

CHABAD LUBAVITCH OF CHAUTAUQUA

23 Vincent Avenue Chautauqua, NY 14722 T: (716) 357 - 3467 W: www.cocweb.org E: rabbi@cocweb.org

Maimonides on Ethics – Goals - Week 6 – 2021

1. ...Now, let me return to my subject. If a man will always carefully weigh his actions, directing them to the medium course, he will reach the highest degree of human perfection possible, and thereby come close to G-d, and attain His goodness. This is the most wholesome way of [of ways to be] serving G-d. The sages, too, had in mind when they wrote the words, "He who evaluates his course aright is worthy of seeing the salvation of G-d, as it is said, '*to him that evaluates his course aright will I show, will I show the salvation of G-d!*'" (Psalms 50:23) Do not read *vesam* but *vesham derech*". *Shumah* means "weighing" and "valuation". This is exactly the idea which we have explained in this chapter. This is all we think necessary to be said on this subject.
2. **CHAPTER V:** As we have explained in the preceding chapter, it is the duty of man to subordinate all the faculties of his soul to his reason. He must keep his mind's eye fixed constantly upon one goal, namely, the attainment of the knowledge of G-d (may He be blessed!), as far as it is possible for mortal man to know Him. Consequently, one must so adjust all his actions, his whole conduct [active and passive], and even his very words, that they lead to this goal, to the extent that none of his deeds be aimless, i.e., such an action which doesn't lead to this goal.
3. So, his only design in eating, drinking, cohabiting, sleeping, waking, moving about, and resting should be the preservation of bodily health, while, in turn, the reason for the latter is that the soul and its agencies may be in sound and perfect condition, so that he may readily acquire wisdom, and gain moral and intellectual virtues, all to the end that man may reach this highest goal [of his endeavors].
4. Accordingly, man will not direct his attention merely to obtain [bodily] enjoyment, choosing of food and drink and the other things of life only the delightful, but he will seek out the most useful, if it chances to [also] be delightful, so be it, and if not, so be it. Or at times when the agreeable may be used from a curative point of view, as, for instance, when one suffers from loss of appetite, it may be stirred up by highly seasoned delicacies and agreeable, palatable food. Similarly, one who suffers from melancholia may rid himself of it by listening to singing and all kinds of instrumental music, by strolling through beautiful gardens and splendid buildings, by gazing upon beautiful pictures, and other things that enliven the mind, and dissipate gloomy moods. The purpose of all this is to restore the healthful condition of the body, but the real object in maintaining the body in good health is to acquire wisdom. Likewise, in the pursuit of wealth, the main design in its acquisition should be to expend it for noble purposes, and to employ it for the senses of the body and the preservation of life, so that it may obtain and know of G-d, in so far as that is bestowed unto man.
5. From this point of view, the study of medicine has a very great influence upon the acquisition of the virtues and of the knowledge of G-d, as well as upon the attainment of true, [spiritual] success. Therefore, its study and acquisition are preeminently important religious activities, and then [i.e. if used for serving G-d] is not ranked in the same class with the art of weaving, or the science of architecture, for by it one learns to weigh one's deeds, and thereby human activities are rendered true virtues. Since the person who insists upon indulging in savory, sweet smelling and palatable food although it be injurious, and possibly may lead to serious illness or sudden death ought, in my opinion, to be classed with the animals. His conduct is not that of a man in so far as he is a being endowed with understanding, but it is rather the action of a man in so far as he is a member of the animal kingdom, and so (Psalms 49:21) "*he is like the beasts who perish*".
6. Man acts like a human being when he eats only that which is beneficial, at times avoiding the agreeable, and partaking of the disagreeable in his search for the beneficial. Such conduct is in accordance with the dictates of reason, and by these acts man is distinguished from all other beings. Similarly, if a man satisfies his sexual passions whenever he has the desire, regardless of good or ill effects, he acts as an animal, and not as a man.
7. It is possible, however, for one to shape one's conduct entirely from the point of view of usefulness, as we have stated, with no aim beyond that of maintaining the health of the body, or guarding against disease. Such a person does not deserve to be called virtuous, for, just as he strives for the enjoyment of good health, another like him may have as his aim the gratification of eating, or of sexual intercourse, none of which actions are for the purpose of the true goal. The proper duty of man is, that in adopting whatever measures he may for his well-being and the preservation of his existence in good health, he should do so with the object of maintaining a perfect condition of the instruments of the

soul, which are the limbs of the body, so that his soul may be unhampered, and he may busy himself in acquiring the moral and mental virtues. So it is with all the sciences and knowledge man may learn.

