

# THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 5:5 - PART 11

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

One drawback to striving for spiritual excellence is the feeling that sometimes comes with it that everyone else is spiritually inferior to you. After all (the reasoning goes), if spiritual excellence is the most laudable trait to have and you're one of the few people around striving for it, it follows then that you're successful on an ultimate level and that everyone else is inferior.

Now, while the logic is technically sound since spiritual excellence is indeed the paragon of human virtues, the claim still and all fails simply because the unabashed arrogance behind it out-and-out *contradicts* any claim to spiritual excellence.

For true spiritual excellence is rooted in humility, in the realization of how imperfect each one of us is, and in the dream of bettering *yourself* in the face of all your failings. An often unspoken-of side aspect of it, though, is the nudging suspicion that everyone else has something special going for him or her that you don't despite your spiritual accomplishments which is actually true.

So we'd need to fight the hubris of arrogance and self-satisfaction if we're to truly succeed. We've found that the best way to do that is to follow Ibn Pakudah's retorts to this particular tease of the yetzer harah.

The next time your own accomplishments impress you overmuch, he suggests, say something like this to yourself: How could I ever assume to be better in G-d's eyes than someone else if I don't really know what's in his heart? After all, he may seem to be one thing on the outside and actually be another on the inside. For only G-d knows a person's thoughts and intentions.

Perhaps someone who appears to be all wrong is actually much better than he seems, and maybe he's actually loftier than I in G-d's eyes, taking everything into consideration. After all, he might not know how to advance in his soul and thus have a better excuse for his lapses than I, since I know what to do and yet I don't always live up to it! So while he could be accused of "passive" or "innocent" wrongdoing, if you will, I could be accused of active and conscious wrong when I lapse.

From another angle, the truth is that every single thing he does to better his spiritual stature is noteworthy, since no one in his circle is likely to praise him for it (and he thus does it purely and selflessly); while everything good and lofty I do is expected of me by friends and neighbors, and I'd just naturally want to foster that impression among them for my own purposes.

Finally, the truth be known, we spend far too much time evaluating others. Do that enough, Ibn

Pakudah says, and you'll "have no time left to think about your own defects and blemishes, which we're all obliged to do" if we're to grow past them.

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*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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