

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 7:4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We're now back to the point at which we'd started this chapter, with a discussion about what differentiated one prophet from another and the role that character played in it.

Rambam makes the point that a prophet "had to have acquired all the intellectual virtues", meaning to say that he had to be bright, sharp-witted, and scholarly. But he would only have to have acquired "most of the more significant" personal virtues, not all of them. That means to say that while he had to have been a good and moral person by all means, he wasn't expected to be perfect.

He had to have been content and satisfied with his lot in life, we're told, rather than troubled by this and that. And he had to be in control of his inclinations overall. But he wasn't expected to "have all the personal virtues and be utterly devoid of flaws".

After all, "G-d appeared to Solomon" (1 Kings 3:5) at a certain point in a prophecy, yet Solomon was known to be indulgent. And King David was certainly a prophet as well, yet we know that he was cruel to a degree. (In fact, G-d didn't allow him to construct the Holy Temple himself because of that.) And we learn that Elijah the prophet expressed anger now and then; and that the prophet Samuel was fearful (of Saul), as was our forefather Jacob (of Esau).

Yet the individuals we're talking about were prophets and thus achieved a personal rank that Rambam referred to as "great" in his introduction to this work. How could they have been subject to such traits?

Rambam's point is that while these were certainly character faults, still and all they weren't fatal flaws. They were an indication or two of humanity, of less than perfection, but understandable. (There are certain character failings that are more problematic, though, as we'll see.)

Nonetheless, these and other such traits were termed "screens", in that they blocked off the individual prophet's connection to G-d. And any prophet exhibiting two or three of the sort of unbalanced traits we'd focused on before (see Ch. 4) was said to see G-d from behind two or three screens. Thus, personality played a major role in differentiating one prophet from another.

We'll explore Moses's character in that light, too.

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