

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 3:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

What is "health" exactly? Is it merely the state in which each part of us runs well and is on equal footing with every other part -- or is that simply "well-being"? Is health a sense of robustness, vigor, and might -- or is that only heartiness (since the truth be known we could be harboring some terrible disease and still flourish for the longest time)?

As many know, Rambam himself was a physician, and a rather successful and sought-after one at that. He speaks of medicine a number of times in this work and elsewhere in his writings, and even wrote whole medical texts that were studied up to the modern era. Still in all, as he put it here, "the health or illness of the body is something that the art of medicine delves into", and that isn't our concern here. What we'll be delving into is the health of the Spirit.

So, what in fact does it mean to be healthy in Spirit or to have a sound disposition? "A healthy Spirit", Rambam declares, is one that's "predisposed to do ing good, benevolent and comely things" while "an ill Spirit ... is predisposed to doing bad, harmful and disgraceful things." That means to say that good and generous people are healthy, spiritually speaking, while bad and onerous ones are ill.

But a lot could be said about this. For, in truth, one could be partially ill and mostly well, or vice versa; or one could have a dread chronic disease and still manage to function quite well in the world, or suddenly become terribly ill with a simple cold or flu and not be able to function at all. That's to say that we each have faults (illnesses) and virtues (health). And that while some faults are serious and ingrained (chronic), others are lighter and more easily gotten rid of (acute). The wise would want to know the difference and "treat" each accordingly, because both can be debilitating as we pointed out. Rambam will discuss treatment later on, in fact.

There's another important point to consider. It's that when we're ill in Spirit we often think we're healthy and make wrong decisions accordingly. (Some people who are healthy in Spirit think they're ill, on the other hand, and consequently make other sorts of poor judgments. But that's beside our concerns here.)

Rambam then delves into an interesting phenomenon. He points out that "when they're (physically) ill and their senses are off kilter, people imagine sweet things to be bitter, and bitter things to be sweet". They then "take pleasant things to be unpleasant, and they crave and enjoy things that healthy people would never enjoy". In fact, "they might eat minerals, charcoal, soil, very pungent or sour foods, or other such things that healthy people would find revolting and never want".

In much the same way, he says, "those whose *Spirit* is ill ... likewise imagine bad things to be good, and good things to be bad, and always pursue goals that are actually harmful which they imagine to be good, simply because their Spirit is ill".

So the only way for us to avoid making poor judgments like that is to know the true state of our Spirit and to act accordingly. We'll soon see how we're to do that.

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