

Yom Kippur Afternoon 5771

Discussion Text

Moses Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Book One: Knowledge *Laws Relating to Moral Dispositions and Ethical Conduct* Selections from Chapters 1-2

Chapter 1

1. Every human being is characterized by numerous moral dispositions which differ from each other and are exceedingly divergent. One man is extremely irritable, always hot tempered; another sedate, never angry; or if he should become angry, is only slightly and very rarely so. One man is haughty to excess; another humble in the extreme. One is a full of desire whose lusts are never sufficiently gratified; another is so pure in soul that he does not even long for the few things that our physical nature needs. One is so greedy that all the money in the world would not satisfy him...

3. To cultivate either extreme in any class of dispositions is not the right course nor is it proper for any person to follow or learn it. If a person finds that his nature tends or is disposed to one of these extremes, or if one has acquired and become habituated to it, he should turn back and improve, so as to walk in the way of good people, which is the right way.

4. The right way is the mean in each group of dispositions common to humanity; namely, that disposition which is equally distant from the two extremes in its class, not being nearer to the one than to the other. Hence, our ancient sages exhorted us that a person should always evaluate his dispositions and so adjust them that they shall be at the mean between extremes, and this will secure his physical health. Thus a man should not be extremely irritable, easily moved to anger, nor be like the dead without feeling; but should aim at the happy medium; be angry only for a grave cause that rightly calls for indignation, so that the like shall not be done again. He will only desire that which the body absolutely needs and cannot do without, as it is said, "The righteous eats, to satisfy himself" (Proverbs 13:25). He will only labor at his occupation to obtain what is necessary for his sustenance, as it is said, "A little that a righteous person has is better than the riches of the wicked" (Psalms 37:16). He will not be tight-fisted nor yet a spendthrift, but will bestow tzedakah according to his means and give a suitable loan to whoever needs it. He will be neither frivolous and given to jesting, nor mournful and melancholy, but will rejoice all his days tranquilly and cheerfully. And so will he comport himself with regard to all his other dispositions. This is the way of the wise. Whoever observes in his dispositions the mean is termed wise.

5. Whoever is particularly scrupulous and deviates somewhat from the exact mean in disposition, in one direction or the other, is called a saint (hasid). For example, if one avoids snobbishness to the utmost extent and is exceedingly humble, he is termed a

saint, and this is the standard of saintliness. If one only departs from snobbishness as far as the mean, and is humble, he is called wise, and this is the standard of wisdom.

And so with all other dispositions. The ancient saints trained their dispositions away from the exact mean toward the extremes; in regard to one disposition in one direction; in regard to another in the opposition direction. This was to do more than duty requires. We are bidden to walk in the middle paths which are the right and proper ways, as it is said, "And you shall walk in God's ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9).

Chapter 2

3. There are some dispositions in regard to which it is forbidden merely to keep the middle path. They must be shunned to the extreme. Such a disposition is pride. The right way in this regard is not to be merely meek, but to be humble-minded and lowly of spirit to the utmost... Anger, too, is an exceedingly bad passion, and one should avoid it to the last extreme. One should train oneself not to be angry even for something that would justify anger. If one wishes to arouse fear in his children and his household, or in the members of a community of which he is the head, and desires to exhibit anger, so that they may amend their ways, he should make a show of anger before them, so as to correct them, but in reality, his mind should be composed like that of a person who simulates anger and does not really feel it. The ancient sages said, "He who is angry--it is the same as if he worshipped idols..."

4. One should always cultivate the habit of silence and only converse on topics of wisdom or on matters of moment to one's existence. Of Rav, disciple of our sainted teacher Rabbi Judah the Prince it was said that throughout his life he never indulged in idle conversation, of which most people's talk consists. And even of our material needs, we should not speak much. In this connection, our wise men charged, "He who multiplies words causes sin" (Pirke Avot 1:17)....

7. One should not indulge in jesting and mockery nor be melancholy and mournful, but one should be cheerful. So our sages said, "Jesting and levity lead a man on to lewdness" (Pirke Avot 3:17). They further charged that a man should not give way to immoderate laughter nor yet be sad and mournful, but should receive everyone with a cheerful countenance... This is what Solomon expressed in the text, "Balance the course of your steps, so that all your ways may be right" (Proverbs 4:26).

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