

# THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 9:6

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Let's meander a bit down a short by-road for now. Early on in this book Ibn Pakudah made a distinction between deriving principles of the faith from logic and our everyday experience, and from extracting them from the Torah and Oral Tradition alone (see our introduction). He made the point that while it was certainly vital to draw from the tradition, that logic and experience are truly viable means of deriving principles, too. And in fact this gate has \*largely\* drawn upon the latter kinds of sources. So, Ibn Pakudah took it upon himself at this point to cite statements from the tradition that laud abstinence as well.

But there's more to it than that, though. It seems that we'd \*need\* to offer authoritative proof from the tradition itself that we're expected to abstain from things, since so many people resist the whole idea (even when it's tempered by Ibn Pakudah's moderation). But since, on the other hand, it seems so clear that a person can especially draw close to G-d by withdrawing from things that distract from Him, then perhaps we really \*don't\* need to quote from the Torah and our sages. But Ibn Pakudah apparently decided to cite from those sources after all, in order to underscore just how inherently valuable and established a tradition abstaining is.

In fact, very many things have been said throughout the tradition in stark praise of abstinence, but we'll offer just a few. Many greats in the past were praised for their personal discipline. Both Moses and Elijah, for example, were lauded for having fasted at certain points; those who took upon themselves the restrictions involved in being a Nazir were termed "holy" (see ch. 6 of Numbers); the sons of Yonadav ben Rechav were commended for avoiding wine, not planting, not building a house, and for dwelling on the outskirts of civilization for a time (see ch. 35 of Jeremiah); and Elisha was admired for abandoning everything in order to follow Elijah the Prophet (see ch. 19 of 1 Kings).

The prophets enjoined us to fast (which is clearly a form of abstinence) when we repent, for it became clear to them that "when (people) were fed they became full... (and) forgot (G-d)" (Hosea 13:6) whereas "when they are anguished they pursue (Him)" (Ibid. 5:15). And we can easily derive the importance of temperance from King David's remarks that "Torah from Your mouth is better for me than thousands of pieces of gold and silver" (Ibid. 119:72), and from Job's habit of disdaining the world and its wealth, of mastering his senses and embracing the truth.

Didn't Solomon say, "Do not be among wine guzzlers" (Proverbs 23:20), "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep, and poverty will come like a runner, and want will come like a soldier" (Ibid. 6:10-11), and "The point is, after everything else has been heard: 'Fear G-d and keep His

mitzvot, for that (alone) is the whole of man" (Ibid. 12:13).

And when it comes to the Oral Tradition, as Ibn Pakudah put it, "our sages said so much about this topic in the Mishna and Talmud that we can't possibly include all of it in this work." Most of what's said, though, can be found in Pirke Avot, where our sages said among other such things, "This is the Torah way: eat bread with salt, drink little water, and sleep on the ground" (Pirke Avot 6:4) which is followed by the "forty- eight ways that Torah is acquired" that focuses on personal restraint.

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