

הלכות דעות • פרק ראשון

Learned like the daf, the literal words in bold, flowing with the elucidation

CHAPTER PREVIEW

In this opening chapter of Hilchos De'os, the Rambam introduces us to the fundamental landscape of the human neshama and its character traits, the de'os. We learn how Hashem created people with a vast spectrum of different temperaments and tendencies. The Rambam contrasts the extreme ends of various traits—such as anger versus absolute passivity, pride versus extreme lowliness, and miserliness versus wasteful spending—showing how these midos manifest in our daily lives.

We are then introduced to the essential path of the "golden mean," the middle path in all traits, which is the way of the Chacham (the wise man). The Rambam guides us in how to navigate our natural inclinations, explaining that while some traits are inborn, a person has the power to shape and change his midos through constant practice and avodah, ultimately walking in the ways of Hashem.

All introductions, summaries, and contextual notes are the editor's commentary and are not part of the original text.

הלכה א

Halacha 1 • The Diverse Character Traits of Man and Their Extreme Opposites

דעות הרבה יש לכל אחד ואחד מבני אדם

Many different character traits exist for each and every one of the children of man,

וזו משנה מזו ורחוקה ממנה ביותר.

and this trait in one person is completely different from this same trait in another, and is exceedingly distant from it.

יש אדם שהוא בעל חמה כועס תמיד.

For example, there is a man who is a master of wrath, who is always angry,

ויש אדם שדעתו מושבת עליו ואינו כועס כלל

and there is a man whose mind is settled upon him and he is not angry at all,

ואם יכעס יכעס פעם מעט בכמה שנים.

and if he will be angry, he will only be angry with a slight anger once in several years.

ויש אדם שהוא גבה לב ביותר.

And there is a man who is exceedingly haughty of heart,

ויש שהוא שפל רוח ביותר.

and there is one who is exceedingly humble of spirit.

וַיֵּשׁ שֶׁהוּא בֹעַל תַּאֲוָה לֹא תִשְׂבַּע נַפְשׁוֹ מִהֵלֶךְ בְּתַאֲוָה.

And there is one who is a master of desire, whose soul will not be satisfied from walking in desire,

וַיֵּשׁ שֶׁהוּא בֹעַל לֵב טָהוֹר מְאֹד

and there is one who is a master of a very pure heart,

וְלֹא יִתְאָוֶה אַפְלוֹ לְדִבְרִים מְעַטִּים שֶׁהַגּוּף צָרִיךְ לָהֶן.

and he will not desire even those few things that the body needs.

וַיֵּשׁ בֹּעַל נֶפֶשׁ רַחְבָּה שֶׁלֹּא תִשְׂבַּע נַפְשׁוֹ מִכָּל מָמוֹן הָעוֹלָם,

And there is a master of a broad soul, a greedy person, whose soul will not be satisfied by all the money in the world,

כַּעֲנִין שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר קֹהֶלֶת ה' ט "אוֹהֵב כֶּסֶף לֹא יִשְׂבַּע כֶּסֶף".

like the matter as it is said in Koheles 5:9, "A lover of money will not be satisfied with money."

וַיֵּשׁ מְקַצֵּר נַפְשׁוֹ שֶׁיְדִיו אַפְלוֹ דִּבְרַי מְעַט שֶׁלֹּא יִסְפִּיק לוֹ

And there is one who restricts his soul, being content with so little that even a small thing, which will not really suffice for him, is enough for him,

וְלֹא יִרְדֹּף לְהַשִּׁיג כָּל צָרָכּוֹ.

and he will not pursue to attain all his needs.

וַיֵּשׁ שֶׁהוּא מְסַגֵּף עַצְמוֹ בְּרָעָב וְקוֹבֵץ עַל יָדוֹ

And there is one who afflicts himself with hunger and gathers money to his hand,

וְאֵינוֹ אוֹכֵל פְּרוּטָה מִשָּׁלוֹ אֶלָּא בְּצַעַר גָּדוֹל.

and he does not eat even a penny of his own money except with great pain.

