

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 9:2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

What kind of abstinence should we practice? Our sages offered various opinions, and some were more demanding than others.

As Ibn Pakudah portrays it, some of them offered that abstinence entails doing away with everything that distracts you from G-d; others said it comes to despising the material world and stifling as many physical desires as you can; others said it's centered on trying to achieve an inner calm by squelching all your worldly dreams and desires; others said it consists in learning to trust in G-d alone and doing without things that would test that trust; others said it comes to wearing only enough clothes to cover yourself and eating enough to get by, and nothing more; others said it entails renouncing human love and living in solitude; and yet others said it consists of simply being grateful for whatever you've been given and in managing to do without anything else.

But some said that abstinence consists of nothing more than getting only as much relaxation and permissible pleasure as you must, according to your makeup, and rejecting the rest, which is the definition that Ibn Pakudah deems the ideal one according to the Torah. But, we're not in an ideal state of being -- far from it.

After all, the whole reason Torah calls upon us to abstain from many amenities is because it wants us to think things through rather than act impulsively -- to have "reason ... govern desire", as Ibn Pakudah puts it. For "when desire dominates reason, sin and all sorts of unwholesome things follow" in its wake. We ourselves have clearly come to the point where we've allowed our worldly impulses to cloud-over our dreams of spiritual excellence.

You see, while many of our ancestors made do with the bare minimum and were content with just that, we've made ourselves bleary-eyed with our endless quests for more and more, and have consequently "fallen into the abyss ... and been forced by our yetzer harahs to endure the terrible lashing of the waves" of the demand for everything we can get our hands on. And as a result, "the world now has dominion over us" and "bewilders our eyes", and we've become "fixated upon, crave, depend on, and seek" all sorts of extraneous things "over and over again, night and day". The danger lies in the fact that "the more immersed in desire we become ... the further we stray, the farther we recede from the light of truth ... and the more darkness affixes itself to us". And we then "begin to believe our bad ways are good, and our errors virtues" in our rationalizations, and start to "transform our errors into laws" -- that is, we set out to legislate our wishes so that we're never in the wrong according to our way of thinking, and we begin to "deny the sorts of morals that parents have always

left to their children as legacies" as a matter of course. In fact it's gotten to the point where "what was originally alien (and verboten) to us ... has become familiar, and what was (always) proper has (suddenly) become alien". We've taken to calling people who are satisfied with little, "lazy"; we term others who are more relaxed about making money "negligent" and those content with the bare essentials, "weak"; and we deem those who strive for too many things "people of action" and admire them. We've even come to the point where we've made "our bellies our gods, our clothing our Torah, and the condition of our homes our morals", Ibn Pakudah points out. And we've come to demand to be "rewarded for our misdeeds, and to be considered ... righteous despite our sins".

So it's clear that we've indeed lapsed into extraordinarily materialistic times.

Now, it's important to know that Ibn Pakudah wrote this nearly 1000 years ago! But since it clearly applies to our times as well, but exponentially more so, we're to take heed.

In any event we're told that when otherwise fine individuals become so overtaken by materialism and by their yetzer harahs, that we're forced to counter that with the sorts of more-stringent types of abstinence cited above "until conditions return to normal". Ibn Pakudah isn't suggesting though that *all* of us should follow stricter, more abstemious ways; only those who would "accept its conditions upon themselves in order to help their fellow Jews", who would act as "doctors of the faith and heal those souls who reject good traits" and lead our people wisely.

He then informs us that he's referring to "the prophets and pious ... in every generation" who have indeed practiced stricter forms of abstinence -- not us. But as we'll see, there'll certainly be advice that *we* would do well to heed.

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