8. Concerning those which lead directly to this goal, there is naturally no question; but such subjects ...which do not tend directly towards that goal, should be studied for the purpose of sharpening the mind, and training the mental faculties by scientific investigations, so that man may acquire intellectual ability to distinguish demonstrative proofs from others, whereby he will be enabled to comprehend the essence of G-d.
9. Similarly, in regard to man's conversation, he should speak only of those things that will be conducive to the true welfare of his soul and body, or that will tend to avert injury from them, whether his words concern themselves with wisdom, or virtue, or praise of virtue or of a virtuous man, or with censure of vice or of a vicious person; for to express contempt for those who are loaded with vice, or to depict their deeds as contemptible if done for the purpose of disparaging them in the eyes of other men who may avoid them, and not do as they do, is indeed a virtuous and a duty. Does not Scripture say, (Leviticus 18:3) *"After the doings of the land of Egypt ye shall not do, and after the doings of the land of Canaan"*? Also, the story of the Sodomites and all the passages occurring in Scripture, which censure those laden with vice, and represent their doings as disgraceful, and those passages which praise and hold the good in high esteem, endeavor, as I have said, to induce man to follow the paths of the righteous, and to shun the way of the wicked.
10. When man has this as his ideal, he will dispense with many of his customary conducts, and refrain from a great deal of [ordinary] conversation. He who follows this line of conduct will not trouble himself with adorning his walls with golden ornaments, nor with decorating his garments with golden fringe, unless it be for the purpose of enlivening his soul, and thus restoring it to health, or of banishing sickness from it, so that it shall become clear and pure, and thus be in the proper condition to acquire wisdom. Therefore, our Rabbis of blessed memory say, (Shabbat 25b) *"It is becoming that a sage should have a pleasant dwelling, a beautiful wife, and domestic comfort"*; for one becomes weary, and one's mind dulled by continued mental concentration upon difficult problems. Thus, just as the body becomes exhausted from hard labor, and then by rest and refreshment recovers, so is it necessary for the mind to have relaxation by gazing upon pictures and other beautiful objects, that its weariness may be dispelled. Accordingly, it is related (Shabbat 30b) that when the Rabbis became exhausted from study, they were accustomed to engage in entertaining conversation (in order to refresh themselves). From this point of view, therefore, the use of pictures and embroideries for beautifying the house, the furniture, and the clothes is not to be considered bad nor aimless.
11. Know, that to live according to this standard is to arrive at a very high degree of perfection, which, in consequence of the difficulty of attainment, only a few, after long and continuous perseverance on the paths of virtue, have succeeded in reaching. If there be found a man who has accomplished this that is one who exerts all the faculties of his soul, and directs them towards the sole ideal of comprehending G-d, using all his powers of mind and body, be they great or small, for the attainment of that which leads directly or indirectly to virtue I would place him in a rank not lower than that of the prophets. Such a man, before he does a single act or deed, considers and reflects whether or not it will bring him to that goal, and if it will, then, and then only, does he do it.
12. This is what the Almighty requested us to direct towards, when He said, (Deuteronomy 6:5) *"Thou shalt love the Lord thy G-d with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might"*, that is, with all the faculties of thy soul, each faculty having as its sole ideal one goal: the love of G-d. The prophets, similarly, urge us on in saying, (Proverbs 3:6) *"In all thy ways know Him"*, in commenting upon which the sages said, (Berachot 63a) *"even as regards a transgression (of the ritual or ceremonial law)"*, meaning thereby that you should set for every action a goal, namely, the truth, even though it be, from a certain point of view, a transgression. The sages of blessed memory, too, have summed up this idea in so few words and so concisely, at the same time elucidating the whole matter with such complete thoroughness, that when one considers the brevity with which they expressed this great and mighty thought in its entirety, about which others have written whole books and yet without adequately explaining it, one truly recognizes that the Rabbis undoubtedly spoke through divine inspiration. This saying is found among their precepts (in this tractate), and is, (Ethics of our Fathers 2:12) *"Let all thy deeds be done for the sake of G-d"*. This, then, is the thought we have been dwelling upon in the present chapter, and what we have said must be considered sufficient for the needs of this introduction.

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