

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 9 INTRODUCTION

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Abstinence is probably the most demanding condition for spiritual excellence, since at bottom we all tend to indulge while abstinence demands that we withhold. It also asks us to hone our allegiances and declare which we favor: heavenly or earthly delights (of course the Torah allows for both at the same time, but we're talking about *favoring* one over the other).

The assumption is that since we'd learned all we had in our introspections about what truly matters and what doesn't, about what we already have and what we can do without, that we'd be more inclined by now to abstain from some earthly things than we'd thought we could. And indeed, the wise reader will come to that point, we're told, and will worship more deeply and be better off both spiritually and materially as a consequence.

We'll be explaining the difference between "conventional" abstinence and the kind that the Torah requires of us, and we'll examine the various sorts of abstainers, the criteria for beneficial and appropriate abstinence, how the Torah and the Books of the Prophets depict abstinence, and we'll discover the difference between the way our ancestors abstained from things and how we're to abstain.

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