

# THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 9:1

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

We abstain from things all the time in this world, and for many different reasons. And we often don't give it a second thought. So let's begin to explore what sets this sort of everyday, "conventional" abstinence apart from other kinds. But let's start with the basics. As Ibn Pakudah defines it, "Abstinence is the act of stifling your desires and avoiding something ... which you're nonetheless able and prepared to have" and which you have an "aptitude for" or inclination toward, that you nonetheless "purposely don't act on". That's to say that it comes down to being very able and willing to engage in something which you then don't, for one reason or another. And he terms abstinence "one of the cornerstones" of society which "people need just as much as they need any other field of study and skill" (i.e., any other form of set human behavior or rules of interaction).

Expanding on our idea that we abstain from very many things every day, we notice that many people conventionally and habitually stay away from foods they'd like to have for health reasons, for example. Many avoid certain situations on a regular basis that might threaten their social or professional standing even when drawn toward them, and many stifle emotions they'd like to (or feel they have to) express for the sake of civility. Despite the truth of all that and how widespread it is, it's still true that all these instances of conventional abstinence have only material benefits in mind, albeit good and reasonable ones.

The kind of self-denial that the Torah asks of us is nonetheless rooted in \*spiritual\* benefits. But there are some fundamental principles about human nature's good and bad points that we'd have to lay out before we could go on from there to depicting healthy, Torah-based abstinence.

We're to always recall that it was G-d Himself who imbued us with quite normal desires that enable us to do good, healthy, and wholesome things in the world, which G-d wants us to express and even rewards us for expressing when done in the proper context. After all, as Ibn Pakudah points out, it was He who "implanted a desire for food (and drink) in our souls" as well as "a penchant for intercourse" which He "meant for us to enjoy".

There's no denying the fact, though, that we sometimes go to extremes, "which brings us to ruin, and wracks our body". And besides, at bottom, G-d wants us to strive for self-discipline and a degree of purity beyond the everyday. So, it would obviously do us well to learn the art of abstinence and draw upon it in our search for spiritual excellence.

But Ibn Pakudah asserts that not everyone should undertake the more erudite and specific sort of

abstinence that the Torah requires of our people, since the "world would never be cultivated if everyone devoted himself to the practice of the same (spiritual discipline)". For society at large is best served if different peoples engage in various disciplines. He thus invites us to inquire into just what the Torah would have our people abstain from, and to what degree.

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