

CHAPTER 4:3 MAN'S STANDING IN THIS WORLD, AND THE SPECIFIC WAYS AVAILABLE TO HIM

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

As to our surroundings and circumstances, they and everything that goes on in them is physical and murky, too. Yet we're forced by our makeup to partake in all that; after all, we have to eat and drink, earn a living, etc.

As such, we're stuck in the muck and mire by virtue of our physical makeup, our environment, and our concerns. So we would need to work very hard at transcending our situation, given all that ¹.

Notes:

1. The gist of this chapter so far is that each one of us is in the thick of a terrible conflict, inside and out, between the essential parts of our own being (i.e., our body and our soul), on the one hand; and between our beings and the world's demands of us and its makeup, on the other. (In fact, the way we resolve those conflicts defines who we are in the end, but that's not our concern here.)

Thus, we're each a brew of clashing forces and proclivities, caught between physicality and its "partisans" who want this and that, and spirituality and its own partisans who want that and the other thing. And we're each thick in the mire of a subtle, often intangible battle-field of self-contradictions, conflicts of interest, and compromises.

And beside all of that, Ramchal also makes the daunting point that physicality is in fact at a distinct advantage. For it's able to assert itself from birth and to gnaw away at our spirituality, the late-comer, our whole lives long. After all, the greatest, most manifest partisan of physicality we have is our body, which is always right *there*. While the greatest partisan of spirituality we have, the soul, is utterly intangible and it only manifests itself in the mind and its elusive thoughts. Hence, the soul is essentially stymied and frustrated as long as it's in this world.

In fact, some would reason that, given all that, we should utterly stifle our physicality and try as hard as we can to deny its demands. Rambam cites the decision of some non-Jewish ascetics who thought as much and decided that "one should separate oneself from (all material things) and go to the opposite extreme, so that one wouldn't eat meat, drink wine, marry, live in a nice house or dress in fine clothes, but dress only in sackcloth and hard wool, etc." (*Hilchot De'ot* 3:1). But as he said elsewhere, they believed that "that was how a person draws close to G-d" -- as if "G-d is the enemy of the body, and wants to destroy and annihilate it!" (*Eight Chapters*, Ch. 4), which is not at all true!

The question is, then, is there somehow or another a way to make use of the world's physicality to our spiritual advantage? There is, and the rest of this chapter and the majority of what will follow in this work, will in fact expand upon that.

Rabbi Yaakov Feldman has translated and commented upon "The Gates of Repentance", "The Path of the Just", and "The Duties of the Heart" (Jason Aronson Publishers). His works are available in bookstores and in various locations on the Web.