וַיֵּשׁ שֶׁהוּא מַאֲבֵד כָּל מָמוֹנוֹ בְּיָדוֹ לְדַעְתּוֹ.

And there is one who destroys all his money with his own hand by his own will.

וְעַל דְּרָכִים אֵלּוּ שְׂאֵר כָּל הַדַּעוֹת

And upon these ways are the rest of all the traits,

כַּגּוֹן מֵהוֹלֵל וְאוֹיֵן וְכִילִי וְשׁוֹעַ וְאֶכְזָרִי וְרַחֲמָן וְרָב לֵב וְכַיּוֹצֵא בָהֶן:

such as the overly elated, and the depressed, and the stingy, and the generous, and the cruel, and the merciful, and the soft of heart, and the courageous of heart, and the like of them.

וַיִּשׁ בֵּין כָּל דַּעַה וְדַעַה הִרְחוּקָה מִמֶּנָּה בְּקֶצֶה הָאַחֵר דְּעוֹת בִּינּוּנִיּוֹת זֶה רְחוּקָה מִזֶּה.

And there are, between each and every trait and the other trait that is distant from it at the other extreme, intermediate traits, each this far distant from that one.

וְכָל הַדְּעוֹת יֵשׁ מֵהֶן דְּעוֹת שֶׁהֵן לְאָדָם מִתְחִלַּת בְּרִיתוֹ לְפִי טִבְעֵהוּ גּוּפוֹ.

And regarding all the traits, there are among them traits that belong to a person from the beginning of his creation, according to the nature of his body and physical makeup.

וַיִּשׁ מֵהֶן דְּעוֹת שֶׁטִּבְעוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם זֶה מְכוּן וְעֵתִיד לְקַבֵּל אוֹתָם בְּמַהֲרָה יוֹתֵר מִשְּׁאָר הַדְּעוֹת.

And there are among them traits that the nature of this particular person is disposed and destined to receive quickly, more than the rest of the traits.

וַיִּשׁ מֵהֶן שֶׁאֵינֶן לְאָדָם מִתְחִלַּת בְּרִיתוֹ אֲלָא לָמַד אוֹתָם מֵאַחֲרִים.

And there are among them traits that do not belong to a person from the beginning of his creation, but rather he learned them from others by observing their behavior,

אוֹ שֶׁנִּפְנָה לָהֶן מֵעֲצָמוֹ לְפִי מַחֲשַׁבָּה שֶׁעָלְתָה בְּלִבּוֹ.

or that he turned to them on his own, according to a thought that arose in his heart and mind,

אוֹ שֶׁשָּׁמַע שֶׁזֶה הַדַּעַה טוֹבָה לוֹ וְכֵן רָאוּי לֵילֶךְ.

or that he heard that this trait is good for him, and in it it is proper to walk,

וְהִנְהִיג עֲצָמוֹ בָּהּ עַד שֶׁנִּקְבְּעָה בְּלִבּוֹ:

and he accustommed himself in it until it became fixed in his heart as a second nature.

שְׁתֵּי קְצוֹת הִרְחוּקוֹת זֶה מִזֶּה שֶׁבְּכָל דַּעַה וְדַעַה

The two extremes that are distant, this from this, which are in every character trait and character trait,

אֵינֶן דֶּרֶךְ טוֹבָה

are not a good path,

וְאֵין רָאוּי לוֹ לָאָדָם לָלֶכֶת בָּהֶן

and it is not fitting for a man to walk in them,

וְלֹא לְלַמְּדוֹן לְעַצְמוֹ.

and not to teach them to himself.

