EIGHT CHAPTERS CHAPTER 4:10

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The Torah never charged us to go overboard in our observance or to extremes. For as Rambam himself worded it, "it wants us to live normally and to follow a balanced path: to eat and drink what's permissible in balanced measure; to have intercourse in ways permitted in balanced measure; to develop the world in a just and honest way rather than live in caves or on mountaintops; to not wear sackcloth or coarse wool" -- in short, "to never strain, deplete, or afflict our bodies" or our Spirit en toto.

For while deep in the corner of every Jewish heart lies a dream of drawing close to G-d and of achieving spiritual excellence that sometimes encourages it to go to extremes ... and even though it's the sort of adorable and touching kinds of extremes that innocent lovers might go to in their ardor ... still-and-all Rambam's point is that it's wrong.

After all, wasn't the individual who wanted to become a Nazir -- to set himself apart from society for a while in order to dedicate himself to G- d's service in a unique and commendable way, and thus had the best of intentions -- called a "sinner" (see Numbers 6:1-21)? He indeed was, and that's all the more so true of others who shun things that they needn't shun to be good Jews. (The Nazir is also termed *holy*, by the way, which seems to throw Rambam's equation off indeed; but suffice it to say that while holiness is certainly commendable, one person's holiness is another, lesser person's recklessness.) . At bottom we're to realize that G-d's lush, glorious, and delightful Torah charges us "to pursue balance, and character virtues", as Rambam puts it, and to hone our Spirit (and minds as well, which we'll come to later). And while it certainly wants us to strive and aspire ever upward, it doesn't ask us to oppress ourselves with burdens we wouldn't think of asking others to bear.

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