

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 3:4 - PART 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Let's dwell now on what Torah is at bottom and how it functions. After all, as we determined, it's what draws us close to G-d.

Ibn Pakudah describes the Torah as "a disclosure from G-d to man of the kind of service acceptable to Him, and which would reward him in this world and the World to Come". That's to say that the Torah is a revelation of the specific things we're to do to draw close to G-d both in the hear-and-now and in the ultimate future, which we could never figure out on our own. The granting of the Torah is thus said by Ibn Pakudah to be the greatest "act of kindness, generosity, and goodness on the part of G-d" imaginable. For the Torah is the textbook on spiritual excellence, and thus the fulfillment of every yearning soul's dreams.

Taken in that spirit Torah becomes an immensely and profoundly welcomed gift of answers to the greatest questions, rather than the weighty and demanding tome it's taken to be by those who have never been transported to high and delicious realms of adoration by it.

So we'll first offer an overview of the Torah system itself then a depiction of its sages, in the hopes of understanding what it asks of us and what our hearts and minds are capable of achieving.

Understand, though, that when we speak of "the Torah" we're speaking of G-d's will; and that when we say that the Torah suggests this or that, we're actually saying that G-d Himself does. The sensitive soul will take that to heart and always hear the Voice behind the call, the Personality behind the message.

The Torah informs us that there are three sorts of actions in the world: those that draw us close to G-d (i.e., mitzvot), those that draw us away from Him (i.e., sins), and everything else in between.

Mitzvah-related vs. sinful acts themselves can be broken down into two sorts.

There are heart-based mitzvot, termed the "The Duties of the Heart" in this work, which we'll discuss at length. They include having a heartfelt faith in G-d's Oneness, being wholehearted with Him, trusting Him, surrendering yourself to Him, accepting His decrees, believing in His prophets and His Torah, loving and fearing Him, dwelling on His wonders, reflecting on His goodness, and many such others). And then there are action-based mitzvot like studying Torah, praying, fasting, offering charity, observing the Sabbath and Festivals, and the like.

There are likewise heart-based sins like loving anything or anyone else to the degree we're to love

G-d, being arrogant, having contempt for others, ridiculing the prophets and what G-d says through them, despising good itself or good people, being jealous, coveting, etc. And there are action-based sins like publicly worshipping anything or anyone other than G-d, taking false oaths, lying, talebearing, eating unkosher food, murdering, etc.

And then there's "everything else" -- everything that doesn't directly bear on our service to G-d.

Interestingly enough, we'll find that everything else can be turned into either a mitzvah or sin, depending on the manner and spirit in which it's done. We'll explain that shortly. But for now let's explore the fact that everything else can also be broken down into categories, although another way -- by the degree to which we engage in them.

Let's take eating for example. When our eating doesn't touch upon a mitzvah or sin per se -- as when it has nothing to do with a Sabbath meal for example, it's perfectly kosher, and we're not eating in the course of a fast day -- but we're simply eating a midday meal or snack, then the act of eating can be broken down into the following three categories: "adequate" (i.e., which would be eating a moderate amount of food, in this case), "excessive" (i.e., eating too much), and "inadequate" (i.e., eating too little.)

All the "everything else" things we do fall under those three categories. I could be said to exercise too much, too little, or just enough; to chat with my friends, read the news, etc. But we'll settle on the example of eating.

Now, a person can eat too little for most of our tastes for a couple of reasons. Either out of a pious wish to engage less in worldly things; or to be skimpy, for example, or to "appear to be pious". Needless to say, neither of the last two examples are for the good or likely to lead us to spiritual excellence. In fact, they're actually rooted in rank materialism, since they're a means to merely to save money, to impress others, etc.). Eating moderately, on the other hand, is always admirable, while eating too much is always blameworthy.

Hence, when we engage in everyday things in moderation for pious or admirable reasons, they become mitzvot; and when we engage in them for rank material reasons or in excess, they become sins.

Thus thanks to the Torah we learn that "everything" we do touches upon our relationship to G-d, either fostering closeness and devotion to Him or hindering it. The wise will keep that in mind and act accordingly.

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