

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 4:4 - PART 6

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The sixth area in which we're to trust in G-d's decisions touches upon certain "esoteric" themes like reward and punishment, and the Afterlife.

Belief in reward and punishment for one's actions is basic to the Jewish faith. But it's really no more esoteric than the idea that every action has an equal -- though not necessarily opposite -- reaction. Not a soul believes that things happen in a vacuum or go about unanswered; indeed, everyone knows that every "tick" elicits a "tock" *somewhere*.

We're asked to understand that on a deeper level, though -- to know that some "ticks" do good in the world while others do harm; and that any and all "tocks" that react to them will reflect that. We're also asked to know that some reactions -- rewards or reprisals -- are meted out in the here-and-now and others in the Afterlife.

Some have raised the question, though, as to why the Torah never speaks directly of the Afterlife, which is indeed an esoteric theme. There are several reasons, Ibn Pakudah informs us, most of which are due to its esoteric nature, in fact.

It isn't mentioned in the Torah because most of us really can't grasp things having to do with what the soul experiences anyway; because not everything is to be committed to writing -- most especially not esoteric things; because most of us would be overwhelmed if too much were to be revealed, and would be distracted from the pursuit of spiritual excellence, which is our main goal; because most of us only appreciate the here-and-now, so the Torah focuses on earthly rewards and punishments; and because the essence of reward in the Afterlife is attachment to G-d and drawing closer to His celestial light, which we can't understand.

In any event -- to go back to how we're to trust G-d when it comes to such things -- we're indeed to trust in the fact that we'll be rewarded for our goodness as He promised, and suffer reprisals for our misdeeds.

It wouldn't be wise, though, to "rest on your laurels" if you'd been good and to thus trust in *them* alone. "Thank G-d for all He's done for you rather than look toward your reward in the future" Ibn Pakudah says, and try "to repay Him with the gratitude due Him for all the many favors He has bestowed on you" and trust in His decisions.

Because, the truth be known, we don't merit a lofty status in the Afterlife by our own deeds alone.

Much of what we attain is based on how much we'd helped others grow spiritually, and a lot more comes upon us as a gift from G-d.

Finally, as to which deeds are rewarded or punished here and which in the Afterlife, Ibn Pakudah offers this insight. As he pointed out early on in this work, "there are two kinds of deeds: hidden ones, which G-d alone is aware of ('The Duties of the Heart'), and obvious ones, which are open and above board to all ('the physical duties')" he points out. "G-d thus rewards and punishes obvious good deeds with obvious and worldly rewards, and He rewards and punishes inner and hidden ones in secret -- that is, in the Afterlife".

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