

Obligatory Moral Conduct

1. Every person has natural traits, and there are other traits that one acquires by regularly habituating himself to act in these ways. A person must always evaluate his traits and strive to bring them toward the correct path.¹

How so? One must especially strive not to become angered or to be an angry person, for these traits are despicable and they destroy one's life. Therefore, the Sages taught that anyone who gets angry suffers the departure of his intellect, and this type of a life is greatly lacking. If one is naturally an angry person, he should train himself not to get angry at all, and he should force himself to act with humility and patience toward others by habit, until he permanently acquires these good traits. Likewise with other character traits, one should evaluate himself truthfully to determine if he acts as a righteous person would, and he should correct himself to act in a way that finds favor in the eyes of G-d and in the eyes of other people.

2. A person should not be a buffoon or constantly despondent. Rather one should be happy, and should greet others with a happy countenance. Similarly, one should not be greedy, rushing for wealth and possessions, nor lazy and an idler from work. Rather, one should look upon others with a favorable eye, and be favorably looked upon by others. One should not have a quarrelsome or envious jealous temperament, or be possessed by desires, nor pursue honor. The Sage Rabbi Elazar HaKappar said (Tractate *Avot* 4:21): "Envy, lust and honor-seeking drive a person from [life in] this world."

3. If a person has one of these bad traits, how should he refine himself? One should habituate himself to the correct traits until they become habitual for him. He should force himself to perform actions that are morally and logically correct many times, until these actions are easy and the correct traits are set into his soul. For example, in regard to what we have written previously about the bad trait of anger, he should train himself that if he is hit or cursed, he should not arouse

¹ This chapter is collected from Rambam's *Laws of Attitudes (Hilhot De'ot)*.

his anger at all (that is, he should not answer back or fight about this, but he should accept it silently, against his nature), and he should habituate himself to do so until the anger is removed from his heart.

Likewise, one who is a buffoon and wastes his time with foolish jokes and lightheadedness which have no benefit, should distance himself from his friends who have these habits, and if he comes in contact with them he should close his mouth and stop from saying his usual foolish words. Instead, he should regularly act with seriousness, the opposite of his previous foolish ways.

4. It is forbidden for a person to tell lies, or act in a smooth-tongued and luring manner in order to deceive or persuade. One should not speak one thing outwardly and think otherwise in his heart. Rather, his inner self should be like his image that he shows to the world. He may not deceive people, and instead he should always pursue truthfulness.

5. A person should direct his heart and the totality of his behavior to one goal, which is becoming aware of G-d, and searching to be close to Him and His just ways. How so? When involved in business dealings to make a profit, one should not think solely of gathering money to be rich, and certainly not just to hoard money for no purpose at all, as is the way of the stingy. Rather, he should earn his income with righteousness and honor, and his goal in this should be to have a healthy and strong body, to provide for the members of his household respectfully, and to do charitable deeds with his money as are logically expected, for his good and the good of others.

Likewise all his other actions should be intended for this goal, and he should not do things without any reason at all or for vain reasons, as Solomon the Wise said,² "In all your ways you should know Him, and He will straighten your ways," meaning that you should think through all your actions before they are taken, in order that they should definitely be for the goal of doing the will of G-d. With this effort, G-d will illuminate the correct path for the person, and will bestow success in it.

² Proverbs 3:6.

6. Every person by nature is very influenced by his friends and surroundings, and by nature he is drawn after those around him, to also act in their ways. Therefore everyone must befriend good people to learn from their worthy actions, and distance themselves from bad people in order not to learn from their bad actions, as Solomon said,³ “He who walks with the wise will become wise, while one who associates with fools will suffer.” Therefore one must also be especially careful about who his children and other household members are befriending, and what places they are frequenting.

7. Likewise, it is an obligation for every person to endeavor to influence those around him to observe those things that they are obligated in, in a way of friendliness and sociability. One who is able to distance those around him from doing wrong, has an obligation to do so, in order to support the foundation of a moral society that will be as G-d wishes, as the prophet says,⁴ “The world was not created to be void, but properly settled.”

