Berel Wein note that King Jeroboam, who broke from King Rehoboam to create the Northern Kingdom of Israel (see I Kings 11-12), was such an example. He began as holy upholder of G-d's honor -- going so far as to criticize King Solomon himself (see Talmud Sanhedrin 101b). Later -- in order to consolidate his own power -- he led his own kingdom to the depths of depravity and idolatry (see I Kings 12:26-33).)

There's another angle to this that deserves mention. If I've recovered from one extreme, say anger, I'll naturally feel very holy in my accomplishment -- and that will provide me some of the energy to push forward. I know how evil anger or alcoholism is. It destroyed my job, my family, my previous life. Now, however, I'm better. Only **I** fully appreciate just how bad it was. And the tendency is then to swing to the utter opposite extreme. I live off of the good feeling of knowing I've made it, I've scaled that height that so many others have failed to reach. And I'm damn proud -- and condescending. And the dangerous extremism will return. We all know there is no one more obstinate and intolerant than the repentant sinner -- or the slave-turned-tyrant. I am so perfect now that I despise the unrepentant all the more so. And guess what? I may just find that I **like** despising them.

Because of all the above, the Rambam finds need to stress once more the importance of adhering to the "ordinary", middle path. Conquering your particular area of extremism is only half the battle. You must also make a conscious effort to rid yourself of extremism altogether. Become accustomed to blending in, to being no different from the others. And then, if you want to stand out -- which man invariably does -- let it be through good deeds and worthy achievements. For only therein will you discover the true path to human distinction.

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