



RAMBAM'S GUIDE TO CHOL HA-MO'ED TRIPS

Chol ha-Mo'ed trips are ubiquitous and, assuming they are in keeping with proper *kavod ha-mo'ed*, generally seen positively. They enhance our *simchat ha-chag* and facilitate positive family bonding. Moreover, observing God's breathtaking creations is inspiring. Like all activities, we must consider their role within *avodat Hashem*. To do this, we must consider the value of leisure more broadly. In this article we focus on four relevant texts from Rambam that relate to both leisure and the value of visiting beautiful places.

Rambam's View on Wasting Time

When considering the value of leisure we must first consider a more basic question. Why not? Assuming I don't

violate the Torah when having a good time, what could be bad? The answer, of course, is that leisure comes with a huge cost. Not (necessarily) money — but time. Our days on this world are limited and we must utilize God's gift of life maximally. No one values time more than Rambam. Thus, before evaluating Rambam's view on the value of leisure it is worthwhile to examine Rambam's perspective on wasting time.

To appreciate the extent to which the Torah demands we value our time, consider the following remarkable statement. R. Akiva states (*Sanhedrin* 100b) that someone who reads outside books (*sefarim ha-chitzonim*) has no portion in the world to come. The Talmud suggests that this may include even works like Ben Sira,

which contain some ethical teachings. Rambam writes that the problem with such works is that they are pointless and a waste of time. He even includes in this category historical chronologies, which may be interesting, but lack substance and value:

וספרים החיצונים אמרו שהם ספרי מינים. וכן ספר בן סירא, והוא היה איש שחיבר ספרים יש בהם התלים מענייני הפרת פנים אין בהם טעם ולא תועלת, אלא אבוד הזמן בהבל. כגון אלה הספרים הנמצאים אצל הערב מסיפור דברי הימים, והנהגת המלכים, ויחוסי הערביים, וספרי הניגון, וכיוצא בהן מן הספרים שאין בהם חכמה ולא תועלת גופני, אלא אבוד הזמן בלבד.

Sefarim Chitzonim (lit. outside books) mentioned in the Mishnah refers to heretical books. It refers to Ben Sira as well, who was a man who composed books ... that have no value other than

wasting time with nothingness, like the Arabic books of chronicle, kingly etiquette, and genealogy, as well as books of music and the like that have no wisdom and no bodily value, only a waste of time.

Rambam, Introduction to Perek Chelek

Of course, Rambam does not believe that loss of *Olam Ha-Ba* is an appropriate punishment for wasting time. In a formal sense, wasting time is not an egregious sin. Rather, someone who does not value his or her time lacks the basic values necessary to experience *Olam Ha-Ba*.¹ If we appreciate that we are here to fulfil a higher calling, that there is more to life than pleasure, then we will seek to use our life productively. On the other hand, those who fritter away their days engaged in inane activities demonstrate that they lack an appreciation of why they are here. If they do not value their life here, they forfeit their chance at eternity.

Rambam's aversion to wasting time also can be gleaned from his explanation of why gamblers are disqualified as witnesses. He writes that gaming is a waste of time; a person should dedicate all of his resources to making the world a better place or himself a better person. Gambling does neither of these.² Also, consider his comments in the third chapter of *Hilchot Teshuva*, where he

writes that the purpose of shofar is to wake people up from wasting their time:

אלו השוכחים את האמת בהבלי הזמן, ושוגים כל שנתם בהבל וריק אשר לא יועיל ולא יציל. *Those who forget the truth [caught up] in wasting time, who spend their year in frivolity and vanity which does not help or provide salvation.*

Note that he does not focus on sin as much as failure to efficiently use our brief span on this world.

As we shall see, however, none of this necessarily implies that Rambam would oppose leisure trips. On the contrary, they may constitute a magnificent mitzvah. What the above sources do indicate is that we must justify the religious value of our trips. If they are constructive, then they become a mitzvah. As Rambam famously explains, we can serve God in all that we do. With proper intent, even mundane acts, such as eating, drinking, working, and exercising, constitute divine service of the highest order.³ In this vein, we consider how Chol ha-Mo'ed trips, far from being a waste of time, can potentially accomplish great things.

Love and Fear of God

Achieving a powerful emotional connection to a Being we cannot see, hear, or touch can prove challenging.

