

CHABAD LUBAVITCH OF CHAUTAUQUA

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Maimonides on Ethics – Balance (2) - Week 5 – 2021

1. **CHAPTER IV (2):** On this account, the pious ones would not maintain their souls' disposition, an exact balance between the two extremes, but deviated somewhat, by way of [caution and] restraint/protection, either to the side of exaggeration, or to that of deficiency. Thus, for instance, Abstemious would incline to some degree towards excessive denial of all pleasures (abstinence); 'courage' would approach somewhat towards temerity; generosity to lavishness; humility to extreme self-effacement, and so forth. This is what the rabbis hinted at, in their saying, "Do more than the strict letter of the law demands."
2. When, at times, some of the pious ones deviated to one extreme by fasting, keeping nightly vigils, refraining from eating meat or drinking wine, distancing themselves from women, clothing themselves in woolen and hairy garments, dwelling in the mountains, and solitude in the wilderness, they did so, partly as a means of restoring the health of their souls, as we have explained above, and partly because of the immorality of the towns-people. When the pious saw that they themselves might become ruined by association with evil men and by constantly seeing their actions, fearing that their own morals might become corrupt on account of contact with them, they fled to the wildernesses and to places where there are no evil men, as the prophet Jeremiah said, (Jeremiah 9:1) *"Oh that someone would grant me in the wilderness the dwelling of a wanderer, and I would quit my people and abandon them; for they are all adulterers, a troop of faithless evil-doers."*
3. When the ignorant observed the pious men acting thus, not knowing their motives, they considered their deeds of themselves virtuous, and so, thinking thereby to become like them, tortured their bodies with all kinds of afflictions, imagining that they had acquired perfection, moral worth and done good, and that by this means man would approach nearer to G-d, as if He hated the human body, and desired its destruction. It never dawned upon them, however, that these actions were bad and resulted in moral imperfection of the soul. Such men can only be compared to one who, ignorant of the art of healing, when he sees skillful physicians administering to those at the point of death [purgatives known in Arabic as] colocynt, scammony, aloe, and the like, and depriving them of food, in consequence of which they are completely cured and escape death, foolishly concludes that since these things cure sickness, they must be all the more effective in preserving the health, or prolonging life. If a person should take these things constantly, and treat himself as a sick person, then he would really become ill. Likewise, when applying these remedies, those who are spiritually well, will undoubtedly become morally ill.
4. The perfect Torah which leads us to perfection as one who knows it well testifies by the words, (Psalms 19:8) *"The Torah of the L-rd is perfect restoring the soul; the testimonies of the L-rd are faithful making wise the simple"* recommends none of these things (such as self-torture, flight from society etc.). On the contrary, it aims at man's following the path of moderation, in accordance with the dictates of nature, eating, drinking, enjoying legitimate intercourse, all [that he needs] in moderation, and living among people in honesty and uprightness, but not dwelling in the wilderness or in the mountains, or clothing oneself in garments of hair and wool, or afflicting the body.
5. The Torah even warns us against these practices, according to what tradition tells us is the meaning of the passage concerning the Nazarite, (Numbers 6:11) *"And he (the priest) shall make an atonement for him because he had sinned against the soul."* The sages ask, "Against what soul has he sinned? Against his own soul, because he has deprived himself of wine. Is this not then a conclusion a fortiori: if one who deprives himself merely of wine must bring an atonement, how much more incumbent is it upon one who denies himself every enjoyment."
6. By the words of our prophets and of the sages of our Torah, we see that they were bent upon moderation and the care of their souls and bodies, in accordance with what the Torah prescribes and with the answer which G-d gave through His prophet to those who asked whether the fast-day once a year should continue or not. They asked Zechariah, *"Shall I weep in the fifth month with abstinence as I have done already these many years?"* His answer was, (Zachariah 7:3-7) *"When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and in the seventh (month) already these seventy years, did ye in anywise fast for me, yea for me? And if ye do eat and if ye do drink are ye not yourselves those that eat and yourselves those that drink?"* After that, he enjoined upon them justice and virtue alone, and not fasting, when he said to them, (Zachariah 7:9) *"Thus hath said the L-rd of Hosts. Execute justice and show kindness and mercy every man to his brother."* He said further, (Zachariah 8:19) *"Thus hath said the L-rd of Hosts, the fast-day of the fourth, and the fast-day of the fifth, and the fast of seventh, and the fast of the tenth (month) shall become to the house of Judah gladness, and joy, and merry festivals; only love ye truth and peace."* Know that by "truth" the intellectual virtues are meant, for they are immutably true, as we have explained in Chapter 2, and that by "peace" the moral virtues are designated, for upon them depends the peace of the world.

