

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 5:3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

But why should we subject ourselves to such restrictions? After all, while we wouldn't eat anything out-and-out unkosher because we're committed to drawing close to G-d through His Torah's guidance, we still and all might want to enjoy a fine or perhaps even a sumptuous kosher meal once in a while, and the like.

We're to strive for that level of self-control because not aspiring for it and going about "eating the kinds of appetizing, aromatic, and yearned-for foods that are so harmful and can make a person seriously ill or even kill him" is *less than human*, we're told -- not merely indulgent.

A person is only truly human -- a "mensch", as it's termed in Yiddish -- only truly decent, upright, and on par with what's expected of us when he "sometimes rejects pleasant things and eats (or experiences) unpleasant ones instead" by choice. Why? Because "that would be an act based on reason", which is what "sets human behavior apart" from that of other beings.

(Understand that there are several descending grades of personhood, from holy to pious to righteous all the way down to evil. True "humanness" as Rambam depicted it above sits somewhere below righteousness, but certainly a grade or two above what we'd term "decent", which itself sits fairly highly above evil, the lowest. The point is that while humanness isn't lofty, it's nonetheless rooted in reason and thought rather than mere instinct, it's certainly not base, and it's the least expected of us if we're ever to grow upward and draw close to G-d.)

Would avoiding sumptuous things because we'd wind up being healthier in the end be "human" enough? After all, being well allows us to pursue spiritual excellence as we're encouraged to. But in fact Rambam says, no. The pursuit of good health unto itself isn't a virtue; it's just another lust. Because "if your goal was to be merely healthy" for good health's sake alone, you'd be little different from one who pursued good food. For you too wouldn't "have done anything toward achieving (your) true goal" of drawing close to G-d. You'd have eventually died healthy, for sure, but you'd have remained spiritually ill to the end nonetheless.

So, "make the goal of things you do be for your health and a long, peaceful enough life" to be sure, but do that in order to "remain sound enough to pursue character and intellectual virtues without encumbrance" and to grow in your being.

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