

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 5:4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Don't imagine it's easy only caring about what G-d thinks of you. For there's nothing more daunting than being ostracized, looked down on, taken for the fool, etc., for your faith. But settling for spiritual mediocrity is just as untenable. And the middle-ground is barely comforting either, in that it doesn't solve the conflict so much as assuage it.

So we're being asked to make a very bold move when we're advised to serve G-d alone and to overlook all the other "lords and masters" we've accepted upon ourselves. It seems, then, that the only thing that will help is understanding and internalizing three particular truisms about G-d, ourselves, and the world that we overlook which we'll now offer.

Ibn Pakudah asserts that what often leads us to "worship" and acquiesce to others first off are our misapprehensions of G-d's ways in the world and of how good He is. For if we realized His ways as we'd been taught up to this point in the book, we certainly wouldn't direct our energies toward others. The second thing that holds us back is our wrong-headed approach to His mitzvot and Torah. For one thing, we over-accentuate the idea of mitzvot as "commandments" and "imperatives", and disregard their being guides to growth, and advice from G-d and His prophets and sages. And we only understand Torah as "Scripture" rather than as the solution of the mysteries of our beings.

But what most especially has us fail to fulfill our spiritual potential is the fact that we often fall for the lies we tell ourselves *about* ourselves (which the sages refer to as the "promptings of the yetzer harah" -- that inner mechanism that encourages us to settle for spiritual mediocrity which every sensitive soul is well aware of).

Now, all of that obviously calls for a lot more explanation which could easily comprise a book unto itself. And in fact it could be said that "The Duties of the Heart" is nothing if not an explication of and a guide through this very struggle of the spirit. Be that as it may, though, we'll have to settle for what we'd said above about our misunderstandings about G-d's ways and His Torah, and wait to delve into the nature of the "yetzer harah" in the course of the extensive chapter to follow.

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