7. But to resume. Should those of our co-religionists and it is of them alone that I speak who imitate the followers of other religions, maintain that when they torment their bodies, and renounce every joy, that they do not do so merely to discipline the faculties of their souls by inclining somewhat to the one extreme, as is proper, and in accordance with our own recommendations in this chapter, our answer is that they are in error, as I shall now demonstrate.
8. The Torah did not lay down its prohibitions, or enjoin its commandments, except for just this purpose, namely, that by its disciplinary effects we may persistently maintain the proper distance from either extreme. For, the restrictions regarding all the forbidden foods, the prohibitions of illicit intercourse, the forewarning against prostitution, the duty of performing the legal marriage-rites which, nevertheless, does not permit intercourse at all times, as, for instance, during the period of menstruation, and after child-birth, ...all of these, G-d commanded in order that we should keep entirely distant from the extreme of the inordinate indulgence of the passions, and, even departing from the exact medium, should incline somewhat towards self-denial, so that there may be firmly rooted in our souls the disposition for moderation.
9. Likewise, all that is contained in the Torah concerning the giving of tithes, the gleaning of the harvest, the forgotten sheaves, leaving the corner of the field, the single grapes, and the small bunches in the vineyards for the poor, the law of the Sabbatical year, and of the Jubilee, the giving of charity according to the needs of the needy one, all these approach the extreme of lavishness to be practiced in order that we may depart far from its opposite, stinginess, and thus, nearing the extreme of excessive extravagance, there may become instilled in us the quality of generosity.
10. If you should test most of the commandments from this point of view, you would find that they are all for the discipline and guidance of the faculties of the soul. Thus, the Torah forbids revenge, the bearing of a grudge, and blood-revenge by saying, *"Thou shalt not avenge nor bear any grudge"; "thou shalt surely unload with him" (the ass of him who hates you); "thou shalt surely help him to lift them up again" (thy brother's ass or ox which has fallen by the way).* These commandments are intended to weaken the force of wrath or anger. Likewise, the command, *"Thou shalt surely bring them back" (thy brother's ox or lamb which has gone astray),* is meant to remove the disposition of miserly. Similarly, *"Before the old shalt thou rise up, and honor the face of the old man", "Honor thy father and thy mother" etc., "thou shalt not depart from the sentence which they may tell thee" etc.,* are intended to do away with boldness, and to produce modesty.
11. Then, in order to keep away from the other extreme, i.e. of excessive bashfulness, we are told, *"Thou shalt indeed rebuke thy neighbor" etc., "thou shalt not fear him" (the false prophet) etc.,* so that excessive bashfulness, too, should disappear, in order that we pursue the medium course.
12. Should, however, anyone who would without doubt be foolish and attempt to increase these commands, as for instance, by prohibiting food and drink, more than does the Torah, or by restricting connubial intercourse to a greater degree, or by distributing all of his money among the poor, or for sacred purposes more than the Torah requires ----- he would indeed unknowingly be performing improper acts, and would be going to either one or the other extreme, thus forsaking completely the proper mean.
13. In this connection, I have never heard a more remarkable saying than that of the Rabbis, found in the Jerusalem Talmud, in the ninth chapter of the tractate Nedarim, where they speak demeaning, of those who bind themselves by oaths and vows, in consequence of which they are fettered like prisoners. The exact words they use are, "Said Rabbi Iddi, in the name of Rabbi Isaac, 'Dost thou not think that what the Law prohibits is sufficient for thee that thou must take upon thyself additional prohibitions?' "
14. From all that we have stated in this chapter, it is evident that it is man's duty to aim at performing acts that observe the proper mean, and not to desist from them by going to one extreme or the other, except for the restoration of the soul's health by having recourse to the opposite of that from which the soul is suffering.
15. So, just as he who, acquainted with the science of medicine, upon noting the least sign of a change for the worse in his health, does not remain indifferent to it, but prevents the sickness from increasing to a degree that will require recourse to severe remedies, and just as when a man, feeling that one of his limbs has become affected, carefully nurses it, refraining from things that are harmful to it, and applying every remedy that will restore it to its healthy condition, or at least keep it from getting worse, likewise, the moral man will constantly examine his characteristics, weigh his deeds, and daily investigate his psychic condition; and if, at any time, he finds his soul deviating to one extreme or another, he will immediately hasten to apply the proper remedy, and not suffer an evil aptitude to acquire strength, as we have shown, by a constant repetition of that evil action which it occasioned. He is, likewise, bound to be mindful of his defects, and constantly to endeavor to remedy them, as we have said above, for it is impossible for any man to be free from all faults.

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