

## Excerpts from Rambam's Laws of Character Traits

### Chapter Two

1. ... Similarly, those who are morally ill desire and love bad traits, hate the good path, and are lazy to follow it. Depending on how sick they are, they find it exceedingly burdensome... What is the remedy for the morally ill? They should go to the wise, for they are the healers of souls. They will heal them by teaching them how to acquire proper traits, until they return them to the good path. Concerning those who recognize their bad traits and do not go to the wise to heal them, Solomon Proverbs 1:7 said: "Fools scorned wisdom and correction."

2. How are they to be healed? We tell the wrathful man to train himself to feel no reaction even if he is beaten or cursed. He should follow this course of behavior for a long time, until the anger is uprooted from his heart. The man who is full of pride should cause himself to experience much disgrace. He should sit in the lowliest of places, dress in tattered rags which shame the wearer, and the like, until the arrogance is uprooted from his heart and he returns to the middle path, which is the proper path. When he returns to this middle path, he should walk in it the rest of his life. One should take a similar course with each of the other traits. A person who swayed in the direction of one of the extremes should move in the direction of the opposite extreme, and accustom himself to that for a long time, until he has returned to the proper path, which is the midpoint for each and every temperament.

3. There are temperaments with regard to which a man is forbidden to follow the middle path. He should move away from one extreme and adopt the other. Among these is arrogance. If a man is only humble, he is not following a good path. Rather, he must hold himself lowly and his spirit very unassuming. That is why Numbers 12:3 describes our teacher Moses as "very humble" and not simply "humble". Therefore, our Sages directed: "Hold oneself very, very lowly." Also, they declared: "Whoever is arrogant is as if he denied God's presence, as implied by Deuteronomy 8:14: 'And your heart will be haughty and you will forget God, your Lord.' Furthermore, they said: "Whoever is arrogant should be placed under a ban of ostracism. This applies even if he is only somewhat arrogant." Anger is also an exceptionally bad quality. It is fitting and proper that one move away from it and adopt the opposite extreme. He should school himself not to become angry even when it is fitting to be angry. If he should wish to arouse fear in his children and household - or within the community, if he is a communal

leader - and wishes to be angry at them to motivate them to return to the proper path, he should present an angry front to them to punish them, but he should be inwardly calm. He should be like one who acts out the part of an angry man in his wrath, but is not himself angry. The early Sages said: Anyone who becomes angry is like one who worships idols. They also said: Whenever one becomes angry, if he is a wise man, his wisdom leaves him; if he is a prophet, his prophecy leaves him. The life of the irate is not true life. Therefore, they have directed that one distance himself from anger and accustom himself not to feel any reaction, even to things which provoke anger. This is the good path.

7. One should neither be constantly laughing and a jester, nor sad and depressed, but happy. Our Sages declared: "Jesting and lightheadedness accustom one to lewdness." They also directed that a man should not laugh without control, nor be sad and mournful, but receive everyone in a friendly manner. Similarly, he should not be greedy, rushing for wealth and possessions, nor lazy and an idler from work. Rather, he should be of a goodly eye and limit his business endeavors so that he may occupy himself with Torah study. He should be happy with the little which is his lot. He should not be quarrelsome, of envious temperament, full of desires, nor pursue honor. Our Sages have said: "Envy, desire and honor remove a man from life in this world." The general principle is that one should follow the midpoint quality of each temperament until all his traits are aligned at the midpoint. This is what is implied

### **Chapter Three**

1. A person might say, "Since envy, desire, [the pursuit] of honor, and the like, are a wrong path and drive a person from the world, I shall separate from them to a very great degree and move away from them to the opposite extreme." For example, he will not eat meat, nor drink wine, nor live in a pleasant home, nor wear fine clothing, but, rather, [wear] sackcloth and coarse wool and the like - just as the pagan priests do. This, too, is a bad path and it is forbidden to walk upon it... Therefore, our Sages directed man to abstain only from those things which the Torah denies him and not to forbid himself permitted things by vows and oaths [of abstention]. Thus, our Sages stated: Are not those things which the Torah has prohibited sufficient for you that you must forbid additional things to yourself?...Of all the above, and their like, Solomon directed and said: "Do not be overly righteous and do not be overly clever; why make yourself desolate?" (Ecclesiastes 7:16).

2. A person should direct his heart and the totality of his behavior to one goal, becoming aware of God, blessed be He. The [way] he rests, rises, and speaks should all be directed to this end...

