

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 4:12

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Imagine you were an air traffic controller and you suddenly caught sight of a speck off in the distance of the radar screen. Now, if you knew it was nothing but the first appearance of a plane that was expected to show up, then you'd clearly do nothing. But if it wasn't that, and the speck started to wiggle just a little bit perhaps, or to make some other awkward moves, then you'd certainly keep your eyes on it. And if the wiggle widened after a while and was joined by another speck or two that wiggled also -- then you'd undoubtedly take action. Because something was clearly going on there; something was off.

In much the same way, Rambam warns us to always be introspective: to "keep a steady eye on things" within -- on our inner screen. And to never "neglect a symptom" or a sign of something gone off-kilter and wiggling. And we're certainly not to "allow it to fester to the point where we'd need the strongest medicines available" -- the direst means -- to deal with it.

He also counsels us, though, to always take appropriate measures when we notice something wrong about our personalities. In fact, we'd be wiser yet to "avoid things that would harm our Spirit" in the first place, but we're to at least "favor things that would either help treat it or prevent it from getting weaker yet".

For we're to "constantly scrutinize our character while we're healthy, weigh our actions, and gauge our dispositions every single day" -- that is, to keep our eyes on the screen all the time. And to then "quickly treat ourselves" when a glitch comes up, "rather than allow a bad disposition to develop". And we're to act just "as soon as we notice ourselves inclining toward one extreme or another", that is, wiggling this way or that.

After all, he warns us, "everyone has his flaws". For as Rambam notes, it's been said that "it would be hard and hardly likely to find anyone with all the virtuous intellectual and character traits". And we're taught that "There is no one so righteous upon this earth who (only) does good and doesn't sin" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). And that holds true of even the best of us, as we'll see.

So as Rambam sums it up, "it's important to favor balanced actions and to only resort to an extreme in order to heal yourself or to counterbalance another, opposite extreme", and that it's likewise important to make sure that you don't come to that point.

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