

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART - GATE 3 INTRODUCTION

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Where do we go from here, knowing how manifest G-d's presence is and how much of His bounty we enjoy? This third gate will explain a number of things touching on that. And along the way it will also take lengthy forays into the endlessly fascinating subjects of just what we do on our own as free agents and what we're compelled to do; the meaning of our lives; how we're to channel our personality traits, and much more.

As to where we go from here, we'll find that if we're indeed in search of spiritual excellence (which is our underlying premise after all), then we should be moved to serve and worship G-d in light of His presence and goodness. After all, it's only natural that someone who's been helped by someone else would only want to "return the favor". When it comes to G-d we refer to doing that as "serving" Him. At bottom, though, what serving G-d implies is doing whatever it takes to draw close to Him.

So let's start off by delineating the many ways people help others, and the obligations their beneficiaries have to return the favor. For by doing that we'll be able to infer ways to serve G-d.

The truth be known -- though we deny it and take this to be a rather cynical and skewed view of things -- we mostly have ulterior, self-serving motives for doing others favors. There's no denying the good and great things that many people do selflessly, but let this basic and honest assumption form the backdrop to what we have to say here. (The sensitive soul couldn't help but recognize how true it is, in fact, albeit embarrassing.)

We'll begin by taking note of the many favors parents do for their children (though we don't usually think of them as "favors"). The truth be known, though, parents do much of what they do because their children represent the parents themselves and their personal hopes, and because human nature dictates that parents give to and protect children. Yet both the Torah and common sense oblige us to serve, honor and revere our parents.

Consider now all the favors employers do for their employees -- how they grant them salaries, offer them benefits, provide them with a sense of security, etc. Yet as everyone knows, employers do that for the most part to protect their own interests and for other self-serving reasons. Yet it's incumbent upon us be honest and earnest at our jobs, and to be grateful to our employers.

We could then dwell on the way people contribute to the poor. In fact that's often done for the sake of a Heavenly reward. As such, the contributors can be seen to merely be investing a little money in

a project that will surely pay off grandly in the end. Still-and-all, though, their beneficiaries are obliged to be grateful.

How about the favors we do friends and relatives? Aren't so many of them laden with expectations of "returns on an investment"-- though this-worldly ones -- too? Don't we expect gratitude, respect, and favors-in-kind? Couldn't we be said to be merely "loaning" something we fully expect to get back, in a sense? Yet none of us would dare not express thanks for favors done us, which is the least we could do.

Consider the compassion and empathy many kind souls express to the needy and troubled. Isn't much of that offered just to assuage their *own* pain and anguish at having to see others in pain? And yet such people are to be admired and praised.

"So it's clear in light of all of the above," writes Ibn Pakudah, "that everyone who acts kindly to another does so essentially for selfish reasons". And yet it's true that we're obliged and expected to offer "love, reverential praise, and thanks" to them when we're favored by them.

"Consider then the magnitude of our obligation to serve, praise, and thank *the Creator of kindness itself*" he goes on to say. To revere and thus worship "**the Creator of people who act kindly*", whose own goodness is infinite, constant, unending, and is offered for no selfish reason whatsoever or in order to avoid harm". After all, what does G-d need that we could ever provide, and who could harm Him? Hence we'd do well to realize that whatever He grants us "is a gift outright and a personal favor".

We're thus commended to "reflect on G-d's greatness, capabilities, wisdom, and abundance" in the face of our own human weakness and faults; to "discern all the good and kind things G-d has done for us"; and to "serve, revere, praise, acknowledge and constantly glorify G-d" in utter gratitude as a consequence.

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