Rambam describes various ways in which a person falls in love with God. One of them involves being overwhelmed by the magnificent universe:

והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו ויראתו, בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים ויראה מהן חכמתו שאין לה ערך ולא קץ מיד הוא אוהב ומשבח ומפאר ומתאוה תאוה גדולה לידע השם הגדול כמו שאמר דוד צמאה נפשי לאלקים לא-ל חי, וכשמחשב בדברים האלו עצמן מיד הוא נרתע לאחוריו ויפחד ויודע שהוא בריה קטנה שפלה אפלה עומדת בדעת קלה מעוטה לפני תמים דעות, כמו שאמר דוד כי אראה שמיך מעשה אצבעותיך וגו' מה אנוש כי תזכרנו וגו', ולפי הדברים האלו אני מבאר כללים גדולים ממעשה רבון העולמים כדי שיהיו פתח למבין לאהוב את השם, כמו שאמרו חכמים בענין אהבה שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם.

What is the way to cultivate love and fear God? When one contemplates the great wonders of God's works and creations and sees that they are a product of a wisdom that has no bounds or limits, he immediately will love, laud, and glorify [God]. He will yearn with an immense passion to know God, like [King] David said, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Tehillim 42:3). And when one thinks about these matters, he immediately will feel a great fear and trepidation. He will know that he is a low and insignificant creation with hardly an iota of intelligence compared to that of God. Like [King] David

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said, "When I observe Your heavens, the work of Your fingers ... what is man that You are heedful of him?" (Tehillim 8:4-5) Based on these ideas, I explain important concepts of the Creator's work as a guide to the discerning individual to love God. Concerning this love, the Sages said that from it one will come to know the Creator.

Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei ha-Torah 2:2

Rambam writes that contemplation of God's staggering creations ignites fear and love of God. It is noteworthy that Rambam emphasizes that this contemplation does not merely generate love of God but an intense desire to *know* God (מתאוה תאוה גדולה) (לידע השם הגדול).

Visiting the Grand Canyon is not inherently valuable, but it can be a life-altering experience. However, while trips to extraordinary places have the capacity to create this passionate bond to the Almighty, they will not necessarily do so. Practically, for most people, contemplating the beauty of a flower will cause us to "thirst for the living God" only if we do so mindfully. Thus, when visiting extraordinary places we must allow ourselves to become overwhelmed so that, like David, the experience transforms us.

Mental Stability

The value in visiting beautiful places is not limited to robustly experiencing the Divine. Like all healthy recreation, it can be beneficial for our mental health. Rambam expresses this in chapter 5 of *Shmoneh Perakim*:

אם התעוררה עליו מרה שחורה, יסירה
בשמיעת שירים ומיני נגינות, ובטיול בגנות
ובבניינים נאים, ובישיבה עם צורות נאות,
וכיוצא בזה ממה שירחיב הנפש, ויסיר דאגת
המרה השחורה ממנה.

If melancholy awakens within a person, he should expel it by listening to songs and music, strolling in gardens and beautiful buildings, sitting near attractive forms, and other such activities that expand the spirit. Through this, anxiety and unhappiness will leave him.

Rambam sees these activities as reparative. They can be necessary for someone who is sick, or someone who needs a boost. Sometimes we need a break, and a Chol ha-Mo'ed trip hits the spot. Far from a license to waste time, Rambam indicates that we must know our limits and ensure that we are physically and emotionally healthy — for only someone fit can maximally serve God.

The Torah's Perspective on the Aesthetic

In the previous source, Rambam acknowledged the possible benefit of aesthetic encounters. However, as noted, its value is reparative. The text ascribes no inherent value, which makes us wonder if visiting an art museum qualifies as a good Chol ha-Mo'ed trip. To better appreciate the value of beauty (outside of the confines of the Temple), we must consider his explanation of the shift between the nature of man before and after the first sin. Rambam discusses the matter in *Moreh ha-Nevuchim* (1:2). Rambam begins by noting that someone once asked him a powerful question. When we read the text of the Torah, it sounds like God does not wish for us to have knowledge, since He prohibited eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Moreover, when we disobeyed, we were punished by acquiring knowledge, as the verse states, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, **knowing** good and evil." Why should we be punished

by being granted the ultimate gift (knowledge)?

To answer this question, Rambam first notes that initially, man was an intellectual being, which is why he alone was given a mitzva. Rambam then distinguishes between knowledge of *tov va-ra* (good and evil), which man acquired only after the sin, as the verse above indicates, and knowledge of *emet ve-sheker* (truth and falsehood), which man possessed initially. *Emet ve-sheker* reflect objective reality. They stem from the intellect. For example, we would say that it is true that the world is spherical; we would not say it is good (*tov*) that the world is spherical. On the other hand, a person would say that a dress looks good (*tov*), because *tov va-ra* reflect conventions. The shame of nakedness is the ultimate convention; there is nothing objectively problematic about being undressed. Accordingly, the shame associated with it did not exist in the pre-sin world:

ובשכל יבדיל האדם בין האמת והשקר, וזה היה
נמצא בו על שלמותו ותמותו, אמנם המגונה
והנאה במפורסמות לא במושכלות, כי לא
יאמר: השמיים כדוריים - נאה, ולא: הארץ
שטוחה - מגונה, אבל יאמר אמת ושקר. וכן
בלשונו יאמר על הקושט ועל הבטל - אמת
ושקר, ועל הנאה והמגונה - טוב ורע.

