

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 9:3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

As we'd already said, everyone abstains from things for one reason or another. But it's clear that people have different motivations for doing that. So let's explore what drives various people to do without things. We'll find that some do it for more idealistic reasons (which the Torah clearly favors) while others abstain from things for rather mundane, sometimes Machiavellian reasons.

There are three different degrees of abstaining from things for idealistic reasons. Some do it so as to "be on par with the angels", as Ibn Pakudah depicts it (which is of course humanly impossible, though it's still admirable as a goal). Those sorts of people always look for ways to draw close to G-d and subsequently reject everything having nothing to do with that; so they might live in the desert or woods, eat only grubs and growths, and wear coarse wool or tattered old clothes. And they yearn to fear and love G-d, but aren't at all concerned with the fear and love of anyone else. But as Ibn Pakudah says clearly, they're too extreme; their service "is the furthest removed from the moderate form of it that the Torah favors, because its followers utterly abandon the world".

Others of that sort practice a more *temperate* form of abstinence which is healthier and more admirable. They tend to reject extraneousness like extra food and drink, more expensive clothing and lodging, and more frivolous forms of entertainment and diversion -- yet they never withdraw from society as the first group do, so much as temper their exposure to it. And so they're able to hold down positions of responsibility in society. Nonetheless, they're said to "live in solitude in their homes ... (thus) accomplishing two things and earning two portions at the same time", as Ibn Pakudah puts it. That's to say, they're able to live in the world and away from it to degrees, and to thus foster a closeness to G-d and to mankind at the same time. They're said to be "*closer*" to the Torah-authorized moderate path" than the one cited above, but still off the mark.

And others yet practice the most lenient form of abstinence, which is in fact the sort the Torah charges us to follow. "They detach themselves from the world *in their hearts and minds*" we're told, and yet they also join in on society's demands, though *externally* only. That's to say that they "participate in all the trials mankind must endure in this world which imprisons him; suffer all the afflictions and experience all the alienation and the sense of having been cut off from the world of spirit" that the rest of us do. But they "yearn for the World to Come, and both await and are leery of death" which means to say that while we're out-and-out leery of death, they're somewhat leery too, being only human. But they also fully trust in the reality of the Afterlife, so they prepare for their stay there by storing up a full stock of spiritual goods.

But as we said, there are those who abstain from things for less-than- ideal reasons.

Some do it to get a reputation for being "other worldly" and pious, the hy pocrites that they are. And they do that in order to persuade others to trust them or perhaps to entrust them with their money, and to divulge their secrets to them. Ibn Pakudah describes them as "the worst of all sorts of people" -- the lowest of the low, and he says that they're "further from the truth and more despicable than anyone else" since they use a profound medium for spiritual growth, abstention, toward unholy ends.

Others are simply *stingy* and do without as much as they can only to hoard money (which is after all a form of abstinence, though we don't think of it that way). And they barely begrudge themselves things mainly because they haven't any trust in G-d's ability to provide for them. Now, while they might seem to be above mere materialism to some, they actually do what they do because they love the physical world and would want nothing better than to have more things, if they could.

And finally, others only do without things because they're poor -- and they're also too ashamed to ask for the sort of help they're entitled to. They indeed make do with little, as the others do, but they actually needn't do that. And they're not selfless so much as hapless, and they're also unwilling to allow others to help.

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