

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ RAMBAM'S INTRODUCTION PART 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Some things are better off said obliquely -- especially things that really matter and can be misunderstood.

Now, that's actually a vital principle behind the transmission of the undying truisms of the Torah. For while what's said in it had to be said, things can nevertheless go wrong if they're misconstrued. So the Torah itself -- and our sages, in their explanations of it -- often speaks figuratively and in a sort of "code".

In fact that's oftentimes true about the most seemingly simple statements made. What does the common Torah expression, "And G-d said, ..." really mean, for example? The idea of G-d actually speaking to humankind is absolutely mind-boggling! Yet we're obviously being made privy to something that we have to know about G-d's intentions for us, even if some of us come to incorrect ideas about His incorporeality as a result. So in a sense the expression "And G-d said" hides more than it reveals.

In any event, Rambam's point here in "Eight Chapters" is that the same holds true of the seemingly straightforward words of Pirke Avot ("The Ethics of the Fathers"). Though what's said there certainly works on a clearly ethical, inspirational level, so much of it nonetheless alludes to deeper, more portentous things than we might have expected. And it touches upon things that very much affect our spiritual status.

Now, since "it fosters great perfection and true good fortune" (i.e., it's a very important means for us to grow in our beings and to draw close to G-d), and because we're taught by our sages that "whoever wants to be pious should live by the words of Pirke Avot" (Babba Kama 30A), and since we know that "other than prophecy, there's no greater rank than piety", it's clear then that Pirke Avot is saying a lot more than we might think.

But, what exactly is piety? Is it anything more than simple goodness; and if it is, can I achieve it or is it beyond me? Would being pious make me somehow antisocial and aloof, sad and sombre?

And what's prophecy? Is it like being psychic or clairvoyant? Were prophets holy (and what's holy, then)? We know of many prophets from the Torah like Ezekiel, Isaiah, and most especially Moses -- is that what we're talking about? And if it is, then are we somehow expected to be prophets, since prophecy is tied in with the study of Pirke Avot?

So since so many such questions could be raised it occurred to Rambam that he'd need to offer some background, introductory material to pave the way for his comments to Pirke Avot, otherwise they'd be misunderstood. Hence, these eight chapters.

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