

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 2:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Let's now tie-in some more of what we'd learned about our makeup to our search for spiritual excellence. We'll find that there's a lot more to be said, and that much of it has to do with our free choice -- our sovereign right to make ethical and mitzvah-based decisions on our own.

"It's important to know" Rambam says, "that all acts of disobedience and obedience mentioned in the Torah" that is, all the sins and mitzvot cited there which we can choose to act on or not, "actually apply to only two parts of your Spirit: your senses and emotions" and not to "your digestive system or imagination" (though they also apply to our minds to some degree, as we'll see).

What that means to say is that, despite what's commonly thought and widely rationalized, we can indeed decide to adhere to G-d's wishes for us when it comes to our five senses and our emotions. We can truly learn to quash feelings that run counter to G-d's requirements of us by managing to control our anger, squelch our pride, or by becoming magnanimous, for example. And we can likewise manage to avert our eyes or close off our ears in order not to look at or listen to things we shouldn't be concerned with. Even when those things seem to go against the grain.

None of that's beyond us, and most of it comes down to finally and consciously deciding to do it.

We're not free to make ethical choices when it comes to our digestive system or imagination, though. Simply because we can't *decide* to digest one way or another, as those kinds of things tend to happen despite us (though we can in fact help them along medicinally, mechanically, and the like, but that has little to do with ethics per se). Understand of course that we can choose what to eat and drink, which indeed touches on sins and mitzvot, but that's not the point at hand, since those are emotional and sensual decisions, which we learned we have control of.

And we can't decide what thoughts or images are going to occur to us all of a sudden. We can, though, decide to reject or quell the ones that the Torah disallows us, like idolatrous thoughts for example. (The operative point here is that oftentimes in fact "bad thoughts occur to good people", to coin a phrase, but that we can then reject them out of hand, and not at all be blamed for them.)

"There's some confusion, though, when it comes to the intellect", Rambam avers. Nonetheless he contends that personal choices apply to it as well. Since we can consciously and freely decide to adopt what he terms "sound or unsound" (i.e., good or bad) ideas which then touch upon sins or mitzvot.

As such, we can decide that eating kosher isn't a good idea and fall into that trap easily enough; or contrarily we can decide that it's a good idea and follow through on that. It's just that "the intellect (itself) can't do anything per se that can be said to be either a mitzvah or a sin", so on that level the intellect itself can't be culpable for anything, only the person who uses his or her intellect to do wrong.

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