

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 9:7 - PART 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

There have been special souls practicing abstinence throughout the ages, but by varying degrees. We ourselves are forced to practice a more stringent form of it, because of the exigencies of the age (though still with moderation), while our ancestors didn't need to. What got us to this point? Let's review the history of the yetzer harah, if you will, to see.

The ancient holy ones, like Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Job and his companions, only needed to do a few things to serve G-d wholly and deeply, and they had to abstain from very few things, since they had such heart-felt faith in Him -- and also, most significantly, because they were "lucid in their reasoning, their yetzer harahs were weak, and because they were governed by reason" as Ibn Pakudah puts it.

Now, that's a vital point. It means to say that those ancient ones were so clear-minded, they could so easily distinguish between what truly mattered and what didn't, and that they were so motivated by truth rather than by temptation, that they didn't need much external prodding to do the right things, and didn't have to avoid doing many things that might thwart their devotions. But people didn't stay on so exalted a level for very long.

For when our ancestors came to dwell in rich and lavish Egypt, they began to enjoy their surroundings (obviously, before their enslavement), they began to want more and more, and temptation began to prevail over their clear reason. So, they needed a form of abstinence that would enable them to withstand their yetzer harahs. They were thus instructed to observe the traditional physical mitzvot (as opposed to The Duties of the Heart), since despite their struggles they themselves didn't need to take more stringent restrictions upon themselves.

But when our people then came to settle in the Land of Canaan (after the redemption, and despite the revelation of the Torah) and savored its richness, they were drawn into greater temptations. And in fact, "the more they settled the land, the more ravaged their sense of reason became and the more difficult it became for them to make the right (ethical) choices", we're told. So they needed to practice "a more austere form of abstinence that would withstand their desires, like the practice of becoming a Nazir, and taking on the customs of the disciples of the prophets we cited earlier".

As time passed, reason weakened even more so while temptation grew stronger yet. It has come to the point where we're so utterly distracted and enthralled by worldly things and delights that we're willing to settle for spiritual mediocrity. And while the ancients could occupy themselves with both

worldly and otherworldly concerns at the same time to full advantage, we're compelled to detach ourselves from the world nearly completely when engaged in our spiritual practices, to the detriment of both on some level -- but we haven't any choice, lest we abandon our dreams of spiritual progress altogether.

Our prayer, of course, is that we take it upon ourselves to strive higher and higher, and that we learn to delight more in the lusciousness and sublimeness of things G-dly over more prosaic earthly delights.

Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman and **Torah.org**