

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 7:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

In an age of "absolutely no absolutes!" it's comforting to know that there are out-and-out right's and wrong's, good and bad deeds. But don't misunderstand me, for there are certainly instances in which "wrong" is "right" and vice versa -- as when we're bidden to cut someone (which is, of course, ordinarily "bad") if we're a surgeon; or when we're told not to eat fruits and vegetables (which is ordinarily "good") if we're ill and have to fast. But suffice it to say that people of faith are blessed with ethical parameters within which to live an ethical and spiritually full life.

Now, it's axiomatic to the Torah that we're "wrong" when we either do something that the Torah warns us *not* to, or when we don't do something it bids us *to* do. In any event, if we were guilty of either, we'd have to repent for that. And we'd do that by rectifying our misdeeds in the ways we'll detail in the chapters to come.

Ibn Pakudah refers to teshuvah, then, as "the act of reworking your service to G-d" after having sinned, "and of restoring what was missing from it"; which is to say, of beginning anew and doing it right this time.

But, what has us sin? There are a number of things, we're told. First is our not knowing what's right and wrong in the first place. And interestingly enough just as in the secular realm, "ignorance of the law isn't an excuse" when it comes to our Torah obligations (much the way not knowing how dangerous it is to eat fatty, high-cholesterol food doesn't "excuse" you from heart disease).

Or we might sin for more arcane reasons. Either because our "yetzer harah" (the base instinct in every human heart to settle for spiritual mediocrity) got the better of us and we became negligent; because we'd befriended people who encouraged spiritual mediocrity and we wanted nothing better than to please them; or because we were "ignorant of G-d", as Ibn Pakudah terms it. What that comes to is this.

Most of us have a rather childish view of G-d Almighty at best. Now, while that's a full and broad-ranging subject unto itself, for our goals now it's vital to understand that G-d Almighty is purposeful, that He has laid out spiritual and ethical expectations for us, and He has thus presented us with a series of choices in order to test our mettle in that sphere. Should we fail in one aspect or another, we're expected to dust ourselves off, own up to our mistake, and go onward. Since that enables us

to achieve what G-d wants us to.

Thus Ibn Pakudah's point seems to be that once we know all that about G-d and His expectations of us, we can more readily accept our mission in this life and strive for true spiritual excellence.

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