

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 5:5 - PART 12

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The fact of our mortality does different things to people. It inspires some to disregard the mundane and to deepen their spirits, since it will outlive their earthly life; and yet it persuades others to "seize the day" and to pack-in as much as they can. The yetzer harah has its say in this as well, so we'd have to be aware of its arguments. But as we'll find, it addresses the issue from different perspectives, depending on circumstances.

If you're managing to do well in life, the yetzer harah will suggest that your success is thanks to all your "effort, ingenuity and wisdom", as Ibn Pakudah puts it. And it will urge you to "keep on busying yourself with earthly things" that way, rather than spiritual ones. For "then you can be sure that (your success) will continue -- and even increase". It will tell you to enjoy what you have and to live life to its fullest, "for very, very soon you'll be called by name, and will have to respond to the darkness of the grave", so take in as much now as you can (it will argue).

If you're **not** doing well, the yetzer harah will remind you of how fortunate and successful less spiritual people often are. It will suggest that the only reason you've failed was because you were too spiritual. And it will try as hard as it could to convince you that the pursuit of spiritual excellence is too "oppressive and obscure", and that you'd undoubtedly be happier if "you'd only dismiss this piety and give up on it!" Because, again, in the end both believer and nonbeliever will die (it will point out).

Then it will take a different tack. When it notices you deciding to do something to deepen yourself and to serve G-d, it will begin to blow things all out of proportion in order to discourage you. If you set out to fast, for example, it will say, "Watch out -- fasting weakens you and makes you ill". If it sees you staying up late at night to study Torah or pray, the yetzer harah will try to convince you that "sleep is even better for you than food, for it keeps you healthy and strengthens you". And if it sees you about to give charity, it will have you dwell on how much money you're giving away and will suddenly evoke a morbid picture of the sort of poverty you'd be opening **yourself** up to if you keep giving your money away.

Yet it will do all it could to make a sin seem suddenly very attractive to you, when you're about to lapse into it; it will prod you on in it and have you forget the price to pay in terms of spiritual mediocrity.

How are we to respond to all that? Ibn Pakudah suggests that you "simply rejoin with the fact that

whatever harm has come to you in the past (by doing good things) has always disappeared without a trace" -- as when your weakness from fasting quickly dissipated after you ate again, and how easily you made-up for lost sleep, and the like; yet "their rewards will surely endure forever". And that on the other side, wrongful and self-centered pleasures "quickly fade", while "the shame and disgrace" that result from your wrongful choices will "remain forever".

Hence the point is that our mortality can't be denied. But while this- worldly "rewards" for sins are a will-o'-the-wisp, the harm they do reaches beyond life's boundaries; and while the "harm" that sometimes comes from the good we do is short-lived, too; still-and-all the impressions they leave in our souls are immortal.

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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