8. If one who sees that his friend has sinned and is following an improper path, and he knows that he will be able to effectively rebuke him with words and return him to the correct path, he should do so. How should he rebuke him? He should rebuke him patiently with respectful and nice words, and he should not speak harshly or embarrass him (unless the one rebuking is a true scholar of human nature, who understands that in this particular situation, it is the correct way to influence him to be better, since each situation and person is different). His objective should be that his words should be accepted by the sinner's heart, and they should have the right effect. It is a very righteous deed to bring another to the merit of following the correct path, and one who accomplishes this does great good for humanity and brings G-d much pleasure.

If one begins to affectionately rebuke his friend but sees that his words are not being accepted, he should not admonish him further in order to embarrass him, which will cause a useless fight. Rather, he should distance himself somewhat from the person so that it does not

³ Proverbs 13:20.

⁴ Isaiah 45:18.

seem that he is agreeing to and supporting his actions. Certainly, one should never flatter sinners (unless he is in great danger that they might harm him otherwise).

9. One should always try to respect every person and show him honor, and speak about his honorable traits and deeds, but not about his disgraceful traits and deeds. Many fights in the world are brought about by people who spread tales, gossip and slander about others.

The Sage Ben Zoma said:⁵ “Who is wise? One who learns from every person ... Who is strong? One who subdues his [evil] inclination ... Who is rich? One who is happy with his lot ... Who is honored? One who honors others ...”

10. Likewise, a person should not take revenge or hold a grudge toward another. What is an example of taking revenge? If A asks for a favor from his friend B, and B does not agree to do it for A, and the next day, B asks A for a favor, and A answers to B, “I will not do this favor for you, just like you did not do one for me.”

If A says, “I will do it for you, unlike you, who didn’t want to do a favor for me before,” he is holding a grudge.

A person must know that these traits, taking revenge or holding a grudge, are extremely bad, and they bring enmity and conflict between mankind. Almost every fight starts with something small which is not worthy of fighting over, and then it gets out of control, and hatefulness or arguing can end up in bloodshed or the like.

Instead, a person should overlook the bad traits of others, and do kindness to his friends until they all love him and his actions, and they will learn from him about the correct way to act. This is the truly good way in which it is correct to behave, and the true path by which it is possible to establish stable and productive societies which are based on good principles, and peaceful business dealings between people.

11. All the things explained in this chapter are only a small part and a few examples of a person’s moral obligations. We have written this in brief, as an *introduction* for one who wishes to strive in gaining understanding and in following the correct ways with other people and with G-d.

⁵ *Mishnah Avot* 4:1.

Repentance

1. Every person is obligated to frequently search his own actions and make an accounting with his soul, to determine if he is acting in a correct way in G-d's eyes.

If he finds that he acted wrongly, or if he transgressed G-d's will in one of his Seven Noahide Commandments, or he erred in acting in a moral way, then he should change his ways and conduct, and he should accept upon himself that henceforth he will act in the correct way, and he will stop transgressing the commandments that G-d has given him.

2. A person should have regret for doing wrong and change his sinful ways, and ask for forgiveness from G-d for the sins that he transgressed. This process, by which one asks and begs forgiveness from G-d, is called "repentance."⁶ (G-d certainly accepts sincere repentance, and forgives the repentant sinner for his transgression.)

3. One should not think that his actions are already sealed before G-d, and since he sinned very much, it is impossible for him to return and become a righteous person. This is not true, for G-d is merciful and constantly anticipates that those who want to return to Him will repent and correct their ways. When they do, He accepts them fully and has mercy on them, and when they repent in the correct way and completely remove themselves from their wrong actions, and they accept His Kingship and resolve to observe their commandments for the future, G-d forgives them for their sins and does not punish them

⁶ The obligation of repentance derives from the "essence of the commandment" – that it is a general obligation for a person to recognize G-d and His precepts (not as a part of any specific command), and therefore automatically, if one errs, he is required to correct his ways in order to keep G-d's commandments, at least from then on. (The "essence of the commandment" refers to a basic aspect of G-d's issuance of commandments to mankind: the very fact that mankind's Creator issues commands is the reason that mankind is obligated to follow those commands, above and beyond any specific details of what He has commanded. Here also, the obligation to repent is derived from the essence of the commandments themselves: the Divine commands are eternal, and they obligate the one who is commanded not only to adhere to them, but also to align and correct his deeds to be in compliance with his commandments.)

for the past.

