

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 5:5 - PART 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

There's no denying the fact that there's a part of us -- and no small part, at that -- that simply doesn't want to bother. It doesn't feel a real "need" to draw close to G-d, to be spiritually honed and matured, and certainly not to reject a lot of other priorities to pursue spiritual excellence. After all, there are many more attainable things, and a world of niceties that seem to offer a lot more in the here-and-now.

"Besides", as the expression goes, "we're only human"... and "G-d must have had His reasons for not making us angels", we reason.

But saying that is like being a bright young person who'd been offered a full scholarship to a leading medical school, been allowed to fast-track toward a career in surgery, and been assured that based on his interests, proclivities, and talents he'll undoubtedly assume a very lucrative, attractive, and high-caliber position in his field -- who says, "No thanks. Too much work, and much too long to wait!"

Indeed, the truth be known, we're each capable of spiritual excellence. We just need to pursue it *and to ignore the reticence that harasses us from within* -- that noisome entity in our heart termed the "yetzer harah". As we defined it last time, it's that "inner mechanism that encourages us to settle for spiritual mediocrity". It's nothing short of our "inner brat", if you will.

Whenever a thought rooted in the search for G-d comes to mind, the yetzer harah sends along some sort of "hunch" that rejects it and discourages us. For, make no mistake about it -- there are actual inchoate hunches, and then there are nudging doubts somewhere deep in the recesses that aren't hunches so much as self-doubts expressed from within. (And there's no denying the fact that it's often hard telling the difference, since we tend to laud hunches in our days and age, and to take every wisp-of-a-thought as inspiration and genius. But delving into the works of the wise is one excellent way to train yourself in true insight.)

In any event, we'll now delve at length into the dynamic of that inner voice that's more cynical than wise, the yetzer harah. And we'll offer more quotes from Ibn Pakudah this time than usual, simply because he waxes so poetic in this area that it would be an injustice not to quote him.

"Know, O man", he begins, that there's an "intrinsic component of your being, a part of the very climate of your spirit, and a cohort in the performance of the deeds of your physical and spiritual senses ... (that's) your greatest enemy" -- your yetzer harah. It "rules over the secrets of your soul and the darkest recesses of your heart ... and it waits to entice your every step".

Clever and learned, it does things like "dress in the robes of camaraderie, adorn itself in love for you and make itself a confidante, counselor and lover, ... signal and wave to you, and act as if it is rushing about fulfilling your wishes when it's actually shooting poison arrows at you".

His point is that the yetzer harah is subtle yet brash, seemingly wise but actually perverse in its logic -- a virtual inner con-man that catches you off guard by whispering inanities in your ear in warm and soothing tones.

Don't imagine that it's easy to disregard it, because it's not. Since, unbeknownst to you, it has engaged you in an unending struggle -- much the way an enemy in your office might try you each and every day, seem to loosen up for a while or even give up, then return with a vengeance.

In fact, Ibn Pakudah tells of "a certain pious man who once met soldiers returning from war with their enemies, with the great spoils of war in their hands and said to them, 'You've just come back from ... a minor battle. But you're about to fight a great one.' 'What great battle is that?' they asked, and he replied, 'The battle against the yetzer harah'". His point is that that's our situation in life, when we pursue spiritual excellence. For while the rewards are very great, the ongoing battle cannot be denied.

Now, one of the things the yetzer harah does best in order to undermine your dream of spiritual excellence is to "raise doubts about things you already believe in ... to confuse you about things already clear to you, and to befuddle you with false ideas and faulty reasoning". So we'll delve into some of those next time.

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