

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 1:4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Rambam ends this chapter by declaring rather cryptically that our Spirit is "a sort of matter whose form is reason". And he adds -- quite dauntingly -- that "if the Spirit never achieves its form, then its aptitude to achieve it would have been for naught, and its existence worthless". But, what does that mean?

He allows for the fact "there's a lot to say about form and matter" and reason, too, but then he contends that "(The Eight Chapters) isn't the place for it", since none of that has to do with character growth (on the face of it, at least) which is the subject at hand.

Now while we'd have to concede that a lot of this doesn't really matter when it comes to our character traits, nonetheless it's certainly relevant to spiritual excellence. So we'll do what we can to explain it all with that in mind, point by point.

First off, it's important to know that while we ourselves still use terms like "matter", "form", and "reason", nonetheless the ancients whom Rambam is drawing from (like Aristotle and others) understood them differently than we. What we'll try to do is apply them to our experience and understand them in a spiritual context.

"Matter" is the material *stuff* things are made of, and their "form" is some invisible, some might say "magical" element within things that gives them their definition and meaning. A painting's "matter", for example, is nothing more than the host of colors that make up the contents of the canvas. What makes it an actual "painting" in the end is the form and definition that all those color take. In much the same way, we're each little more than a wad of flesh and bones who only become a "real live" person by virtue of our "form" or defining Spirit.

So when Rambam says that our Spirit is "a sort of matter whose form is reason" he means to say that what defines us as humans is our ability to reason -- not our emotions or our actions per se, though they certainly count. And that's so because it's our ability to reason that enables us to choose growth over stagnation, spiritual excellence over spiritual mediocrity. The other parts of our being -- the rest of our matter -- feeds into that; but what gives life to our spiritual choices is our rational mind. (Understand, of course, that Rambam isn't mentioning our immortal soul simply because it too doesn't touch upon the subject at hand.)

And his remark that "if the Spirit never achieves its form, then its aptitude to achieve it would have been for naught, and its existence worthless" implies that if we don't hone our mind and use it

toward personal betterment, then we might as well not have been granted the ability to reason. For while the mind certainly allows us to function and grow on many, many levels, at bottom we're to grow in our beings and spirits; and if we don't use our mind's ability to reason toward that end, then our lives would have been tragically ineffectual.

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