

# EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 4:4

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Some think that spiritual excellence comes down to spiritual overkill, frankly. They honestly, earnestly believe that one would have to resign him- or herself to a life of deprivation and abstinence to realize his or her spiritual potential. And that anyone who'd settle for any less "less" is a rank hedonist at bottom.

But Rambam is quite against that sort of thinking. He'd consider it extremist, and he opposed all sorts of extremism -- most especially when it came to this sort. We'll touch upon this in detail later on. But as we'll now see, he was also against extremism when it comes to other elements of our character.

As he put it, "people often mistakenly believe that an extreme is good and a virtue" when it comes to character traits. And so for example they'd take "*daring*" to be a virtue" and they'd "call daring people 'brave'" and "praise someone who'd do something extremely daring" when what he actually was, was excessive, too ardent, and foolhardy.

We're indeed encouraged to be *courageous* as we'd seen before, but no one asks us to be reckless. And to think we're expected to be is off-the-mark, other than in extraordinary and rare circumstances.

One lesson we could draw from this, though, is that that while we'd all be expected to summon up our courage when we encounter ethical challenges and try our best to plunge ahead spiritually rather than backward, we're *not* expected to confront temptation head-on, and threaten our moral well-being in the hope that we can resist. Because the challenge might very well set us back. There are many other examples of spiritual foolhardiness, to be sure.

While Rambam doesn't expand on it here, we'd have to assume that he'd be against people being impressed by acts of extreme charity (which is usually uncalled for, unless the time or issue demands it, and is usually rooted in ego-satisfaction rather than charity per se); and being all right with brashness, arrogance, audacity, and boastfulness (which they might see as being healthily self-assertive when it's rarely that) and with so-called "righteous indignation" (which is seldom righteous, and not indignation so much as insistence).

For while he contends that a lot is asked of us as humans, given our potential, we're nonetheless not expected to be clamorous blithering idiots in our honest struggles to be good.

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