

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 1:10 - PART 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We're about to discuss G-d as He truly is as opposed to how He's depicted as being. But don't suspect anything nefarious about all this. After all, we're talking about how He's depicted in the Torah -- not by His detractors, if you will. And we'll find that there are some very good reasons why He's depicted there the way He is. Our ultimate hope is that we'll all come away from this discussion with a new, deeper understanding of both G-d and His Torah, and thus have an easier time pursuing our goal of drawing closer to Him.

The only things we can say about G-d as He truly is (which will also prove to be inadequate), is that He exists, He's truly one, and He's eternal. We know He exists because we proved He clearly does; we know He's truly one because we proved that He expresses no plurality whatsoever (in all the ways we illustrated); and we know that He's eternal because we proved that He's the ultimate cause of everything, *including time*, hence He transcends it and is eternal by definition.

But G-d's true Being is *far beyond our experience*. His state of existence is nothing like our own; the fact that He's one implies that He's free of properties, not subject to change, indescribable, incomparable, and utterly independent (as we said in 1:8), hence He's unlike everything else we know of; and His being eternal is also beyond our ken. So these facts tell us very little about Him in the end and do nothing to touch our hearts or inspire spiritual excellence. They're cold and algebraic, and not at all handy; on the mark but of little avail. After all, how worship an utterly transcendent Immortal Creator?

And besides, a true sense of G-d's utterly transcendent Essence is actually beyond human depiction. We simply have neither the vocabulary, nor the context in which to place Him. Maimonides once said that it's as impossible for us to conceive of the Afterlife which is utterly spiritual in nature as it is for a fish to conceive of life on earth. We'd add that it's thus as impossible for us to conceive of G-d's Essence as it is for a fish *to conceive* of having a conception of life on earth!

Still and all, the ones we listed above are the best descriptions we have of His Essence, and they at least give us some room to speak of Him as He is. In the end, declaring that He exists at least allows us to make the point that He doesn't *not* exist; asserting that He's truly one allows to deny plurality on His part; and affirming His being eternal enables us to deny His having been created by another.

Needless to say, this says nothing about G-d's appearance, thoughts, emotions, and actions -- His

"personality," if you will -- as we know it to be from the statements made about Him in the Torah.

For G-d is often depicted in physical terms there. We're taught that "G-d created man in His image" (Genesis 1:27), and we're also told that G-d has a "mouth" (see Numbers 9:18), "hands" (see Isaiah 45:12), "ears" (see Numbers 11:1), "feet" (see Exodus 24:10), "arms" (see Isaiah 52:9), "eyes" (see Genesis 6:8), and a "heart" (see Genesis 8:21). And He's depicted as doing and experiencing many other physical things, as in "G-d smelled the sweet smell" (Genesis 8:21), "G-d saw... He regretted ... it grieved Him" (Genesis 6:5-6), "G-d descended" (Genesis 11:5), "G-d remembered" (Genesis 11:5), "G-d heard" (Numbers 11:1), "G-d awoke" (Psalms 78:65), and the like.

So how explain the discrepancy between G-d as He is, and how He's depicted in the Torah? Ibn Pakudah explains that the Torah simply *had* to personify G-d and describe Him in human terms. Why? In order for us to have a "working concept" of Him in our minds and thus find it easier to fully accept His presence in our lives. For if we can't "relate" to G-d's ways in the world in one fashion or another, we're likely to reject Him, G-d forbid. Since He'd simply be far too removed from our experience to acknowledge Him.

"In fact," Ibn Pakudah adds, "if we were to speak about G-d in terms that actually suit Him -- which is to say, in spiritual terms and in a spiritual context, we would understand neither the terms nor the context", as we said above. "And ... we couldn't serve Him, since it's impossible to serve what one can't grasp." Besides, he adds quite ominously, if the Torah didn't do that, then "the great majority of people ... would be left without religion or Torah."

But make no mistake about it. We're forbidden to imagine G-d as actually having a body. As it's written, "Guard yourselves very closely, for you saw no form" (Deuteronomy 4:15)-- at Mount Sinai, when G-d Himself presented us with the Torah. As well as, "You saw no form, only (heard) a voice" (Ibid. 4:12), "Whom would you liken G-d to? What likeness would you compare Him to?" (Isaiah 40:18), etc.

We need to keep two things in mind, then: that G-d is beyond our ken in fact, but that the Torah uses human terms to depict what He does when He interacts with the world (by necessity).

Yet that almost brings us back full circle. How then is the soul in search of spiritual excellence supposed to draw close to G-d when He's utterly unfathomable? Is there any sort of hook we can hang our hopes onto? We'll delve into that next time.

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