

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 13:3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Everything but everything is a mix of good and bad, right and wrong; even ostensibly clear-cut things like certain moral values and spiritual practices have their bad side, the truth be known. (That all goes back to Adam and Eve having eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which then compelled the combination of the two, but now's not the time to expand on that.)

It follows then that there's a "dark" side to abstinence, too, as we'll see. In any event, let's first explore what's especially good about abstaining from otherwise acceptable things.

For one thing, we'd learned early on in this work that everything that happens to us in life is a test of our morals and of our abilities to make good choices. We referred to Ramchal's remark (in Ch. 1 above) that G-d has "placed mankind in a situation where there are many things to hinder closeness to Him". For, we "have been placed in the midst of a mighty battle, wherein all worldly happenstances ... are trials" and tests of our determination to get close to Him (which is of course the point of it all). In fact, Ramchal adds here, in our chapter, that "there's no earthly pleasure that doesn't have some sin following in its train" potentially, since it sets us up for more and more desire.

"Take food and drink, for an example," he offers. "Remove all that's forbidden in it", like any un-kosher elements, or the fact that it could be a fast day, and "eating is certainly permitted" and essential of course. The point remains, though, that "a full stomach often leads to the removal of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven", which is to say that when we're good and full and happy, we're so content and so pleased that it's hard to be serious about anything as important as drawing close to G-d. And it goes without saying that excessive "wine-drinking leads to licentiousness and all sorts of immorality".

There's not only a moral lesson to be drawn from this but a practical one, too. "When you're used to filling yourself with food and drink" and then there would suddenly come to be a time when you simply couldn't do that anymore, "you'd be pained, and would (quickly) become very aware of what you'd be missing", and would have to change things. You'd have to work harder taking time away from your Divine service, Torah study, and prayer, and do a lot of other sundry things to make up the difference, which might even leave you open to cheating and stealing (for the sake of finding shortcuts) and the like. His point is that you could avoid all that if you prepare yourself to abstain from extras from the first.

The same could be said of other things along those lines. As Ramchal puts it, while "sexual relations

with your spouse is certainly thoroughly permissible", the sages nonetheless put restrictions on it so as to encourage us to be less preoccupied and distracted by it than we might ordinarily be.

Now, "the Torah never warned us against (admiring or exhibiting) beauty or stylishness" by disallowing us to wear fine clothes or jewelry, for example. Still and all, "as everyone knows, wearing fine embroidered clothes and accessories is bound to encourage arrogance and licentiousness, as well as jealousy, lust," and the like. And even though innocent-enough and pleasant things like "pleasure trips and small-talk are certainly not forbidden by Torah law," still and all the unholy consequences of them are the fact that "a lot of people neglect Torah study as a result of them", while others lapse into "a lot of slander, deceit, and levity" in the process.

So anyone who'd want to truly be pious would do well to be cautious about overdoing all such "excesses" and possible indiscretions.

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