

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 4:7

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

After having just filled us in on the protocol to follow to rectify our character, Rambam then adds another dimension on to what he terms his "secret of healing". What that means to imply is that this most effective way to rectify our personalities somehow or another also gives something away. What it reveals in fact is an insight into the Jewish view of spiritual health, and it feeds into our discussion about piety. After all, one of the most important themes of this work is an explanation of just what "piety" is in a Jewish context (see Rambam's Introduction). But let's backtrack a bit to explain.

Recall that this chapter started off with the notion that a healthy Spirit is one that's "predisposed to doing good" deeds while an ill Spirit is "predisposed to doing bad" ones. And we learned that Rambam defines "good" deeds as ones that "lie midway between two extremes", and he thus instructs us to always strive for equilibrium.

And he then advises us to have someone with an extreme disposition go to the opposite extreme again and again for a while, then have him or her move slowly backward to middle-ground. But this is where Rambam's healing "secret" is about to be revealed, and it touches on this conundrum we'd raised before.

Why did Rambam say that if we encountered someone who's "extravagant", that we'd have to enjoin him to act "stingily" in order to bring him to the more balanced state of being "generous" ... and that we'd have to have him do that * more often* than we'd have to encourage a stingy person to act extravagantly to eventually be wholesomely generous?

It comes to this. As we saw above, when Rambam terms someone "stingy" he means that he's austere (i.e., he's stingy with his *own* needs); when he terms someone "extravagant" he means that he's self-indulgent to a degree; and when he speaks of someone being "generous" Rambam means that that person's *somewhat* easygoing toward oneself.

Thus, Rambam is making a particular point. Being austere and self-denying is not only not balanced -- it's not Jewish. Our faith deems that too extreme. We Jews -- including the most pious among us -- are encouraged to have families; to engage in society; and to enjoy good, healthy (kosher) food and the like while being deeply religious. For Jewish spiritual excellence comes down to doing all that in a healthy, balanced way.

So, the "secret" comes to this: if we encounter someone who's out-and-out self-indulgent, then we'd

want to encourage him to act somewhat austerely for a while, as we said above, because self-indulgence isn't the Jewish way. But we'd have to encourage him to go to that other extreme more often than we'd have to tell the austere person to be self-indulgent for two reasons. First, simply because even though austerity comes naturally to people who want to be pious, it's still easy enough for people in general to ease-off a bit; and second, because our people know intuitively that austerity isn't what's asked of us.

(Along the same lines, Rambam also adds that we'd do well to ask a cowardly person to practice being out-and-out *daring* for a longer time than we'd ask "a daring person to practice cowardice", since it's easier and more intuitive going from daring to cowardice -- or let's say, to healthy caution -- than it is to go from cowardice to daring.)

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