

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 5:5 - PART 9

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

What's a sincere soul to do? On one hand, if you show your devotion to G-d outright you could be misunderstood; while on the other, if you hide it, you'll likely slacken off. So, is it better to be "one of the guys" if "the guys" prefer to be spiritually mediocre, or better to be falsely accused of being a hypocrite -- or worse?

The yetzer harah would encourage us to "blend in" indeed and to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy. But like all its suggestions, this one also has its problems.

"Appear to be the opposite of what you are when you're with other people", it suggests. Don't seem to strive for spiritual excellence. While you'd really be inclined to speak heart to heart with G-d in prayer, pray the way most do instead. Utter the words mechanically and by rote; move this specific way and that, and stop on cue; whisper your prayers, and in a blah, humdrum way; or sing the melodies the way you might order food, and recite the supplications the way you might chew it.

And while you'd ordinarily study Torah as if closely reading a note from G-d Himself with instructions meant just for you -- astounded, touched to the core, moved to ecstasy -- and you wouldn't care who or how many were around you at the time, study it privately instead, the yetzer harah would suggest. Don't let others suspect how deeply and roundly the Torah touches you since that's between you and G-d, it would reprimand.

"Seem to be lazy and sluggish in your devotion", the yetzer harah would also say (as Ibn Pakudah puts it). "Don't let anyone know of your wisdom, don't teach anyone, and don't show how much you fear G-d or how well you serve Him". What you should really do, it offers, "is befriend all kinds of people Join in with them as they eat and drink ..., indulge themselves and play games. Reminisce with them... , and do whatever you can to assure the world that you're not an ascetic" -- that you're just like them.

But while it's important to be humble and to recognize your humanity as well, it's also essential for your spiritual standing to realize that you're only doing what we should *all* be doing by worshipping G-d well. So, if you do the things you do to get close to G-d rather than for others' sake, and if you do the same things in private that you do in public, then you're justified in what you're doing and should go on.

On the other hand, though, don't take yourself too seriously and misread your own piety. If you do, you might find yourself saying to yourself (in Ibn Pakudah's words), "Look -- you're one of the

Creator's pious ones, one of His treasures, and you deserve to be rewarded in this world and the world to come. So do everything you can *to* be."

Ibn Pakudah refers to well-intentioned people who fall into that trap as "hidden polytheists" and "self-worshippers" because of their self-serving agendas. He warns us not to "scoff at all the good G-d constantly bestows on us" by stooping that low, and to recall instead our obligations to serve G-d in return for all the good -- which is to say, selflessly and in search of spiritual excellence.

This series is dedicated to the memory of Yitzchak Hehrsh ben Daniel z"l, and Sara Rivka bas Yaakov Dovid, z"l.

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