



Shabbat Afternoon Parsha Study פרשת ראה תשפ"ג / 2023 Middle Path? Or Take a Stand?

1. Deuteronomy 11:26

See, I place before you today a
blessing and a curse:

דברים י"א:כ"ו

רֹאֵה אֲנִי נִתֵּן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה
וּקְלָלָה:

Translation by Charles Kahane, Torah Yeshara, 1963:

Said Moses: 'Mark! I set before you
today a blessing and its reverse.

2. Sforno on Deuteronomy 11:26:1

Pay good attention so that your way
will not be the middle ground,
which is the custom of the other
nations. For I set before you this
day blessing and curse, which are
two extremes/opposites. The
blessing represents success more
than is needed, tending towards the
exceedingly good. And the curse is a
blight that constantly diminishes,
where even sufficiency is
unattainable. Both are before you,
to attain based on what you
choose.

ספורנו על דברים יא:כו

ראה. הביטה וראה שלא יהיה עניןך
על אופן בינוני, כמו שהוא המנהג
בשאר האומות. כי אמנם אנכי נותן
לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה. והם שני
הקצוות. כי הברכה היא הצלחה יותר
מן המספיק ע"צ היותר טוב. והקללה
היא מארה מחסרת שלא יושג
המספיק. ושניהם לפניכם להשיג כפי
מה שתבחרו:

3. Mishneh Torah, Human

Dispositions 1:1

Each and every man possesses many character traits. Each trait is very different and distant from the others.

One type of man is wrathful; he is constantly angry. [In contrast,] there is the calm individual who is never moved to anger, or, if at all, he will be slightly angry, [perhaps once] during a period of several years.

There is the prideful man and the one who is exceptionally humble. There is the man ruled by his appetites - he will never be satisfied from pursuing his desires, and [conversely,] the very pure of heart, who does not desire even the little that the body needs.

דעות הרבה יש לכל אחד ואחד מבני אדם וזו משנה מזו ורחוקה ממנה ביותר.

יש אדם שהוא בעל חמה כועס תמיד. ויש אדם שדעתו מישכת עליו ואינו כועס כלל ואם יכעס יכעס פעם מעט בכמה שנים.

ויש אדם שהוא גבה לב ביותר. ויש שהוא נפל רוח ביותר. ויש שהוא בעל תאנה לא תשבע נפשו מהלך בתאנה. ויש שהוא בעל לב טהור מאד ולא יתאנה אפלו לדברים מעטים שהגוף צריך להם.

Human Dispositions 1:3

The two extremes of each trait, which are at a distance from one another, do not reflect a proper path. It is not fitting that a man should behave in accordance with these extremes or teach them to himself.

If he finds that his nature leans

נשתי קצוות הרחוקות זו מזו ושכל דעה ודעה אינן דרך טובה ואין ראוי לו לאדם ללכת בהן ולא ללמדן לעצמו.

ואם מצא טבעו נוטה לאחת מהן או

towards one of the extremes or adapts itself easily to it, or, if he has learned one of the extremes and acts accordingly, he should bring himself back to what is proper and walk in the path of the good [men]. This is the straight path.

מוֹכֵן לְאַחַת מֵהֶן אוֹ שֶׁכָּבַר לְמִדַּ אַחַת
מֵהֶן וְנִהְיָ בָּהּ יִחְזִיר עֲצָמוֹ לְמוֹטֵב וְיִלְךָ
בְּדֶרֶךְ הַטּוֹבִים וְהִיא הַדֶּרֶךְ הַיִּשְׁרָה:

Human Dispositions 1:4

The straight path: This [involves discovering] the midpoint temperament of each and every trait that man possesses [within his personality.] This refers to the trait which is equidistant from either of the extremes, without being close to either of them.

משנה תורה, הלכות דעות א':ד'

הַדֶּרֶךְ הַיִּשְׁרָה הִיא מִדָּה בִּינּוּנִית
שֶׁבְּכָל דָּעָה וְדָעָה מִכָּל הַדְּעוֹת שְׂיִישׁ לּוֹ
לְאָדָם. וְהִיא הַדָּעָה שֶׁהִיא רְחוּקָה
מִשְׁתֵּי הַקְּצוּוֹת רְחוּקָה שְׁוָה וְאֵינָה
קְרוֹבָה לָא לְזוֹ וְלֹא לְזוֹ.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, A Dear Son To Me, 2011

The Golden mean, which is the middle way in between extremes, the medium between the different contradictions, is the basis of Maimonides' ethical theory. Maimonides speaks of avoiding extremism and choosing the moderate way in between extremes as the apex of Jewish and human elevation. According to him, any tendency towards the extreme, even if that extreme is usually considered good, is tantamount to casting off the yoke and is a saddening deviation, whereas the medium way is the good and true way. On the other hand, and in striking contradiction to this, stands Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk's approach to almost the same issue. When this Rabbi was once asked why he is so extreme in his views and conduct, he took the person who asked that to his window which opened to the street, and explained: "You see, the two sides of the road are for human beings; only horses walk in the middle." The Kotzker Rebbe thus defined the middle way,

the average between the extremes, as the “horses’ path,” the way animals walk. Men must choose one extreme or the other, or else they are but horses.

But if we re-examine more deeply these two seemingly contradictory approaches, we shall see that the contradiction between them is, in fact, imaginary, for they do not deal with one and the same issue. There are, in fact, two paths, both of which go in the middle, between extremities. But the golden mean and the horses’ path, are not at all identical. The horses’ path is the horse-like average between extremes, and is the necessary result of lack of power and courage to take one of the extreme ways. People who cannot muster energies and devote themselves totally to something, anything, always walk in the middle: Wanting to please everyone, and pleasing no one. Being always haunted by various motivations in every way, they make silly compromises between things. They measure the middle path with the standards of their smallness, and try to walk there; but in truth, it is the path of horses.

The golden mean, on the other hand, is not just the average between extremes. In fact, the golden mean is the merging of extremes. It is made for people who are full of true passion and great enthusiasm, people who can take both extremes together, and who therefore constitute, in their soul, the inner merging of both extremes – the golden mean.

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