

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 4:2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Let's offer some examples now of the sort of "balanced" traits that Rambam suggests we strive for. But we're going to be running into a significant rhetorical problem.

For you see, Rambam drew from others' examples here, as he indicated he would in his introduction if you recall -- most especially from Aristotle's. As such, the terms used for these traits were originally Greek ones. Those terms were then translated into Arabic by Aristotle's Medieval translators whom Rambam quoted from (in fact, Arabic was the language "The Eight Chapters" was written in). The edition of "The Eight Chapters" we ourselves are quoting from is in Hebrew, and we're about to (try to) present English equivalents.

Hence, Rambam's statement that "we needn't offer exact terms for what we're referring to, as long as we can be understood" makes our task far easier, but understand that these terms are inexact. So here are our best efforts. (Perhaps the lesson for us all here is that not everything written can be expressed otherwise, and not every effort to explain something can be utterly true to its source.)

In any event we're advised to strive for "temperance", "generosity", "courage", "simple happiness", "humility", "earnestness", "contentment", "composure", "shamefacedness", and others.

Rambam depicts our first example of a good, balanced trait -- temperance -- as "a trait that lies midway between indulgence and asceticism", both of which are extreme and thus wrongful. For while we're certainly encouraged to enjoy G-d's great bounty (within ethical and halachic bounds) indulgence would be hedonistic or at least self-destructive, and asceticism is beyond the pale.

So let that serve as a paradigm for the other traits under discussion as well. We're to foster "generosity" because it "lies midway between stinginess and extravagance"; "courage" because it "lies midway between daring and cowardice"; "simple happiness" because it "lies midway between brashness and dullness"; "humility" because it "lies midway between arrogance and meekness"; "earnestness" because it "lies midway between boastfulness and humbleness"; "contentment" because it "lies midway between indulgence and sloth"; "composure" because it "lies midway between wrath and indifference"; "shamefacedness" because it "lies midway between audacity and bashfulness", and the like.

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