

# THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 9:5 - PART 1

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Let's inject an important note here. We've been advocating for spiritual excellence throughout this work (throughout the series, in fact) and have been siding with living a more removed-from-the-everyday, transcendent sort of life. But sometimes spiritual excellence demands a degree of spiritual \*temperance\* as well (rather than lapsing into what some call "spiritual hedonism")!

That's to say that if we're truly to be spiritually excellent the way Torah asks us to, then we're to take our cues from Torah-sources rather than from others that sometimes make untenable demands upon the person in search of such excellence, asking him or her to abstain from things the Torah wouldn't want us to. So let's use this seminal chapter of "The Duties of the Heart" to determine just how far we're to go if we're truly to live the sort of religiously fulfilled life we're expected to as Jews.

We'll be concentrating on the following three central areas of life where abstinence comes in: our relations with other people, our relations with the physical world at large, and our inner-being.

We practice Torah-sanctioned abstinence in our relations with other people by acquiescing to their needs over our own -- when it's reasonable. We do that by being courteous and gracious to others, and "greeting them cordially, and expressing happiness when with them" as Ibn Pakudah puts it; by being humble, soft-spoken, and unpretentious; by "doing them favors without thought of reward, and without hope of getting anything in return"; and by helping "them find favor in G-d's eyes". We're also expected to "tolerate their coarse language" or mannerisms even when they go against our grain -- yet we're also advised to "articulate our feelings about that ... to G-d" (rather than to them) in order to vent our frustrations perhaps, interestingly enough.

But we're clearly \*not\* expected to give no thoughts to our own legitimate, reasonable, and healthy needs in the process. Hence, we're also advised to keep away from people who live indecent or immoral lives, for our own spiritual well-being. For while we're to be polite and civil to everyone we meet, we're still-and-all not expected to go out of our way to grow close to everyone.

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