3. A person who accustoms himself to live by [the rules of] medicine does not follow a proper path if his sole intention is that his entire body and limbs be healthy and that he have children who will do his work and toil for him. Rather, he should have the intent that his body be whole and strong, in order for his inner soul to be upright so that [it will be able] to know God. For it is impossible to understand and become knowledgeable in the wisdoms when one is starving or sick, or when one of his limbs pains him. [Similarly,] one should intend to have a son [with the hope that] perhaps he will be a wise and great man in Israel. Thus, whoever walks in such a path all his days will be serving God constantly; even in the midst of his business dealings, even during intercourse for his intent in all matters is to fulfill his needs so that his body be whole to serve God. Even when he sleeps, if he retires with the intention that his mind and body rest, lest he take ill and be unable to serve God because he is sick, then his sleep is service to the Omnipresent, blessed be He. On this matter, our Sages have directed and said: "And all your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven." This is what Solomon declared in his wisdom: "Know Him in all your ways and He will straighten your paths" (Proverbs 3:6).

#### **Chapter Four**

1. Since maintaining a healthy and sound body is among the ways of God - for one cannot understand or have any knowledge of the Creator, if he is ill - therefore, he must avoid that which harms the body and accustom himself to that which is healthful and helps the body become stronger. They are as follows: a person should never eat unless he is hungry, nor drink unless thirsty. He should never put off relieving himself, even for an instant. Rather, whenever he [feels the] need to urinate or move his bowels, he should do so immediately.

2. One should not eat until his stomach is full. Rather, [he should stop when] he has eaten to close to three quarter's of full satisfaction... He should not eat until he has taken a stroll which is sufficient to raise his body temperature. Alternatively, he should work or exert himself in some other way. The rule is that he should engage his body and exert himself in a sweat-producing task each morning. Afterwards, he should rest slightly until he regains composure and [then, he should] eat. If he were to bathe in hot

water after exerting himself, it would be beneficial. Afterwards, he should wait a short while and eat.

4. Together, day and night make up [a period of] twenty four hours. It is sufficient for a man to sleep a third of this period; i.e., eight hours. These should be towards the end of the night, so that there be eight hours from the beginning of his sleep until sunrise. Thus, he should rise from his bed before sunrise.

8. In the summer, one should eat unseasoned foods without many spices and use vinegar. In the rainy season, one should eat seasoned foods, use many spices, and eat some mustard and chilit. One should follow these principles in regard to cold climates and hot climates, [choosing the food] appropriate to each and every one of them.

13. A person should always try to have loose movements throughout his life, tending slightly towards diarrhea. This is a cardinal principle in medicine: Whenever one suffers from constipation or has difficulty moving his bowels, serious diseases will beset him. How can he induce loose movements if he has mild constipation? If he is a young man, each morning, he should eat well-cooked halimi which have been seasoned in olive-oil, pickled fish oil, and salt without bread daily; or drink the boiled water of [cooked] spinach or cabbage, [seasoned] with olive oil, pickled fish oil and salt. If he is an old man, he should drink honey diluted with hot water, in the morning, wait approximately four hours and then eat his meal. He should do this for one day, or three, or four, if necessary, until he has loose bowels.

14. They have given another principle with regard to physical well-being: As long as one exercises, exerts himself greatly, does not eat to the point of satiation and has loose bowels, he will not suffer sickness and he will grow in strength. [This applies] even if he eats harmful foods.

15. [Conversely,] whoever is idle and does not exercise, or does not move his bowels when he has the need, or is constipated, even if he eats the proper foods and takes care to follow the rules of medicine, will be full of pain for all his days and his strength will fade away. Overeating is like poison to anyone's body. It is the main source of all illness. Most illnesses which afflict a man are caused by harmful foods or by his filling his belly and overeating, even of healthful food. This was implied by Solomon in his wisdom: "Whoever guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from distress" (Proverbs

21:23); i.e., "guards his mouth" from eating harmful food or eating his fill and "his tongue" from speaking [about things] other than his needs.