Through the intellect, one distinguishes between emet and sheker (truth and falsehood), and that was found in Adam in its perfection and integrity. Tov and ra (good and evil), on the other hand, belong to the [category of] things generally accepted as known (convention or mefursamot), not to [the category of] those cognized by the intellect (muskalot). For one does not say: it is good (tov) that the heaven is spherical, and it is bad that the earth is flat; rather, one says true and false regarding these assertions...

Rambam adds, “With regard to what is of necessity, there is no good and evil, but only *sheker* and *emet*.” From the perspective of the intellect, we eat in order to live. The food we choose will be that which is most effective in facilitating life. Qualities like taste and appearance are irrelevant.

Thus, the questioner was absolutely wrong. Once man sinned and considered matters from a non-intellectual perspective, seeing the tree as “a delight to the eyes,” he was punished by losing his intellectual cognitions. Subsequently, man would see the world through the lens of *tov va-ra*, a world of *mefursamot* (conventions or generally accepted notions). What exactly does Rambam mean by *mefursamot*?

Without going into too much detail, there are two general understandings of this term and the nature of the transformation. One possibility is that originally, man lacked awareness of moral virtues. According to this reading, Rambam idealizes the cerebral world in which man is exclusively involved in intellectual speculation. In such a world, moral virtues serve no purpose. Man was punished for his disobedience by being forced to engage in the practical. In this world, the need for moral

virtue became necessary. Henceforth, man was granted the moral sense to perceive the wrongness in nudity. Thus, according to this view, before sin, man had access only to things that could be proven mathematically or using formal logic.

A second possible understanding of Rambam emerges from his focus on *mefursamot*. In the context of this chapter, the word seems to refer to the aesthetic, or qualities like taste and appearance. Support for this understanding comes from the examples Rambam uses to describe *tov* and *ra*. These values have no virtue in the world of *emet* and *sheker*. Moral virtue may have been possible even if man had not consumed the fruit; however, conventions such as beauty and taste were irrelevant. According to this reading, it is easy to understand why the questioner was totally wrong. Man’s foray into the sensual was purely deleterious from an intellectual and spiritual perspective.

Support for this reading emerges from how Rambam understands God’s “opening up their eyes.” He writes that this refers to their newly acquired perspective: “Man changed the direction toward which he tended and took as his objective the **very thing a previous commandment**

had bidden him not to aim at.”

Rambam here is telling us that the commandment to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge was more than a command to refrain from consuming the forbidden fruit — it was a prohibition against looking at the world from the perspective of *tov* and *ra*. When Adam and Chava failed in that respect, this became their focus, even their obsession. Apprehending *emet* and *sheker* still was possible, and viewing reality from that perspective remained within their powers, but it no longer was natural; it became a struggle.

R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik appears to concur with the second possibility, and he offers a fascinating insight on the nature of man’s transition:

*Man is both an intellectual and ethical being. In distinguishing between the contrasting pairs of *emet va-sheker* and *tov va-ra*, Maimonides does not discriminate between theoretical truth and falsity and moral right and wrong, as many historians have erroneously assumed.⁴ Instead, he set up an opposition between the cognitive-ethical truth and falsity, on the one hand, and propriety and impropriety, what is pleasing or displeasing in an aesthetic sense, on the other hand... Maimonides translates the words *tov va-ra*, in the*

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story of the original fall, as meaning the pleasant and unpleasant, the comfortable and uncomfortable, or the delightful and ugly.... What caused man's fall is his giving preference to the sensuous, delightful and pleasing over the true, at both intellectual and ethical levels.⁵

R. Soloveitchik adds that the sin was rooted in “overestimating the importance of the pleasing and beautiful”; moreover, the sin’s consequence “manifests itself in a false axiological assessment of man’s experiences ... giving priority to the aesthetic behavior.”⁶ Perhaps, according to R. Soloveitchik’s understanding, the aesthetic (the perspective of *tov va-ra*) has a place in the ideal world; it is not inherently evil. Hence, God created the Tree of Knowledge. However, the sin was rooted in incorrect apportionment of values and priorities.

