

## EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 4:11

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Just as there have always been genuine innovators, there have likewise always been out-and-out imitators. And in fact Rambam dubs the (well meaning) people who did what the truly pious did when they went a bit to an extreme, "imitators" -- copycats.

Now, that's a curious accusation. He could have labeled them "foolhardy" perhaps or misguided "zealots", and thus pointed out that their mistakes lied in the fact that they'd gone too-far, as we'd have expected. But he didn't. Instead, he condemned them for their non-originality. Thus Rambam seems to be saying (and rather slyly so) that not only is it important for us to be levelheaded and balanced in our observance -- we also need to be as true to ourselves as the Torah would have us be.

(But it's important to underscore the fact that it would be absurd to excuse ourselves from one mitzvah or another by claiming that we're just not "wired" for it. For G-d's immortal Torah can be legitimately tailored to fit all sizes, as long as we allow it to maintain its integrity.)

In any event, Rambam goes on to offer the following overarching principle in relation to being immoderate: "The Torah only prohibited what it prohibited and commanded what it commanded for one reason: that we be trained to avoid extremes".

He then explains that all the restrictions that the Torah places on us in relation to what we can enjoy in this world were set up "in order to draw us far away from indulgence (which is an extreme) and to have us go beyond the mean, toward asceticism (which is the other extreme), in order to foster temperance (which is the ideal)". That is, to only lean toward an extreme so as to arrive at a mean.

And he offers other examples. The Torah charges us to be charitable in various forms, as many know. In fact, when it touches upon being generous in the context of agricultural laws the Torah seems to be quiet demanding. It asks us to tithe our crop, to leave behind certain produce that had fallen or been forgotten so the poor could gather them up themselves, and the like. Rambam himself notes that all this "comes very close to (demanding) extravagance" on our part -- to almost asking us to give away the farm, as the expression goes. But as he explains, all these demands are only "meant to draw us far away from stinginess (an extreme) and toward extravagance (the other extreme), in order to foster generosity (the ideal)."

He then offers yet other illustrations of his point. "For example," he says, "the Torah forbade vengeance and avenging a murder with the declarations, 'Do not take revenge or bear a grudge'

(Leviticus 19:18), 'If you see the donkey of someone who hates you lying beneath its burden, refrain yourself from leaving it up to him -- help him lift it' (Exodus 23:5)" and more. And why? "All in order to temper anger", Rambam declares.

"It's likewise written, 'Do not watch your brother's ox or sheep go astray and hide yourself from them; return them to your brother' (Deuteronomy 22:1), in order to discourage stinginess; and 'Rise up before the aged and honor the old' (Leviticus 19:32), 'Honor your father and mother' (Exodus 20:12) ..., to discourage audacity and encourage shame". But the Torah doesn't stop there. As Rambam underscores, "it then steers you away from the other extreme, bashfulness, by saying 'Do not hate your brother in your heart; but surely reproach your neighbor' (Leviticus 19:17)" and the like, all in order "to ... discourage you from bashfulness and keep you on the more balanced path".

"So when some utter fool comes along and wants to expand upon that by disallowing (himself) even more" Rambam declares, "he's actually doing wrong, ... has gone to an extreme, and has utterly forsaken balance".

And he sums up by providing us with a maxim from the Talmud that commiserates with his sentiments. For as one of our sages put it when he derided people who were imposing unnecessary and unsanctioned hardships upon themselves, "Has the Torah not already forbidden enough that you have to forbid yet other things?" (JT Nedarim 9:1).

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