

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 4:8

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

There have always been some who are willing to do whatever it takes to dedicate their lives and immortal souls to G-d Almighty. They seem to live in a dimension apart from our own where ordinary things are tinged with uncommon color, where events are typical enough but invariably breathtaking, and where G-d is always the subject under discussion. They're the pious; and other than prophets, they're the greatest among us since they're so dedicated and have honed their minds and personalities so well.

Now, wanting to dedicate their beings that way but not wanting to throw their systems off-kilter, as we'd been warned not to, these pious souls would go *somewhat* beyond the norm and be a little too-much of this, or too-little of that. But they were careful not to go too far, despite their extreme desire to dedicate themselves to a life of piety.

So as Rambam depicts it, "they'd tend to be somewhat more ascetic than temperate; somewhat more daring than courageous; somewhat more earnest than boastful; somewhat more humble than meek" and the like. Acting that way was termed by our sages as "(going) beyond the letter of the law" (Babba Metziah 30B) -- what we'd term, "going the extra mile".

"Once in a while, though" Rambam indicates, "some pious individuals would tend toward an extreme". They'd perhaps fast when they weren't otherwise required to; they might "stay awake all night (in prayer and supplication); do without meat and wine; separate from women; wear coarse wool and sackcloth (in mourning for the destruction of the Holy Temple, or in order deny their bodies come modicum of comfort); and dwell on mountainsides or withdraw to the desert (to meditate in seclusion)".

After all, it's hard living in society as the great preponderance of us do; to eat and drink this and that, time after time; and to commune with others the way we all do day after day and keep your mind on lofty goals.

Nonetheless, as Rambam makes clear, "the *only* reason they did any of those things was to heal themselves" that is, to offset harmful material tendencies, "or because everyone around them was becoming corrupt, and they perceived that they'd also become corrupt by staying in contact with them". In other words, some of them would indeed go to extremes once in a rare while -- but never from then on, with only the best of intentions, and always meaning to get back on course.

But some others misunderstood what they were doing (as so many do when it comes to striving for

lofty goals that they themselves aren't suited for -- but that's beyond the subject at hand).

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