We find this exemplified by the city of Nineveh:⁷ And the word of G-d came to Jonah son of Amittai saying, “Arise! Go to Nineveh the great city, and call out against it, for their wickedness has risen before Me.” ... Jonah began to come into the city ... and he called out and said, “In forty days Nineveh will be overturned!”... The people of Nineveh believed in G-d, ... and the king had it proclaimed ... “call out mightily to G-d. Every one shall turn back from his evil way, and from the robbery that is in his hand.” ... And G-d saw their deeds, that they repented from their evil way; and G-d relented concerning the punishment He had said He would bring upon them, and did not do it.

Likewise, G-d said to Cain,⁸ “If you will better your ways, you will be forgiven,” thus teaching about repentance, and that it was in his capability to return at any time he wished, and he would be forgiven.⁹

4. Repentance helps to remove the sins between a person and G-d, such as one who serves idols, eats flesh that was severed from a living animal, or commits adultery. But for one who steals from his fellow, damages him or harms him, whether physically like hitting him, or emotionally like cursing him, in all these cases, his repentance is not effective until he appeases the person he wronged and asks forgiveness from him, and if the person agrees.

It is forbidden for a person who was wronged to be cruel and not let himself be appeased. Rather he should be forgiving and agree to pardon the one who sinned against him, if he asks for forgiveness with a complete and willing heart.¹⁰

Afterwards, the sinner should regret his actions and ask forgiveness from G-d, and do correct repentance.

5. Just as a person needs to examine his actions to see if they are sinful, and repent from those which are, he likewise needs to search his personality for the bad traits he has, and to repent from those also and correct his ways – such as traits of anger, hate, jealousy, sarcasm,

⁷ Book of Jonah.

⁸ Genesis 4:7.

⁹ Ramban translates Genesis 4:7 according to Midrash *Bereishit Rabbah* for this verse.

¹⁰ Rambam, *Laws of Repentance* 2:10.

pursuing money and honor, or pursuing physical desires and the like. These last traits are in some ways more evil than sins that merely involve action, for when one is drawn into these bad traits, it is very hard to remove oneself from them, and to distance one's self from the sins they inspire. Therefore the prophet said,¹¹ "Let the wicked abandon *his* way, and the man of iniquity his thoughts; let him return to G-d, and He will have compassion upon him; and [let him return] to our G-d, for He will abundantly pardon."¹²

Even for an evil thought in which one planned to do a sin, but did not actually do it, one needs to repent, for G-d judges even a person's thoughts, and punishes for evil plans as well as for evil deeds.¹³

6. G-d judges all one's actions, and punishes one for his wrong actions as He sees fit, and also gives reward to those who do His will and keep His commandments and walk in the correct path, as G-d created each person in His image.

This reckoning is not calculated only on the basis of the number of sins and merits, but also takes into account their magnitude. There are some merits that outweigh many sins, as it says,¹⁴ "Because something good for the L-rd, the G-d of Israel, has been found in him ..." In contrast, a sin may outweigh many merits, as it states,¹⁵ "One sin may obscure much good." The weighing of sins and merits is carried out according to the wisdom of the Knowing G-d. Only He knows how to measure merits against sins.

Therefore, a person should always look at himself as equally balanced between merit and sin, and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If a person performs one sin, he may tip his balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and bring destruction upon himself. If he performs one good deed, he may tip his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit, and bring deliverance and salvation to himself and others.¹⁶

¹¹ Isaiah 55:7.

¹² Rambam, *Laws of Repentance* 7:3.

¹³ See Jerusalem Talmud, *Pe'ah* ch. 1, in regard to dwelling on a bad thought.

¹⁴ I Kings 14:13.

¹⁵ Ecclesiastes 9:18.

¹⁶ Rambam, *Laws of Repentance* 3:4.