

# THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 13:1

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

We're told ironically enough that "abstinence", our next trait, "is the beginning of piety", which is a trait further down the line. What's Ramchal's point? For one thing, he means to underscore the fact that "piety" is actually the main thrust of this work (see our Introduction) and that we're finally getting closer to it; and he also wants to begin laying out its parameters, since so many misunderstand piety. He then makes the following vital point which touches upon each one of us in search of spiritual excellence.

"Whereas all that we've discussed to now" in this work from the beginning to this point "is what you would need to become righteous; from here on we'll discuss what you'd need to become pious".

Now, that's a daunting statement in fact. It means for one thing that all we'd struggled with to now has been step one, for all intents and purposes -- including all we'd learned about what we'd need to do to achieve caution, enthusiasm, and innocence (and there has been a lot!). It thus implies that all of that is just the beginning. In fact, it could all even be said to be apprentice, maybe even amateur rank. Because what it does is to ready us for the ultimate task of achieving piety (and even beyond).

Nonetheless, the point is (and this will surprise and disappoint many) that "most people cannot be pious, and it would be enough for them to be righteous" by living up to all that preceded this. So we might not even get very much farther along.

We're all capable of living up to what had been laid out for us until now, to be sure; but we're not all spiritually gifted enough to be out-and-out pious, which calls for much more. (See an esoteric discussion of this in Ramchal's *Sod HaYichud*, found in *Ginzei Ramchal* pp. 269-271, also see *Adir Bamarom* pp. 28-29) .

Even if we aren't capable of reaching the highest levels, though, we'll still pick up a clue here and there about what we're capable of by going further, and of what the truly pious and holy ones are made of. And so while some would advise us to stop where we are and hone the lofty achievements we'd been encouraged in until now rather than go further and either frustrate ourselves or grow discouraged, we'll go on.

Let's define "abstinence" -- the trait under discussion now -- according to Ramchal's depiction of it. After all, we all know about restraining ourselves for the sake of a good end. Many of us steer clear

of things we're perhaps very inclined toward for the sake of character development. In fact, our people have been weaned on self-restraint for many, many centuries. Weren't we instructed to ready ourselves for the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai three days beforehand by avoiding intimacy (see Exodus 19:23)?

As Ramchal puts it, though, "the general principle behind abstinence was expressed by our sages with their admonition to 'Sanctify yourself through what is permitted to you'" (Yevamot 20a). And so, abstinence comes down to "disallowing yourself something that the Torah (itself actually) permits, so you won't come in contact with something it (actually) forbids". That is it means "withdrawing from anything that's likely to cause you to come to do bad, even though it's not bad itself".

That's to say that one who's out to achieve abstinence is to avoid things that are in fact perfectly acceptable for the sake of the "big picture", since it might lower his or her spiritual rank in the end. Ramchal will lay out the parameters and offer examples as we go along.

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