ואם מצא טבעו נוטה לאחת מהן

And if he found his nature leaning to one of them,

או מוכן לאחת מהן

or disposed to one of them,

או שכבר למד אחת מהן ונהג בה

or that he already learned one of them and behaved in it,

החזיר עצמו למוטב

he should return himself to the better

וילך בדרך הטובים

and walk in the path of the good ones,

והיא הדרך הישרה:

and it is the straight path.

הלכה ד

Halacha 4 · Guiding One's Character Traits and Actions Along the Balanced Middle Path

הדרך הישרה היא מדה בינונית שבכל דעה ודעה מכל הדעות שיש לו לאדם.

The straight path is the intermediate trait that is in each and every temperament of all the temperaments that a person has.

והיא הדעה שהיא רחוקה משתי הקצוות רחוק שווה ואינה קרובה לא לזו ולא לזו.

And it is the temperament that is distant from the two extremes an equal distance, and is not close, not to this one and not to that one.

לפיכך צווי חכמים הראשונים שיהא אדם שם דעותיו תמיד ומשער אותם ומכון אותם בדרך האמצעית כדי שיהא שלם בגופו.

Therefore, the early Sages commanded that a person should always evaluate his temperaments, and calculate them, and direct them in the middle path, so that he will be healthy in his body.

כיצד.

How so?

לא יהא פעל חמה נוח לכעס ולא כמת שאינו מרגיש אלא בינוני.

He should not be a master of wrath, easy to anger, and not like a dead person who does not feel, but rather intermediate.

לא יכעס אלא על דבר גדול שראוי לכעס עליו כדי שלא יעשה כיוצא בו פעם אחרת.

He should not anger except over a major matter that is fitting to anger over, so that a similar thing will not be done another time.

וכן לא יתאוה אלא לדברים שהגוף צריך להן ואי אפשר להיות בזה לית

And so, he should not desire except for things that the body needs and which it is impossible to exist without,

כענין שנאמר משלי יג כה "צדיק אכל לשבע נפשו".

as the matter is stated in Mishlei 13:25, "A righteous man eats to satisfy his soul."

וכן לא יתאמץ עמל בעסקו אלא להשיג דבר שצריך לו לחיי שעה

And so, he should not toil in his business except to obtain that which is necessary for him for the life of the hour, meaning his immediate needs,

כענין שנאמר תהילים לו טז "טוב מעט לצדיק".

as the matter is stated in Tehillim 37:16, "Better is a little for the righteous man."

ולא יקפץ ידו ביותר.

And he should not close his hand excessively like a miser,

ולא יפזר ממונו אלא נותן צדקה כפי מסת ידו ומלזה פראוי למי שצריך.

and he should not squander his money, but rather give charity according to the capacity of his hand, and lend properly to whoever is in need.

ולא יהא מהולל ושוחק ולא עצב ואונן אלא שמח כל ימיו בנחת בסבר פנים יפות.

And he should not be overly jovial and laughing, nor sad and mourning, but rather happy all his days, with calmness and with a pleasant countenance.

וכן שאר דעותיו.

And so too with the rest of his temperaments.

ודרך זו היא דרך החכמים.

And this path is the path of the wise.

כל אדם שדעותיו דעות בינוניות ממצעות נקרא חכם:

Any person whose temperaments are intermediate, balanced temperaments, is called wise.

And whoever is precise upon himself exceedingly, holding himself to a higher standard of self-discipline,

וְיִתְרַחַק מִדַּעַה בֵּינוּנִית מְעַט

and distances himself from the intermediate temperament slightly,

לְצַד זֶה אִוְ לְצַד זֶה

to this side or to that side,

נִקְרָא חָסִיד.

is called pious, a chasid.

כִּיצַד.

How so?

מִי שֶׁיִתְרַחַק מִגְּבוּהַ הַלֵּב עַד הַקְּצֵה הָאֲחֵרוֹן

One who distances himself from haughtiness of the heart until the ultimate extreme,

וְיִהְיֶה שָׁפָל רוּחַ בְּיֹתֵר

and is lowly of spirit exceedingly,

נִקְרָא חָסִיד

is called pious,

וְזוֹ הִיא מִדַּת חֲסִידוּת.

and this is the trait of piety.

