

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 2:2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Let's take a step back. Are we really expected to catch sight of G-d on our own, as we suggested? Indeed we are, and we'll find that common sense as well as Torah and the Oral Tradition itself oblige us to.

Isn't it just logical to assume that we should? After all, G-d granted us the unique intellectual capacity to delve into things, so we'd have a right to, wouldn't we? Couldn't it be said that if we don't that we'd be less than human? After all, what sets us apart from animals if not our minds?

But the sensitive soul is somehow or another not satisfied with that answer. After all, G-d gave us many capacities, and a lot of them could be used for untoward purposes. How are we to be sure that the idea of analyzing the world around us to reassure ourselves of G-d's presence isn't out and out hubris? So Ibn Pakudah assures us that the Torah itself commends us to do it.

Keep in mind that many others of us wouldn't even question the notion and would gladly go about doing it without recourse to Torah or Tradition. The point to be made is this: that those souls in search of spiritual excellence would be sensitive to the fact that it's not only our minds that set us apart from all other created beings. Our souls do, too. And they'd wonder if their immortal souls would somehow be detrimentally affected by the sort of open inquiry being suggested. But Ibn Pakudah's point is that we needn't worry. Both Torah and Tradition assert that it's indeed good for our spiritual well being to delve into these things; that G-d Himself has asked us to.

We're thus told to "Lift (our) eyes on high and see Who created these" (Isaiah 40:26), and to "observe (G-d's) heavens, the work of (His) fingers; the moon and the stars that (He) established" (Psalms 8:4). "Hear, you deaf" we're warned, "look to see, you blind" (Isaiah 42:18) all the G-dly wonders about us. And we're told that "the path of the righteous is a like a gleam of sunlight that shines brighter and brighter to the peak of day," while "the path of the wicked is like darkness, and they do not know what they stumble over" (Proverbs 4:18-19), so it would we'd be wise to keep our eyes wide open.

And the Oral Tradition indicates that "a person who can determine the course of the seasons and the constellations but doesn't, is said to 'not notice G-d's deeds, and to not look on the work of His hands' (Isaiah 5:12)" (Shabbat 75a); and it reveals that "if the Torah hadn't been given to Israel, we could have learned modesty from the cat, fidelity from the dove, manners from the rooster, and honesty from the ant" (Eruvin 100b) thanks to our analytical prowess.

Hence we find that we're indeed expected to reflect on things all around us to catch sight of Gd's presence.

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