

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 13:5

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We'd said it before but it bears repetition: there's good and beneficial abstinence that's to be encouraged if you're trying to be pious, and there's bad and unhealthy abstinence.

It would be wrong, for example, to afflict yourself, as some have mistakenly thought one would have to do to draw close to G-d. Those poor well-intentioned but misguided souls would "afflict their bodies in all sorts of weird ways" as Ramchal terms it. But that's wrong. For as our sages put it, "it's absolutely forbidden for one to torture himself" (Ta'anit 22b). Thus, some would roll about naked in the freezing snow to train themselves in abstinence and personal fortitude; and others would wear very heavy and uncomfortable clothing all day long for the same reasons, but none of that should ever be practiced.

Along other lines where taught that "whoever needs charity and doesn't accept it is like a murderer" (Jerusalem Talmud, end of Peah), in that he threatens his own life and the life of his family, thinking he's being pious when he's actually being quite "murderous".

The sages also said, "One who fasts (when he's incapable of doing so for one reason or another) is called a sinner" (Ta'anit 11a). In fact, no lesser a soul than the great Hillel used to quote Proverbs 11:17's statement that "a kind man does himself good, but a cruel one troubles his own flesh" and explained it to mean that only "the person who's generous to his own soul is called pious." For in fact Hillel himself would wash his hands and face in honor of his Maker before breakfast, arguing that all the more so should he do so seeing as how the statues for kings were washed every morning (Vayikrah Rabbah 34:3).

Understand of course that Hillel was talking about simply washing yourself first thing in the morning, which most of us do anyway and would wonder why we'd need permission to. His point is simply that even the pious need to give in to this "indulgence". For while they might reason that doing without that and going about scruffy and a bit malodorous instead would lead to greater purity and piety, Hillel says that that's wrong and a bad way to be pious.

Hence good and true abstinence comes to this: the person striving for it "should abstain from whatever isn't necessary, according to his station in life, but he's deemed a sinner if he abstains from something that he actually needs" for whatever legitimate reason.

The above obviously covers a lot of ground, and all we could do was to lay out the parameters. Those striving for abstinence and overall piety should take this all to heart and do their level best,

meaning in the end to draw close to G-d by avoiding spiritual hazards and by likewise averting the pitfall of going to extremes.

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