וְאִם נִתְרַחַק עַד הָאֶמְצָע בִּלְבָד

And if he distanced himself until the middle only,

וְיִהְיֶה עָנּוּ

and is humble,

נִקְרָא חָכָם

he is called wise,

וְזוֹ הִיא מִדַּת חֻכְמָה.

and this is the trait of wisdom.

וְעַל דֶּרֶךְ זֶה שְׁאֵר כָּל הַדַּעוֹת.

And upon this path are the rest of all the temperaments.

וְחַסִּידִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים הָיוּ מְטִין דַּעוֹת שְׁלֵחַן מִדְרָגָה הָאֶמְצָעִית

And the pious ones of the first generations were bending their temperaments from the intermediate path

בְּנֶגֶד שְׁתֵּי הַקְּצוֹת.

towards the two extremes.

יֵשׁ דַּעָה שֶׁמְטִין אוֹתָהּ בְּנֶגֶד הַקְּצָה הָאַחֲרוֹן

There is a temperament that they bend towards the ultimate extreme,

וְיֵשׁ דַּעָה שֶׁמְטִין אוֹתָהּ בְּנֶגֶד הַקְּצָה הָרִאשׁוֹן.

and there is a temperament that they bend towards the first extreme.

וְזֶהוּ לְפָנִים מְשׁוּרֶת הַדִּין.

And this is beyond the line of the law.

וּמֵצִוִּין אֲנוּ לִלְכֹּת בַּדְּרָכִים הָאֵלּוּ הַפִּינוּנִים

And we are commanded to walk in these intermediate paths,

וְהֵם הַדְּרָכִים הַטּוֹבִים וְהַיְשָׁרִים

and they are the good and straight paths,

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְהָלַכְתָּ בְּדַרְכָּיו":

as it is said, "And you shall walk in His ways."

הִלְכָּה ו

Halacha 6 • The Mitzvah to Emulate the Good Ways of Hashem

כָּךְ לָמְדוּ בְּפֶרוּשׁ מִצְוַה זוֹ.

So they learned in the explanation of this mitzvah of walking in His ways:

מֶה הוּא נִקְרָא חֲנוּן אִף אַתָּה הָיָה חֲנוּן.

Just as He is called Gracious, even you be gracious.

מֶה הוּא נִקְרָא רַחוּם אִף אַתָּה הָיָה רַחוּם.

Just as He is called Merciful, even you be merciful.

מֶה הוּא נִקְרָא קָדוֹשׁ אִף אַתָּה הָיָה קָדוֹשׁ.

Just as He is called Holy, even you be holy.

וְעַל דֶּרֶךְ זוֹ קְרָאוּ הַנְּבִיאִים לֹאֵל בְּכָל אוֹתָן הַפְּנוּיִין

And on this path, the prophets called the Almighty by all those descriptions, such as:

אָרְךָ אַפִּים וְרַב חֶסֶד צְדִיק וְיֵשֶׁר תָּמִים גִּבּוֹר וְחֹזֶק וְכִיּוּצָא בָּהֶן.

Slow to anger and abundant in kindness, Righteous and Just, Perfect, Mighty and Strong, and similar to them,

לְהוֹדִיעַ שֶׁהֵן דְּרָכִים טוֹבִים וְיֵשֶׁרִים

to make known that they are paths that are good and upright,

וְחַיֵּב אָדָם לְהִנָּהִיג עֲצָמוֹ בָּהֶן

and a person is obligated to guide himself in them

וּלְהִדְמוּת אֱלֹהֵי כָפִי כָחוֹ:

and to resemble Him according to his ability.

הִלְכָה ז

Halacha 7- Training Oneself in the Middle Path and the Way of Hashem

וְכִיצַד יִרְגִּיל אָדָם עֲצָמוֹ בְּדַעוֹת אֱלֹהֵי עַד שֶׁיִּקָּבְעוּ בּוֹ.

