

# EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 4:6

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

There's long been a dispute as to which matters more when it comes to character: is it our "nature" or the way we were "nurtured" that makes us who we are? Rambam seems to contend (at this point, at least) that it's the latter. For as he put it, "no one is born with an inherently virtuous or flawed character"; indeed, "we're clearly acclimated from childhood onward to behave the way our family and friends do". He'll expand upon this in the final chapter.

Among many others, there are two things to be underscored with this in mind for our purposes. First, that no one's perfect -- either perfectly good or perfectly bad, for that matter (a lesson most of us still have to take to heart). For we're each a complex and rich, alternately wretched and exquisite brew of this and that. And second, that we'd each do well to choose the sort of environment that would encourage us to be the best we can be. But since Rambam's subject at hand here is the importance of not being extreme, as we know, let's explore how he ties that in with the above.

He contends that given the fact that a lot goes into who we are, and that much goes on despite us or behind the scenes, it follows that we need to be on top of what might make us lean toward one extreme or another. And he suggests that it's likewise important for us to be sure to treat our Spirit (i.e., our personality) when it goes "off-kilter". How? Much the way we'd treat our bodies when they're somehow out of balance.

"For when the body goes off kilter, we first determine the direction it's heading in," he says, that is, we try to get a sense as to just what's wrong with it; then we "deliberately reverse its course until it returns to equilibrium". So if, for example, we found that we were eating too much salty food and that our blood pressure was rising as a consequence, we'd need to do without extra salt.

But since we wouldn't do too well without salt altogether, we'd need to strive for a happy medium. As such, in Rambam's words, we should then "stop reversing its course", that is, we should "stop" cutting down on salt once our blood pressure is stabilized, and then "do whatever will keep it in balance" -- that's to say, that we'd then be wise to cut down on salt from then on but not eliminate it.

His point is that the same holds true when it comes to character improvement.

"Suppose, for example," he warns us, "we were to encounter someone who's disposed toward allowing himself very little" -- who's too austere. Now, since this is such a "serious" personal flaw", as he notes, "we wouldn't order him to start being (merely) "generous" and easygoing toward himself, since "that would be like treating someone overcome by heat with something lukewarm, which

simply wouldn't work". We'd need to have him plunge right into cold water.

So we'd first "have him practice being \*extravagant\*" or somewhat self-indulgent, "again and again ... until he'd have expunged his disposition" for austerity, and until "he'd become well-nigh extravagant". In other words, we'd have him \*reverse course\* from the start, and "tell him to be generous" or more easygoing with himself (but certainly not indulgent).

The rule is that we'd treat a serious personal flaw by having the person suffering from it \*go to the opposite extreme\* right then and there for a time, then we'd guide him slowly back toward the ideal middle-ground.

Along other lines, though, Rambam suggests that if "we were to encounter someone who's extravagant" -- which isn't quite as serious a personal flaw as austerity, as we depicted above -- "we'd have to enjoin him to act \*stingily\* again and again" to set him on course. But then Rambam makes a very telling point. "But we wouldn't have him act stingily as often as we'd have the other person act extravagantly." Why? What's the difference between the two cases? We'll soon see.

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