A Balanced Approach: Thoughts on Parashat Va'et'hanan

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by Jake Nussbam

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In Hilkhot De'ot, the Rambam differed from other standard books of Jewish law, spending the first three chapters dealing with the importance of having a balanced perspective when it comes to character traits and development. In chapter 1, he explains how each character trait exists on a scale, with an extreme on both sides. For example, the trait of giving has one extreme of someone who never gives a penny to charity. The other extreme is someone who gives so much charity that he has no money left for himself. Rambam stresses that either extreme is not correct. Generally, we should be strive for the "middle path." In the case of charity, one should give sufficiently, while being sure to have enough for one's own needs.

In chapter 3, Rambam addresses an issue that can be all too common. There are those who seek to avoid overindulgence and over-involvement in worldly pleasures by going to the opposite extreme, e.g. swearing off meat and wine, not wanting to get married, and wearing clothes of a mourner all the time. Rambam says that this individual is a sinner just as one would be for overindulging. He cites proof from a Nazir, who is someone who swears off wine, among other restrictions, for a designated amount of time. The Torah (Bemidbar 6:8) defines a

Nazir as “holy to Hashem.” Rashi comments that this is because he abstains from wine and stays away from impurity, thereby “sanctifying” his body. However in verse 16, the Torah writes that after the designated period as a Nazir, he must bring a sin offering. Why would a sin offering follow a period of extra sanctity? The explanation seems to be that it is not necessary to fully swear off pleasurable activities such as drinking wine in order to be pious. On the contrary, over-ascetic behavior is sinful.

In Hilkhot De’ot (chapter 5, halakha 3) Rambam describes a person who gets drunk as “a sinner,” “disgusting;” getting drunk in public is a desecration of the name of God. Rambam criticizes both the Nazir and the drunkard, since both go to extremes

In Parashat Ve’et’hhanan, there are two consecutive verses which seem to have no relation to one another (Devarim chapter 4, verses 2-3)

2. You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you.

3. You saw with your own eyes what the Lord did in the matter of Baal-peor, that the Lord your God wiped out from among you every person who followed Baal-peor;

Verse 2 is the prohibition of adding or subtracting to the commandments of God. The classic examples are that there are four sections of the Torah in the head tefillin, four corners to a tzitzit garment, and four species to be shaken on Succot. One may think that three would be sufficient, or that it would be extra pious to have five. This verse teaches us that is not the case. Verse 3 is referring to chapter 25 of Sefer Bemidbar, where Moabite women enticed Israelite men to have immoral relations with them, and convinced them to worship idols. This idol was known as Baal-peor.

Rabbi Moshe Alsheikh, a prominent 16th century Kabbalist from Tzefat, suggested a fascinating idea to connect the verses. He writes that there were actually two groups of Israelites who sinned at Baal-peor. The first was the aforementioned group who were enticed into idolatry by way of sexual immorality. However, there were others who wanted to be zealous and defame the idol worship by casting excrement on the idols. But the actual mitzvah calls for the destruction of idols. The zealots wanted to sanctify the name of God by disgracing the idols and their worshippers; but they sinned through their extremism in adding to the commandment to destroy idols.

None of this is to say that there is no role for stringencies and fences to guide us to proper observance of the Torah. Rather, there is a place for strictness while not going into extremism. Rambam’s insistence on the “middle path” is to be sought.

May we all achieve a balanced perspective in our character traits and in our lives. Shabbat Shalom.