

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 6:4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We just cited the instances in which we automatically surrender our wills to G-d's and to others', so let's explore the ones in which we're *advised* to -- even when we might not be inclined to.

The first sort would apply when we're at work or with friends, but we'll delve into that later on in the course of this gate.

The second would apply when we encounter true Torah sages and holy people - - those "who know of G-d and His Torah" as Ibn Pakudah puts it. It would simply make sense to surrender to their greater wisdom when we encounter them, since they alone can marshal all our talents and inclinations toward true spiritual excellence.

Third, interestingly enough, would be when someone praises us for our good traits. It's not that we're asked to acquiesce to his or her compliments and admit how good we are (though healthy, reasonable pride is to be encouraged). What we're actually bidden to do is to recall the many facets of our personality -- the good and the bad -- and to not overplay the good cited. We're to know full well the wrong we're capable of, and to be humbled by that reality. So what we're to surrender to then is to our vision of ourselves as better people.

The obverse of this, though, comes into play when someone points out our faults. What we're to do then, we're told, is to realize there's always some truth to what people tell us about ourselves (and some fallacy), and that we'd be wise to use the moment for reflection and repentance. For by doing that we succumb to G-d's wishes that we better ourselves all the time.

The next instance is when we enjoy good fortune. We're advised to foster true gratitude for that and to take it upon ourselves to serve G-d more selflessly as a consequence.

But there are many lessons to be learned from the gift of good fortune. It could indeed be a favor from G-d -- but it might also come to test our mettle, and it might bring us harm or throw us off the mark. But how are we to know which category of good fortune we're being subjected to? Just know that it has been granted to you as a gift when you find yourself disregarding the "trappings" and going about serving G-d despite it. Realize as well that it has been sent to test your mettle when you find yourself caring more about it than about serving G-d. And know, too, that it's doing you harm when you're so obsessed with it that you utterly abandon your service to G-d and humanity, you forget its Source, and you're ungrateful for it.

So the best thing to do when you're so fortunate would be to surrender to G-d's will in your life, and to use your resources to that end.

The next circumstance in which we're encouraged to subjugate our wills to G-d's is when we read of others' pains and sorrows in various portions of the Torah (and elsewhere) and we realize how we, too, are subject to all that. For the brittleness of human nature and the coldness of life itself come to teach us many things, but most especially the fact that life is to be focused on spiritual growth; and that each moment that allows us to pursue that is a gift from G-d outright.

Finally, it would do us well to surrender to G-d's will and wishes when we give charity, pray, teach others how to serve Him, and the like. For we're to do those sorts of things with no other aspiration other than of fulfilling G-d's mitzvot. Indeed, one could easily lapse into self-serving pride and satisfaction doing good things like that, and forget the point of it all. So it would help to recall that there's a world of good we could be doing which we often don't, and to concentrate on what's to be done rather than on who's doing it.

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