This understanding has powerful implications on how we spend our Chol ha-Mo’ed. As we have seen, there may be value in visiting a museum, but we must ensure that beauty, pleasure, and taste do not become dominant forces in our persona.

How Rama Spent his Chol ha-Mo’ed

Thus far, we have considered four Maimonidean texts that shed light on how best to spend our Chol ha-Mo’ed. Of course, the discussion is nowhere close to comprehensive. This sampling of Rambam highlights the complexity, profundity, and relevance of his thought. We close, however, with a comment from the seventh chapter of *Shut Rama*, R. Moshe Isserles’s responsa.

The context of Rama’s comments is fascinating. He was responding

to R. Shlomo Luria, also known as Maharshal, another great sage, who criticized Rama’s reference to Aristotle. Rama responded by describing the importance of seeking to know God, to the extent of our ability. There are two primary avenues to do this — philosophy and Kabbala — and Rama argued that both are legitimate. Rama wrote, however, that he prefers philosophy, as it is less dangerous. Rama added, though, that he did not study philosophy from sources containing heresy, but rather from Rambam’s *Moreh ha-Nevuchim*. Moreover, he did not pursue these matters during times when others were studying Halacha; instead, he engaged in this quest when others were going on *tiyulim* (outings), such as on Chol ha-Mo’ed.

First, parenthetically, Rama acknowledges that *tiyulim* on Chol ha-Mo’ed are not new. Indeed, Rama, in his glosses to *Orach Chaim* 536:1, writes that one may not perform *melacha* on *chol ha-moed* to prepare a horse for riding if there is no real purpose for the trip (*chinam*). However, one may prepare the horse for riding if one is doing so for *tiyulim*. Second, and more important, Rama reminds us that Chol ha-Mo’ed is also a time well suited to consider important aspects of Torah that we ordinarily neglect. Thus, Chol ha-Mo’ed is the ideal time to improve our understanding of the Almighty. Remarkably, these two options are powerfully connected, as Rambam writes that contemplation of God’s staggering creations (the ideal Chol ha-Mo’ed trip) ignites an intense desire to *know* God, the very act Rama writes he did on Chol ha-Mo’ed through the study of philosophy. Thus, putting everything together, a productive Chol ha-Mo’ed should

include a healthy combination of inspirational and intellectual outings.

Endnotes

1 To a large degree, Rambam understands *Olam ha-Ba* as a natural consequence of the spiritual accomplishments of this world. We elaborate on Rambam’s view in chapter 20 of *Illuminating Jewish Thought: Explorations of Free Will, the Afterlife, and the Messianic Era*.

2 In his commentary to Mishna (*Sanhedrin* 3:3), Rambam does not associate gambling with theft:

ואמר המשחק בקוביה, והוא המשחק ב"נרד" ו"סטרנג" וכיוצא בהם בתנאי שישלם כסף מי שיעשה כך או לא יעשה כך בהתאם לשטת אותו המשחק, ונאסר זה מפני שהוא מתעסק בעסק שאין בו תועלת לישוב העולם, ויסוד הוא בתורתנו שאין ראוי לאדם להעסיק את עצמו בעולם הזה אלא באחד משני דברים או בחכמה להשלים בה את עצמו, או בעסק שיועיל לו בקיום העולם כגון אומנות או מסחר, וראוי למעט בזה ולהרבות בראשון כמו שאמרו הוי מעט עסק ועסוק בתורה.

3 Rambam emphasizes this idea in numerous places, among them Chapter 5 of *Shmoneh Perakim*. It should be acknowledged, however, that gamblers are only disqualified when “they have no trade but this” - which might imply that limited leisure is permissible, as long as one does not make it one’s vocation. We should also note that there were those who had a more positive attitude towards certain games, especially when they promote wisdom. Consider the following from R. Chaim Benveniste, *Kneset Hagedolah* (*Tur*, CM 370:4) concerning chess (*ishkaki*):

וכן ראיתי למורי הרב ז"ל ולכל גדולי הדור שלא היו מוחין במי שהיה שוחק בו, וגם שמעתי עליו שכשהיה רואה שנים משחקים שחוק דאישקאקי היה מלמד להם דרך השחוק. גם על הרב מהר"י בסאן ז"ל שמעתי עליו שהוא עצמו היה שוחק שחוק האישקאקי. וכן פשט המנהג.

4 The first option we cited earlier. See the English translation of the *Guide* by H. Friedländer, who accepts this interpretation.

5 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, p. 47.

6 Ibid.