

CHABAD LUBAVITCH OF CHAUTAUQUA

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Maimonides on Ethics (Introduction) – Week 1 – 2021

1. The Division of the Mitzvot According to the Halachot of the Mishneh Torah

I saw fit to divide this text into fourteen books.

The first book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that are the *foundations of the faith* ...those which a person must know before everything - e.g., the unity of G-d, blessed be He, and the prohibition against worshipping false G-ds. I have called this book *The Book of Knowledge*.

The thirteenth book - I will include within it all the mitzvot that [govern relations] between an individual and his colleague and do not involve damage at the outset - e.g., the laws of watchmen, debtors, claims lodged [against one another], and [their] denial. I have called this book *The Book of Judgments*.

2. *Sefer HaMada*- The Book of Knowledge

It contains five *halachot*. They are, in order:

1. ***Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*** - The Laws [which are] the Foundations of the Torah
2. ***Hilchot De'ot*** - The Laws of Personal Development
3. ***Hilchot Talmud Torah*** - The Laws of Torah Study
4. ***Hilchot Avodat Kochavim UMazalot V'Chukkot HaAkum*** - The Laws [Governing the Prohibition against] the Worship of Stars and Spiritual Forces, and the Statutes of the Idolaters
5. ***Hilchot Teshuvah*** - The Laws of Teshuvah

3. **Hilchot De'ot** - *The Laws of Personal Development*

They contain eleven mitzvot:

Five positive commandments and six negative commandments. They are:

- 1) To emulate His ways. 2) To cling to those who know Him. 3) To love one's fellow. 4) To love the converts. 5) Not to hate one's brethren. 6) To rebuke. 7) Not to embarrass. 8) Not to oppress the unfortunate. 9) Not to gossip. 10) Not to take vengeance. 11) Not to bear a grudge.

4. 1:5 We are commanded to walk in these intermediate paths - and they are good and straight paths - as [Deuteronomy 28:9] states: "And you shall walk in His ways."

5. 1:6 [Our Sages] taught [the following] explanation of this mitzvah:

Just as He is called "Gracious," you shall be gracious;

Just as He is called "Merciful," you shall be merciful;

Just as He is called "Holy," you shall be holy;

In a similar manner, the prophets called G-d by other titles: "Slow to anger," "Abundant in kindness," "Righteous," "Just," "Perfect," "Almighty," "Powerful," and the like. [They did so] to inform us that these are good and just paths. A person is obligated to accustom himself to these paths and [to try to] resemble Him to the extent of his ability

6. Behold that there are commands and warnings that appear in the Torah that are not about a specific thing, but rather include all of the commandments. It is as if it says, "Do everything I have commanded you to do and be careful about anything from which I have prohibited you"; or "Do not transgress anything of what I have commanded you about." And there is no room to count this command on its own - as it does not command us to do a specific act, such that it should be a positive commandment; nor does it warn us from doing a specific act, such that it should be a negative commandment.

