

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 6:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Some people think that truly good and righteous people are just born that way, and that the rest of us can only hope to avoid doing harm, at best. But that's clearly not Rambam's (or our own) perspective on things, as he asserts that we *all* have what it takes to achieve spiritual excellence in this world.

Understand, though, that that wasn't always as self-evident as it seems.

In the past many thinkers contended that certain people were born "heroes", as they called them, who could do no wrong, while the rest of us are doomed to shlep along in our clumsy, often less-than-righteous ways. In point of fact, that argument is still very much alive today, with some claiming that we're each genetically "wired" to be one way or the other, without much free will ... but that's not the point here.

There's something else many thought in the past: it's that "when a person who subdues his yetzer harah does lofty things", that is, if a person struggles with his urge to do something wrong and manages to stave off the temptation and to do good instead, he's nonetheless "not so praiseworthy". Why? Because he'd still be "longing and yearning to do bad". They'd grant you that "he'd struggled with his longings" and managed to "withstand the promptings of his personal bents, desires, and disposition", but their point would be that he'd be "suffering in the process", that it wouldn't come naturally to him, so he wouldn't be all that noble.

The so-called hero or eminent, sinless person would be loftier and more perfect than the one who subdues his yetzer harah, simply because the latter "still longs to do something bad" which indicates "an inherently bad disposition" on his part -- even though he hadn't succumbed.

Their contention was that if you or I were "really" good, we wouldn't even *think* of sinning. And that struggling not to sin, and even managing to be successful at that, wouldn't be all that great.

But as we said, Rambam disagrees.

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