

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 7 INTRODUCTION

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We'll now delve into the greatest gift G-d has ever granted us after the opportunity to serve Him, "teshuvah" (the ability to repent of our sins; to turn to G-d once again after having turned away from Him; and to set things gone wrong aright).

Our discussion of teshuvah comes on the heels of the last gate, which concentrated upon being humble enough to submit to G-d's wishes, because we can't possibly succeed in teshuvah until we're no longer arrogant and self-assertive. After all, how can you admit you've been wrong when you're always sure you're right?

Ibn Pakudah sees our need for teshuvah as self-evident. As he points out, we're often "negligent when it comes to (our) duties to the Creator", as each one of us knows only too well. For while we're preoccupied with and serious about the minutiae of the passing day, we're woefully blase about immortality and its own call.

We also need it because we humans are invariably "impulsive by nature, and made up of many opposing elements, traits and motives." For as everyone knows, we're "sometimes pleasant, other times objectionable; sometimes criminal, other times righteous; and sometimes good, other times evil". And besides, "there is no one that does not sin" (I Kings 8:46). So it's clear we'd need to know as much as we can about teshuvah if we're ever to achieve spiritual excellence.

Fortunately for us, as Ibn Pakudah puts it, G-d indeed "gave us the ability to correct our mistakes and to return our lost service to Him through teshuvah. He encouraged us in it, in His love and compassion for us; urged us in it; promised things to us for it through His servants, the prophets; exonerated us when we turned away from the path of service; and promised to accept our excuses and welcome us at once, despite the seriousness of our rebellions against His word".

So we'll now lay out the elements of teshuvah including just exactly what it's comprised of, what encourages us to commit ourselves to it, what holds us back from it, and some other practical pointers.

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