7. ...Likewise, should we not say that "You shall be holy," and that which is similar to it, is a commandment - for it has not commanded us to do anything besides what we [already] know. (Sefer Hamitzvot, Shores 4)
- a. *Rav Avraham, the son of Maimonides, [was asked this question, and he explained] that here the specific activity implied by this commandment is the development of our emotions and character traits.*
8. And he also commanded us to act with a certain trait, like that which He commanded us about compassion, mercy, charity and kindness and His saying, "you shall love your neighbor like yourself" (Leviticus 19:18); and he prohibited us from acting with certain traits, like that which He prohibited us from hatred, vengeance, grudge-bearing, bloodlust and other bad traits, as I will explain. (Ibid, Shores 9)
9. These names are not descriptions of G-d, who cannot be defined by any specific quality. To do so would limit Him and detract from His infinite and transcendent state of being. Rather, the use of these titles must be understood as follows: G-d brings about activities, which, had they been carried out by man, would have been motivated by these emotional states. For example, instead of utterly destroying the Jews after the sin of the Golden Calf, G-d allowed our people to continue. Were such a deed to have been performed by a human ruler, we would describe him as "slow to anger." Though that term cannot serve as a description for G-d - for He cannot be described - the Torah and the prophets referred to Him by such terms with the following intent.
10. The reason the Torah informs about a particular Divine quality is so that we can emulate it: "For this reason, the prophets described the A-lmighty with all these different adjectives: ... To make known that these are good and just paths in which a person should conduct himself to emulate Him according to his potential." The Torah's purpose in describing G-d's qualities is not to tell us Who He is, for in truth He defies definition, but instead, to teach who we should be, what are the qualities we should develop within ourselves, these are attributes which man should strive to achieve. (Guide to the Perplexed, Vol. I, Chapters 53 and 54)
11. A more careful look at the wording Maimonides uses indicates that he is not telling us merely to adopt the qualities for which G-d is praised. He is telling us to emulate the manner in which G-d manifests these qualities. To explain: Usually, a person expresses an emotion as a natural, spontaneous response. He sees something attractive and is roused to love. He sees something menacing and he recoils in fear. This cannot be said about G-d. He is by definition above having "natural reactions" to what happens here on earth. For if our conduct would influence G-d like it influences our colleagues, He would not be much of a G-d. Instead, He reacts in a certain way because He chooses to, because He considers this reaction as appropriate. His emotional attributes are expressed only when they are called for.
12. This teaches us two things: Firstly, that we should try to react in a similar manner, expressing the qualities that He does in like situations. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, that we should react as He does, not spontaneously and naturally, but with controlled thought. Often, we become emotionally excited. This prevents us from thinking clearly and knowing which emotional attribute to exercise at a given time. Just as G-d exercises His attributes at will and by choice, without being subject to emotional whims; so, too, we should control our feelings, rather than respond to them.
- In this vein, we can appreciate statements made by Maimonides with regard to a leader: "There will be times when he will be merciful and compassionate to certain people. [He will act] not merely out of ordinary feeling and generosity, but *as is appropriate*. And at times, he will seek revenge and bear a grudge against some other people, manifesting anger as is appropriate for them without feelings of anger.... His purpose should be for this activity to produce the greatest possible good for people at large."
- Leadership — and we all are leaders in given situations — involves ruling over one's feelings, understanding a situation and acting in the way that will lead to the greatest good, not doing what we feel like doing at the moment. This is the emulation of G-d which the above verse asks of us.
- This reflects themes brought out in the previous halachot of this chapter: that a person must constantly evaluate and review his emotions (1:4); that it is a wise man who is able to appreciate the middle path (1:5).
- This is what is meant by the imitation of G-d: that a person not be controlled by the unchecked expression of his emotions. Rather, he should control his feelings and, motivated by his desire to resemble G-d, search to find the correct and proper quality, the middle path, appropriate to the situation at hand. (*Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 34 Tavo 2)

- 13.** [Deuteronomy 13:5 states]: "You shall walk after G-d, your L-rd." Is it possible for man to walk after the Divine Presence? Has it not been stated: "Behold, G-d, your L-rd, is a consuming fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24)?
- 14.** Rather, [it means] one should follow the qualities of G-d.
- a. Just as He dresses the naked...; you, too, should dress the naked;
G-d visited the sick...; you, too, should visit the sick;
G-d comforted the bereaved...; you, too, should comfort the bereaved;
G-d buried the dead...; you, too, should bury the dead. (Talmud, Tractate Sotah 14a)
- 15.** In *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Maimonides mentions emulating both G-d's deeds and His qualities.
- 16.** There is not necessarily a contradiction between these two emphases. As mentioned above, our actions reflect our personalities. Therefore, it follows that developing our characters in the manner outlined by Maimonides in this halachah will ultimately produce the good deeds mentioned by our Sages in the passage from *Sotah*.
- 17.** Nevertheless, deed is often not a reflection of character. A person with many severe character faults may still do good deeds. Hence, for the "resemblance of G-d" to be complete, it is not sufficient merely to perform positive deeds. Rather, a person must undergo internal change by developing his character. Therefore, Maimonides focuses more on this aspect of the commandment.