

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 8:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

"It's no more possible to be born either inherently lofty or flawed" Rambam declares in this final chapter, "than it is to be born instinctively adept at a trade." What he's doing is underscoring the point he'd made earlier on that we're all born with an ethical clean slate and free to be as righteous or wrongful as we care to (see Ch's 2 and 6 above). For just as we'd have to learn to be a doctor, lawyer, rabbi, etc., we'd also have to be taught how to act cruelly or kindly, inconsiderately or sensitively, and the like. None of that is instinctive.

Now, while that's true, there's still no denying the fact, Rambam acknowledges, that it's "possible to be predisposed to a particular virtue or fault, and to find it easier to do certain things than others". And so some people are more studious by nature and thus find it easy to sit still for hours at a time to study Torah, while others are more active and could go to great lengths to help others. Nonetheless, that same studious person could spend hours reading heretical things, while the active individual could apply his or energies towards doing harm.

The point is then that despite our inborn proclivities, we'd each have to decide (with or without others' input and influence) how to apply our instincts. Since neither makeup nor penchant automatically leads to righteous or wrongful outcomes.

But it goes deeper yet. For don't forget that we're expected to be even- tempered; so we'd have to channel our moods, too. Thus if you're hot- headed by nature, for example, you'd be expected to channel that into the sort of bravery that's called for to save lives, for example, rather than allow yourself to slip into irrational anger or cruelty.

Nevertheless the bottom line is that we're all morally clean from the first -- no one is impelled to be either righteous or wrongful. And that we can channel our inclinations.

Understand that this is a radical statement about self-mastery and personal power, since it implies that we can control ourselves and needn't acquiesce to the idea that we're "doomed" to this or that, as so many think. But we'll get back to this latter idea soon enough.

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