

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

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Now that we've come to trust G-d to a greater extent and learned to catch sight of His will played out right before your eyes, the aforementioned questions pop up. Why bother doing anything if G-d will ultimately determine the outcome? Why does G-d allow some people to succeed and others not? And how do we know what G-d wants us to do with what He's given us?

We'll contend with the first issue as to why we're to do things on our own in terms of our having to earn a living. It could be asked in all honesty why we shouldn't just sit back if G-d determines each outcome.

For several reason, Ibn Pakudah asserts. First, because G-d specifically wants us to be full and active members of society since it's there, in the thick of it, where we show the sort of people we are at bottom. Will we be ethical in our actions? Will we follow G-d's will and wishes despite the challenges? Will we strive for spiritual excellence in a world that sees that as less than important and perhaps even ludicrous? So G-d wants us "out there", meeting the challenge.

We're also forced to strive on our own so that we don't grow complacent about what we have and thus forget to be grateful to G-d; and so that we don't lapse into hedonism -- after all, not having professional and personal goals leaves room in our minds for the pursuit of wrong and un-G-dliness (since we all need to concentrate on one thing or another, and if we don't apply ourselves to constructive things, we'll settle for destructive ones). And lastly, so that we're too preoccupied to dwell on certain recondite issues of the nature of things it would be better for us not to question.

Now, as to the vexing question of why G-d sometimes allows the wrongful to prosper and the righteous to suffer, there's a lot to say about that. (Some of Ibn Pakudah's insights will sit well with many, and some will not. Suffice it to say that the sensitive soul will consider his own reactions to what's offered and draw conclusions about his own trust in G-d's wisdom in the course of this very short excursion of an ancient and endless discussion.)

The righteous suffer either because they'd have made mistakes despite their righteousness and are now experiencing the consequences of it; or to enable them to serve as an example to others of how to learn lessons from turmoil and how to turn to G-d in prayer and devotion then; or perhaps because they hadn't done enough to help their contemporaries grow in faith.

(We for-the-most-part and over-all good people suffer, too, as we all know. And we think it unfair.

But perhaps we're too shallow in our definition of goodness, and consider anyone who hasn't done anything outright heinous and untoward as "righteous" -- and that's why we think we suffer for no good reason.)

The wrongful sometimes prosper because, while they're mostly wrongful and very often bad, they're sometimes good. So they're being rewarded in the here-and-now for *that* (since no goodness goes unrewarded). They might prosper because they have righteous children who deserve good things in their life (or else their *own* parents were good, and those bad people are reaping the benefits of that); or because their good fortune will prove to be bad in the end; or to enable them to repent; or perhaps to expose others who are actually bad but who present themselves as good, since hypocrites like that find it easier to display their true natures when other wrongdoers prosper.

Lastly, Ibn Pakudah then addresses the issue of the sort of work we're to pursue given the talents granted us. Quite simply, he offers that the strong but unintelligent should pursue physical labor, while the intelligent but weak should pursue work that demands analysis and thought.

But he also draws an interesting analogy. "People prefer one profession or business to another" he says, "because G-d implanted a love and affinity for it in them" that's analogous to the instincts that animals have to earn a living -- i.e., to find food for themselves. That's to say that much the way cats catch mice, hawks hunt other birds, deer catch snakes, etc., each one of us has been granted a particular way of earning a living.

"Just as birds that catch fish have long bills and legs, lions have strong teeth and claws, oxen and rams have horns, while animals that live on vegetables do not have hunting and trapping components...", each one of us "has traits and abilities that incline him toward certain trades or professions."

He then offers the following advice: "if you find your traits and nature luring you to a particular profession that you're physically suited for and which you can withstand, then make it your own and endure the bitter and the sweet of it. Don't resent it if your livelihood is occasionally withheld from you. Trust, instead, that G-d will provide you with sustenance your whole life long." And he adds that we should never forget that earning a living in an ethical and upright way is a means of serving G-d, too.

"Trust G-d completely" in the course of your career, "and no harm will come to you" he assures us, " ... as long as you do it for the sake of Heaven." Each one of us is thus left to our own devices to determine just how much we indeed trust G-d, and how much of what we do is done for Heaven's sake.

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