

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 9:5 - PART 2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

There are many, many ways to practice Torah-sanctioned abstinence when it comes to the physical world. But we'll lay them out in terms of things that are outright forbidden of us, and things that are perfectly permissible but could lead to problems.

Let's first touch upon the forbidden. Now, we're clearly expected to abstain from the things that the Torah forbid us outright if we're ever to achieve spiritual excellence. But some forbidden things are harder to avoid because we're drawn to them, while others are quite easy to avoid. After all, who wants to eat blood or all sorts of vermin, as we're told not to, for example?

But there are other things we're bidden not to partake in that we're neither drawn to nor particularly repelled by, like wearing "shatnez" (a combination of wool and linen), which we're commanded not to wear. And of course there are certain, clearly illicit things that we're indeed drawn to (which we needn't detail), which most would agree we should refrain from in order to achieve our spiritual goals.

So Ibn Pakudah argues that appropriate abstinence would be to somehow get to the point where the forbidden things that we'd be tempted to partake of become *just as vile to us* as the forbidden things we already find repulsive. That obviously calls for a lot of forethought and effort, but it's perhaps as easy to come to as learning to hate fatty foods after you'd had to endure surgery for poor health, because you know the consequences of eating them.

Now, when it comes to things that are otherwise perfectly permissible which we're advised to abstain from to some degree, it's important to realize that there are different categories there, too. Some things are out-and-out necessities and others are luxuries or excesses (while most are somewhere in-between). We're to certainly partake of permitted things that our health and well-being require (like food and drink, relaxation, and the like) -- but not to excess. Since that would distract us from our spiritual goals. But that's not at all to say that we're to remove ourselves from the world in the process; for, again, we're not bidden to do that.

And there are several, perhaps unexpected areas in which we're asked to practice appropriate abstention. We're told that we'd well to avoid speaking too much, for example. Since, as Ibn Pakudah puts it, "the tongue is quick to sin and its sins are the most numerous sort of all." After all, "just try to remember what has come out of your mouth in the course of a day" and you're sure to be embarrassed!

We're then advised to temper our senses of sight and hearing, and to "not see what you do not need to, or look at things that distract you from thinking about important things"; and to avoid "hearing what you don't need to hear, and stop listening ... to needless, untrue, rumorously, and gossipy conversation", as well as from listening to "things that lead you to rebel against G-d or neglect His commandments".

We're next counseled to try to curb our appetites by "reducing the number of side dishes (we) eat, and making do with just one of them", to then try to "do without side dishes that require a lot of effort and exertion to prepare, and to then live on food that requires none". We're even advised to get to the point where we can "look at what we eat as medicine" rather than as actual food, which is to say, as nourishment rather than as a treat.

And lastly, when it comes to bodily movements, we're (of course) warned not to use our hands to steal or harm anyone, but rather to give charity and to ply at a trade or profession; and to never use our legs and feet to draw close to wrongdoers, but rather in order to do good and to visit the wise and pious.

And lastly, we're warned not to take each category of abstinence in isolation and to assume it's good enough to succeed at one even when failing at the others, because that's not true. For just as the body is a melange of parts that seem utterly unique unto themselves but which are actually conjoined elements of a single body, all our traits are conjoined as well and are to be refined en masse. For as Ibn Pakudah puts it, "you can't possibly master all of these traits if you omit a single one of them, for they're like a string of pearls: detach one of them, and the rest will scatter about, and you'd lose the strand" in the end.

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