

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 14:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

There are three essential types of abstinence the righteous should concentrate on: those touching on personal pleasures, on Halachic processes, and on personal habits.

Ramchal already discussed refraining from personal pleasures in the previous chapter, which focused on the pious only indulging in worldly things that are absolutely necessary for their wellbeing. He makes the further point here that while it's laudable to avoid such pleasures as much as possible in one's day to day life, it's nonetheless imperative to allow for some of it when it comes to a mitzvah (as in enjoying good food on Shabbos and Holy Days, being intimate with one's spouse at appropriate times, and the like).

The second type of abstinence, which touches upon one's relationship to Halacha as Ramchal lays it out, comes to this. Halacha, as its name implies (since it's derived from l'halaich, to "walk" or "proceed"), is the life-path we Jews are to take, the direction that our lives are to follow in.

Now, the Halachic path is often-enough broad, flexible, and open to personal bent; but it can be rather slender and fixed too, depending on circumstances. Ramchal's point is that if one is to be pious, he or she is to walk that narrower path and to "be stringent in the mitzvot at all times". That is, when the normative Halacha would tend toward an acceptable lenience, the pious person should not allow him- or herself to go that way, as it just might leave one open to Halachic or moral error down the line.

Because "the abstinent has to stay away from the abhorrent," Ramchal remarks, as well as "the nearly abhorrent, and even the vaguely abhorrent" if he or she is going to be pious (much the way someone with a sensitive stomach would have to steer clear of not only actually stale food but even day-old or even slightly "off" foods if he's going to be sure not to become ill).

We're taught that the great Talmudic sage Mar Ukva used to say, "I am like vinegar compared to my father, who was like wine (he was so pure). For, had my father eaten meat just now, he wouldn't eat cheese until tomorrow this time; whereas while I will certainly not eat cheese at this meal, I would eat it at the next one," six hours later (Chullin 105a).

As Ramchal explains, "In fact, the Halacha is not as Mar Ukva's father practiced it, for if it were, Mar Ukva himself would never have gone against it" to be sure. "It's just that Mar Ukva's father was (more) stringent in his abstinence (than) Mar Ukva". The point of the matter is that while Mar Ukva was certainly righteous and caring in his Halachic observance, his father strove for an even higher level

and was thus willing to accept a greater degree of Halachic stringency than Mar Ukva was.

(One very important lesson that "the rest of us" should derive from this story is that Mar Ukva was never berated for not striving higher than his natural bent or for not emulating his father's self-sacrifice. Mar Ukva apparently knew his limits and realized that while he was certainly capable of being righteous, as we all are, he was not capable of being pious like his father, and that he needed to live his life in accordance with his own true makeup.)

We'll discuss being pious in one's personal habits next.

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