

CHAPTER 8

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.¹³²

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 God 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

¹³² 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.¹³³

5. A person should direct his heart and the totality of his behavior to one goal, which is becoming aware of God, 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,¹³⁴ “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 God. With this effort, God will illuminate the correct path for the person, and will bestow success in it.

¹³³ *For more on this subject, see Part VII, topics 5:23-27.

¹³⁴ Proverbs 3:6, and *Metzudot David* there.

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,¹³⁵ “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 God wishes, as the prophet says,¹³⁶ “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 God 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 seem that he is agreeing to and supporting his actions. Certainly, one

¹³⁵ Proverbs 13:20.

¹³⁶ Isaiah 45:18.

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:¹³⁷ “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 God.

¹³⁷ *Mishnah Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 4:1.*

CHAPTER 9

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 God's eyes. If he finds that he acted wrongly, or if he transgressed God's will in one of his Seven Noahide Commandments, or he erred by not 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 God has given him.

2. **A person should have regret for doing wrong, and change his sinful ways, and ask for forgiveness from God for the sins that he transgressed.** This process, by which one asks and begs forgiveness from God, is called "repentance."¹³⁸ (God certainly accepts sincere repentance, and forgives the repentant sinner for his transgression.)

3. One should not think that his actions are already sealed before God, and since he sinned very much, it is impossible for him to return and become a righteous person. This is not true, for God 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. When they repent correctly, and completely remove

¹³⁸ *Kol Bo'ai HaOlom*, p. 45, says that a Gentile is obligated in prayer and repentance as part of his commandment to believe in God and the negation of idols. It is possible that the obligation of repentance derives from the "essence of the commandment" – that it is a general obligation for a person to recognize God and His precepts, and therefore if one errs, he is required to correct his ways in order to keep God's commandments, from then on. (The "essence of the commandment" refers to a basic aspect of God'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. 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.) See above, p. 93

themselves from their wrong actions, and they accept His Kingship and resolve to observe their commandments for the future, God forgives them for their sins and does not punish them for the past.

We find this exemplified by the city of Nineveh.¹³⁹

And the word of God came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim against it, for their wickedness has come before Me.” ... Jonah began to enter into the city ... and he proclaimed and said, “In another forty days Nineveh will be overturned!” And the people of Nineveh believed in God ... it was proclaimed and declared throughout Nineveh by the counsel of the king and his nobles, saying: ... “Both man and animal shall cover themselves with sackcloth, and they shall call out mightily to God. Everyone shall repent of his evil way and of the robbery that is in their hands.” ... And God saw their deeds, that they repented of their evil way; and God relented concerning the evil He had spoken to do to them, and He did not do it.

Likewise, God said to Cain (Gen. 4:7), “If you 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.

4. Repentance helps to remove the sins between a person and God, 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.¹⁴⁰ Afterwards, the sinner should regret his actions and ask forgiveness from God, 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

¹³⁹ Jonah 1:1-2, 3:4-10. See Radak on Jonah 1:1.

¹⁴⁰ Rambam, *Laws of Repentance* 2:10.

correct his ways – such as traits of anger, hate, jealousy, sarcasm, 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 (Isaiah 55:7), “Let the wicked abandon *his* way, and the man of iniquity his thoughts; let him return to God, and He will have compassion upon him; and [let him return] to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”¹⁴¹

Even for an evil thought in which one planned to do a sin, but did not actually do it, one needs to repent, for God judges even a person’s thoughts, and punishes for evil plans as well as for evil deeds.¹⁴²

6. God judges all of one’s actions. He punishes for unrepented wrong actions when and as He sees fit, and gives reward to those who do His will and keep His commandments and walk in the correct path, as befits a person whom God created in His image. One whose unrepented sins outweigh his merits is liable to die by the Hand of God [but He is forbearing and may choose to wait to see if the sinner will repent]. After one’s passing, his soul ascends to its spiritual reward. If his unrepented sins outweigh his merits, his soul is first purged in *Ge-hinom*, and then goes to its reward (unless he was extremely wicked).

A country whose sins outweigh its merits is liable to be destroyed (and the righteous would be saved), as it says,¹⁴³ “And God said, ‘...because their sin [in Sodom and Gomorrah] has been very grave, I will descend and see: if they act in accordance with its outcry, etc.’ ”

In regard to the entire world as well, if the sins of humanity would become exceedingly greater than their merits, the wicked would be destroyed, as happened to the Generation of the Flood.¹⁴⁴ The wicked

¹⁴¹ Rambam, *Laws of Repentance* 7:3.

¹⁴² See Jerusalem Talmud Tractate *Pe’ah* ch. 1, and *Tosafot* Tractate *Kiddushin* 39b, that a Gentile is judged by God for dwelling on a bad thought.

¹⁴³ Gen. 18:20-21. [God had no need to “descend” in order to “see.” He stated this to teach a lesson to judges that they must see the evidence in every case.]

¹⁴⁴ *God swore (Gen. 9:8-17) that He would never again bring a punishment of destruction on the whole world. This promise includes holding back from any worldwide destruction, not only by a Flood. Therefore, if the majority were wicked, God would punish the world as a whole in a lesser way.

would perish, and the righteous would be saved, as were Noah and his family, as it is written, “God saw that the evil of mankind was great ... and God said: ‘I will wash away man’ ... But Noah found favor ...”¹⁴⁵

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,¹⁴⁶ “Because something good for the Lord, the God of Israel, has been found in him ...” In contrast, a sin may outweigh many merits, as it states,¹⁴⁷ “One sin may obscure much good.” The weighing of sins and merits is carried out according to the wisdom of the Knowing God. 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.¹⁴⁸

7. Every person¹⁴⁹ who desires and has motivation and understanding to stand before God, to serve Him and to gain knowledge about Him, and who goes in the correct path that God made for him, and who removes from upon himself the many calculations which people strive after, has become sanctified as “holy of holies.” God will be this person’s portion and inheritance forever, and he will merit to have his necessities met in this world, as did the Priests who served in the Holy Temple.¹⁵⁰ Thus said David, may he rest in peace:¹⁵¹ “God is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup; You maintain my lot.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁵ Genesis 6:5,7-8.

¹⁴⁶ I Kings 14:13.

¹⁴⁷ Ecclesiastes 9:18.

¹⁴⁸ Rambam, *Laws of Repentance* 3:4. See also Part VI, topic 7:22.

¹⁴⁹ *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 13, p. 230: “*ish va'ish*” refers to Jews and Gentiles.

¹⁵⁰ This comparison is made above in topic 5:6, which explains that a Pious Gentile who involves himself in learning Torah in the area of the Noahide commandments is compared to a High Priest who serves in the Holy Temple.

¹⁵¹ Psalms 16:5.

¹⁵² Rambam, *Laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years* 13:13.