

CHABAD LUBAVITCH OF CHAUTAUQUA

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Maimonides on Ethics - Week 7 – 2021

1. **CHAPTER VI: PHILOSOPHERS** maintain that though the ‘man of self-restraint’ performs moral and praiseworthy deeds, yet he does them desiring and craving all the while for immoral deeds, but, subduing his passions [(evil) inclination] and in his activity, fights against a longing to do those things to which his faculties, his desires, and his psychic disposition stimulate him, and succeeds, though with constant vexation and irritation, in acting morally.
2. The saintly man, however, is guided in his actions by that to which his inclination and disposition prompt him, in consequence of which he acts morally from [innate] longing and desire.
3. Philosophers unanimously agree that the latter is superior to, and more perfect than, the ‘man of self-restraint’, although they add that it is possible for such a one to equal the saintly man in many regards. In general, however, he must necessarily be ranked lower [in the scale of virtue], because there lurks within him the desire to do bad, and, though he does not do it, yet because his inclinations are all in that direction, it denotes the presence of an immoral soul disposition.
4. Solomon, also, entertained the same idea when he said, (Proverbs 21:10) *"The soul of the wicked desires evil"*, and, in regard to the saintly man's rejoicing in doing good, and the discontent experienced by him, who is not innately righteous, when required to act justly, he says, (Proverbs 21:15) *"It is bliss to the righteous to do justice, but torment to the evil-doer"*. This is manifestly an agreement between Scripture and philosophy.
5. When, however, we research the Rabbinic teachings on this subject, it appears that they consider him who desires iniquity, and craves for it (but does not do it), more praiseworthy [superior] and perfect than the one who does not desire to and feels no torment at refraining from evil. They even go so far as to maintain that the more praiseworthy and perfect a man is, the greater is his desire to commit iniquity, and the more irritation does he feel at having to desist from it. This they express by saying, (Talmud, Tractate Sukkah 52a) *"Whosoever is greater than his neighbor has likewise greater evil inclinations"*. Again, as if this were not sufficient, they even go so far as to say that the reward of a ‘man of self-restraint’, is commensurate with the pain occasioned by his resistance, which thought they express by the words, (Ethics of our fathers 5:23) *"According to the pain is the reward"*. Furthermore, they instructed that man should desire iniquity, and cautioned one from saying, *"I, by my nature, do not desire to commit such and such a transgression, even though the Torah does not forbid it"*. This is what they say (Safra, Leviticus 20:26): Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel said, "Man should not say, 'I cannot [repulse] eat[ing] meat together with milk; 'I cannot [repulse] wear[ing] clothes made of a mixture of wool and linen; 'I cannot [repulse] enter[ing] into an incestuous relationship', but he should say, 'I do indeed want to, yet I must not, for my father in Heaven has forbidden it'".
6. At first glance, by a superficial comparison of the two sayings, one might be inclined to say that they contradict one another. Such, however, is not the case. Both are correct and, moreover, are not in disagreement in the least, as the evils which the philosophers term such and of which they say that he who has no longing for them is more to be praised than he who desires them but conquers his passion are things which all people commonly agree are evils, such as the shedding of blood, theft, robbery, fraud, injury to one who has done him no harm, ingratitude, disgracing the parents, and the like. These are commandments (mitzvoth), about which the Rabbis said, (Talmud, Tractate Yoma 67b:8) *"If they had not been written in the Torah, it would be proper to be written"*. Some of our later sages, who were infected with the unsound principles of the Mutakallimun, called these rational Mitzvoth. There is no doubt that a soul which has the desire for, and lusts after, the above-mentioned misdeeds, is imperfect, that a noble soul has absolutely no desire for any such wrongdoings, and experiences no pain in refraining from them.
7. When, however, the Rabbis maintain that the person who ‘conquers his evil inclination’ has more merit and a greater reward (than he who has no temptation), they say so only in reference to laws that are ritual [traditional]

prohibitions. This is quite true, since, were it not for the Torah, they would not at all be considered transgressions. Therefore, the Rabbis say that man should permit his soul to entertain the natural inclination for these things, but that the Torah alone should restrain him from them.

8. Ponder over the wisdom of these men of blessed memory manifest in the examples they adduce. They do not declare, "Man should not say, 'I have no desire to kill, to steal and to lie, but I have a desire for these things, yet what can I do, since my Father in heaven forbids it!'" The instances they cite are all from the ritual [traditional] law, such as partaking of meat and milk together, wearing clothes made of wool and linen, and entering into incestuous relationships. These, and similar enactments are what G-d called (Leviticus 18:4) "*my statutes*" (*Chukim*), which, as the Rabbis (Talmud, Tractate Yoma 67b) say are "statutes which I (G-d) have enacted for thee, which thou hast no right to doubt them, which the nations of the world attack and which Satan denounces, as for instance, the statutes concerning the red heifer, the scapegoat, and so forth".
9. Those transgressions, however, which the later sages called rational laws are termed commandments (mitzvot), as the Rabbis explained.
10. It is now evident from all that we have said, which of the transgressions, if a man has no desire at all, he is on a higher plane than he who has a longing, but controls his passion for them; and it is also evident what the transgressions are of which the opposite is true. It is an astonishing datum that by establishing the compatibility of these two teaching and their expressions/wording/[examples] it points to the truth of our explanation. This ends the discussion of the subject-matter of this chapter.

11.

Mishpatim	Rational Mitzvot
Edut	Testimonial Mitzvot
Chukim	Supra-rational Mitzvot

12.

Tzadik – Righteous	No desire for bad
Benoni – Average	Desire but no bad action/speech/thought
Rasha - Evil	Bad behavior

13. Now, the rank of *benoni* is one that is attainable by every person; each person should strive after it if he has not yet attained it and should not think it beyond his reach, for every person can, at any time or hour, be a *benoni*, because a *benoni* does not abhor evil; unlike the tzaddik, he does not find worldly pleasures revolting and loathsome, for this is a matter entrusted to the heart, and as explained earlier, the *benoni* has yet to conquer [the evil in] his heart; consequently, he does not loathe evil.

...Rather, the task of the *benoni* is only to "*turn away from evil and do good*" in actual practice—in deed, speech, and thought. In these matters, as opposed to "matters of the heart," every man is given the choice, ability, and freedom to act, speak, and think even that which is contrary to the desire of his heart and diametrically opposed to it.

For even when one's heart craves and desires ...that which is forbidden, and the desire is intrinsically evil; whatever sort of craving it is - he can conquer [this desire] and divert his attention from it altogether by declaring to himself ("saying to his heart") [as follows]: "I do not want to be a *rasha* even for a moment, because under no circumstances do I want to be parted and severed, heaven forbid, from the One G-d; as is written, "Your iniquities separate...[you from G-d]." (Tanya, Chapter 14)

14. A Baal-Teshuvah should not consider himself distant from the level of the righteous because of the sins and transgressions that he committed. This is not true. He is beloved and desirable before the Creator as if he never sinned.

Furthermore, he has a great reward for he has tasted sin and yet, separated himself from it, conquering his [evil] inclination. Our Sages declared: "In the place where Baalei Teshuvah stand, even the completely righteous are not able to stand." The level of Baalei Teshuvah transcends the level of those who never sinned at all, for they overcome their [evil] inclination more. (Maimonides, Laws of Return 7:4)

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