19. Semen is the strength of the body, its life [force], and the light of the eyes; the greater the emission [of sperm], [the greater] the damage to the body, to its strength and the greater the loss to one's life [span]. This was implied by Solomon in his wisdom: "Do not give your strength to women" (Proverbs 31:3). Whoever is steeped in sexual relations, old age springs upon him [before its time], his strength is depleted, his eyes become dim, a foul odor emanates from his mouth and his armpits, the hair of his head, his eyebrows, and eyelashes fall out, the hair of his beard, armpits, and legs grows in abundance, his teeth fall out and he suffers many pains beyond these. The wise of the doctors have said: One of a thousand dies from other illnesses and a thousand from excessive intercourse. Therefore, a person must take care in this matter if he wishes to live in good [health]. He should not engage in intercourse except when the body is healthy and particularly strong, when he has many involuntary erections, the erection is still present even when he makes an effort to think of something else, he finds a heaviness from the loins and below, the tendons of the testicles seem to be stretched, and his flesh is warm. Such a person needs to engage in intercourse and it is medically advisable. He should not engage in intercourse on a full or empty stomach, but after the food has been digested. He should examine himself to see if he needs to move his bowels before and after intercourse. He should not engage in intercourse while standing or sitting, nor in the bathhouse, nor on a day on which he goes to the bathhouse, nor on a day on which he lets blood, nor on the day he departs on a journey or arrives from a journey, nor [on the day] before or afterwards.

20. Whoever conducts himself in the ways which we have drawn up, I will guarantee that he will not become ill throughout his life, until he reaches advanced age and dies. He will not need a doctor. His body will remain intact and healthy throughout his life. One may rely on this guarantee] unless [his body] was impaired from the birth, he was accustomed to one of the harmful habits from birth, or should there be a plague or a drought in the world.

## **Chapter Six**

1. It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior. Therefore, he should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to

learn from their deeds. Conversely, he should keep away from the wicked who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds. This is [implied by] Solomon's statement (Proverbs 13:20): "He who walks with the wise will become wise, while one who associates with fools will suffer." Similarly, [Psalms 1:1] states: "Happy is the man who has not followed the advice of the wicked." A person who lives in a place where the norms of behavior are evil and the inhabitants do not follow the straight path should move to a place where the people are righteous and follow the ways of the good. If all the places with which he is familiar and of which he hears reports follow improper paths, as in our times, or if he is unable to move to a place where the patterns of behavior are proper, because of [the presence of] bands of raiding troops, or for health reasons, he should remain alone in seclusion as [Eichah 3:28] states: "Let him sit alone and be silent." If they are wicked and sinful and do not allow him to reside there unless he mingle with them and follow their evil behavior, he should go out to caves, thickets, and deserts [rather than] follow the paths of sinners as [Jeremiah 9:1] states: "Who will give me a lodging place for wayfarers, in the desert."

2. It is a positive commandment to cleave unto the wise and their disciples in order to learn from their deeds as [Deuteronomy 10:20] states: "and you will cling to Him." Our Sages [questioned the nature of this command for] is it possible for man to cling to the Divine Presence? They [resolved the difficulty,] explaining this commandment to mean: Cleave unto the wise and their disciples. Therefore, one should try to marry the daughter of a Torah Sage and marry his daughter to a Torah Sage, eat and drink with Sages, do business on behalf of Sages, and associate with them in all possible ways as [Deuteronomy 11:22] states: "to cling to Him." Similarly, our Sages have directed [us], saying: "Sit in the dust of their feet and drink in their words thirstily."

3. Each Jew is commanded to love each and every one of Israel as himself as [Leviticus 19:18] states: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Therefore, one should speak the praises of [others] and show concern for their money just as he is concerned with his own money and seeks his own honor. Whoever gains honor through the degradation of a colleague does not have a share in the world to come.

4. Loving a convert who has come to nestle under the wings of the Shechinah [fulfills] two positive commandments: one for he is [also] included among the "neighbors" [whom we are commanded to love] and one because he is a convert and the Torah (Deuteronomy 10:19) states: "and you shall love the converts." [Thus, God] has

commanded us concerning the love of a convert just as He has commanded us concerning loving Himself as [Deuteronomy 11:1] states: "and you shall love God, your Lord." The Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, loves converts as [Deuteronomy 10:18] states: "and He loves converts."

5. Whoever hates a [fellow] Jew in his heart transgresses a Torah prohibition as [Leviticus 19:17] states: "Do not hate your brother in your heart." One is not [liable for] lashes for violating this prohibition because no deed is involved.

10. A person is obligated to show great care for orphans and widows because their spirits are very low and their feelings are depressed. This applies even if they are wealthy. Exodus 22:21: "Do not mistreat any widow or orphan. How should one deal with them? One should only speak to them gently and treat them only with honor. One should not cause pain to their persons with [overbearing] work or aggravate their feelings with harsh words and [one should] show more consideration for their financial interests than for one's own. Anyone who vexes or angers them, hurts their feelings, oppresses them, or causes them financial loss transgresses this prohibition