

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 3:4 - PART 2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

It always helps to know where you stand on the spiritual continuum at any given moment -- as well as where you *hope* to stand down the line -- if you're ever to attain spiritual excellence. So we'll lay out here the depths to which we can go in our Torah studies and in our worship of G-d. Each of us would do well to assess the station of our being right now, the category in which we fit in light of what follows, and to envision the heights of spiritual excellence we can aspire to in the end.

As to our studies, we find that there are various depths to which we can plumb when studying G-d's Torah.

We can merely recite the text itself without understanding it (which does indeed affect our beings on a subliminal and mystical level, we're taught, and thus does sink down to the bones; yet it's hardly Torah *study*); we can read Torah on a superficial or grammatically accurate level alone; we can understand it on a more sophisticated level by touching upon just some of the nuances of the written text; and we can begin to delve into the Oral Tradition -- the axioms communicated orally for generations until they were written down, embodied by the Mishna (the "hard data" relayed pithily and enigmatically), the Talmud (its fleshing out), Midrash (further expansions upon the above), etc.

Best of all would be to actually plumb the depths of the Oral Tradition. But there are degrees to that as well. The least laudable one would be to do it in order to gain a reputation as a scholar. Better than that, of course, would be to do it in order to derive life-lessons enfused with G-dliness that touch upon our emotional and intellectual duties. Better yet would be to delve into it to the degree which the Sages did, and to thus perfect our Divine service and Torah-knowledge. And best yet would be to delve into it to the degree which the prophets and the Men of the Great Assembly -- who were all inspired, righteous, and altruistic souls -- did.

And we'll find that there are various depths to which we can plumb in our worship, too.

The most superficial level of course would be to scoff at the very idea of worshipping G-d. Better yet would be to worship Him like those who don't accept the Divinity of the Torah but who nonetheless see mitzvot as means of self-improvement and as expressions of high ethics. Higher yet would be the worship of those who do accept the sublime nature of worship, but who nonetheless engage in it externally and hypocritically or in order to earn a reward or avoid retribution in the here-and-now or the Afterlife (or both), rather than altruistically.

Greater yet of course would be to worship G-d for selfless and idealistic reasons. But even such commendable people are capable of lacking the sort of self-awareness one would need to avoid the inner, more subtle impediments to closeness to G-d. Best of all would be to worship G-d the way the prophets and the pious do -- those who "hurry to serve G-d for the sake of His name alone, to aggrandize and exalt Him lovingly and wholeheartedly, and because they know Him and recognize His stature" -- like those who "have utterly surrendered themselves to G-d, made a covenant with Him, reciprocated all His kindness, depended on Him, dedicated their souls ... to Him, and who faithfully fulfilled all they took upon themselves" as Ibn Pakudah put it.

Honestly determine where you stand in all this, take heart in the hopes for the future, plan for and look forward to growth, and closeness to G-d will be your's.

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