

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 4:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We'd learned that a healthy Spirit is one that's "predisposed to doing good, benevolent and comely things" while an ill Spirit is "predisposed to doing bad, harmful and disgraceful things". Now, needless to say, that leaves a lot up in the air. What sorts of things are in fact "good, benevolent and comely" and which are "bad, harmful and disgraceful"?

Our tradition has long laid out just what's ethically and spiritually "good" and "bad", but that's not at all what Rambam is referring to here. For he dedicated the full thrust of his magnum opus "Mishne Torah" to explicating just that, setting out there which actions we're to take and which to avoid in a halachic context. His point here, though, isn't about that so much as about the caliber and character of our good deeds.

For while all good deeds are good, by definition -- some are ... better. And it's incumbent upon us to know what sets them apart from the others if we're ever going to achieve the sort of piety and spiritual excellence this work challenges us to achieve.

Rambam contends that our deeds are truly good when "they lie midway between two extremes, both of which are bad -- one because it goes too far, and the other because it doesn't go far enough". And he adds that our "dispositions are 'virtuous' when they lie midway between two bad dispositions, one of which is excessive, and the other of which is inadequate".

In other words, we're off the mark both if we don't quite go far enough in our efforts to be righteous or if we go too far. And our dispositions or characters can be too extreme or too subdued. That's to say that we're to fine-tune our makeup and strive for equibalance throughout. That all obviously calls for a lot of explanation, which Rambam will indeed offer in the course of this chapter; but let's allow the points to stand as they are for now.

Rambam then offers as an aside the fact that too extreme or too subdued dispositions foster too extreme or too subdued actions. All that means to say is that our deeds are directly linked to the quality of our character, as most know; but the implication is that we'd need to hone our character en toto in order to improve our ways.

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