

EIGHT CHAPTERS - PROLOGUE

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Rambam actually wrote "Eight Chapters" as a prelude to his comments upon Pirke Avot ("The Ethics of the Fathers"), but it has always been regarded as a seminal work onto itself. A very early composition, "Eight Chapters" lays out themes that Rambam explains in great detail in some of his later works. So it serves as a wonderful introduction to his idea and ideals, and it details very specific ways you and I can indeed achieve spiritual excellence. Here's a running synopsis of the work and a taste of what's to come.

It's in his Introduction that Rambam points out that this work serves as a prelude to his comments upon Pirke Avot, as we'd said. He says there that, though Pirke Avot is a classic and popular work, it's nonetheless hard to follow through on and sometimes hard to understand, "since it touches upon such important, ultimate issues" having to do with piety, which is right below prophecy in spiritual rank. So he took it upon himself to offer this introduction -- the "Eight Chapters".

Chapter 1 sets out to define the human spirit (nephesh), since "improving character amounts to healing the nephesh" and so "it's important to understand the it the way a doctor understands the body". And Rambam goes to great pains to explain it both on both on a physical and a spiritual level. This will give us great insights into ourselves.

Chapter 2 focuses on the mitzvah-system and lays out how it applies to our beings, and it introduces the idea of there being both intellectual and character flaws.

Chapter 3 defines personal (rather than physical) "health" and "illness" as those instances in which our beings are either well-balanced or off-kilter, and it advises us as to where to go for help once we suspect we're in fact off-kilter.

Chapter 4 is a major and very practical one, and it offers tried and true advice as to how to return ourselves to true balance. Many traits are analyzed as to what's "healthy" and what's "ill" about them (with some surprises). We're told there that "since no one is born with an inherently and utterly virtuous or flawed character, it's important to tend to your character much the way you'd tend to your body when it goes off-kilter", and we're told how to.

Chapter 5 tells each one of us that "aside from subordinating (our) personal capacities" and trying to be the best person we can be, we're to also "strive to comprehend G-d as much as (we) can and to make that (our) life's goal". We're told what helps as far as that's concerned and also what to avoid.

Chapter 6 investigates the issue of who's better: the person who "subdues his yetzer harah and does good even when he's not inclined to", thus fighting his nature and winning, or the one who "does good because he's naturally inclined to" without a struggle.

Chapter 7 explores the makeup and differences between prophets, and we learn there how their characters affected their missions just as much as it affects our own.

And Chapter 8 offers the comforting notion that while "no one is ever born inherently lofty or flawed", still and all "anyone can learn how to counter his disposition." After all, we're all born with the freedom to choose our actions and motivations, "and nothing impels (us) one way or the other". Then Rambam goes into the whole idea of how we can manage to be free in our ethical choices if G-d knows what we're going to opt for in the end (for doesn't that seem to indicate that it's already "in the cards"?).

May G-d grant us the wisdom to be nourished by the great and mighty Rambam's advice and to thus achieve true spiritual excellence!

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