And how shall a person accustom himself with these temperaments until they are established in him?

יַעֲשֶׂה וְיִשְׁנֶה וְיִשְׁלַשׁ בְּמַעֲשֵׂים שֶׁעוֹשֶׂה עַל פִּי הַדַּעוֹת הָאֵמֶצְעִיּוֹת

He should perform, and repeat, and perform a third time the actions that he does according to the middle temperaments,

וְיַחֲזֹר בָּהֶם תָּמִיד עַד שֶׁיִּהְיוּ מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם קִלִּים עָלָיו

and repeat them constantly until their actions will be easy upon him,

וְלֹא יִהְיֶה בָּהֶם טָרַח עָלָיו וְיִקָּבְעוּ הַדַּעוֹת בְּנַפְשׁוֹ.

and there will not be in them any difficulty upon him, and the temperaments will be established in his soul.

וּלְפִי שֶׁהַשְּׁמוֹת הָאֵלֹהִים נִקְרְאוּ בָּהֶן הַיּוֹצֵר

And because the Creator is called by these names,

וְהֵם הַדֶּרֶךְ הַפִּינוּנִית שֶׁאֲנוּ חַיְבִין לָלֶכֶת בָּהּ.

and they are the middle path that we are obligated to walk in,

נִקְרְאתָ דֶּרֶךְ זוֹ דֶּרֶךְ ה'.

this path is called the path of Hashem.

וְהִיא שֶׁלְמִד אֲבֹרָהֶם אָבִינוּ לְכַנְיָו

And it is what Avraham our father taught to his children,

שנאמר "כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה" וגו'.

as it is stated, "For I have known him in order that he will command," etc.

וההולך בדרכו זו מביא טובה וברכה לעצמו

And the one who walks in this path brings goodness and blessing to himself,

שנאמר "למען הביא ה' על אברהם את אשר דבר עלי":

as it is stated, "In order to bring Hashem upon Avraham that which He spoke concerning him."

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The chapter outlines the diverse nature of human character traits, explaining that while some tendencies are inborn, others are acquired through habit or environment. The Rambam establishes that the ideal path for a person is the intermediate path, which represents balance and emotional health. He contrasts the Chacham, who maintains this perfect middle ground, with the Chasid, who acts lifnim mishuras hadin (beyond the strict line of the law) by leaning slightly toward the extreme of modesty or generosity. Ultimately, we are commanded to emulate the middos of Hashem—to be merciful, gracious, and holy—which we accomplish by consciously refining our character and walking in His ways.

למעשה WHAT TO TAKE HOME

We often look at our middos, our character traits, as if they are permanent fixtures of who we are. We say, "I am just a naturally angry person," or "I am just a worrywart by nature." But the Rambam is teaching us a profound secret of our avodah: your personality is not a life sentence. Hashem created us with different tendencies, and we might have picked up bad habits from our surroundings, but we are never stuck. The middle path, the "derech Hashem," is always within our reach.

How do we actually change a deeply ingrained trait? The Rambam gives us a practical, psychological roadmap: "He shall do, repeat, and do a third time." You cannot simply think your way into becoming a calmer or more generous person. You have to act your way there. If you have a tendency to be tightfisted, you must force yourself to give tzedakah, over and over again, even in small amounts, until the act of giving becomes natural and light.

By consciously steering our actions toward the balanced middle, we are not just improving our behavior; we are fulfilling the mitzvah of "v'halachta b'drachav", walking in His ways. Just as Hashem is patient and kind, we train ourselves to act with patience and kindness until these middos are permanently engraved upon our very neshama.

Today, identify one area where you tend to go to an extreme, whether it is reacting too quickly in anger, or being overly stingy with your time or money. Force yourself to perform three small, concrete actions that pull you back toward the gentle middle path.