

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, INTRODUCTION - PART 3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Since it became clear to Ibn Pakudah that there are in fact inner, heart-bound mitzvot waiting to be fulfilled, he wondered if a work dedicated to offering and explaining them had ever been written. And he discovered that none had. (Let's not forget-- The Duties of the Heart was written in the twelfth century!)

And he noted that the only books written by Torah scholars since the redaction of the Talmud were either Torah commentary, legal codes or responsa, or repudiations of the claims of heretics. None other.

Ibn Pakudah was taken aback. Had he been wrong? Had the Torah *not* really charged us with pursuing inner mitzvot? Were they merely discretionary and optional, he wondered?

So he went back to the drawing board, so to speak, and delved once again into the duties of the heart. And he determined that not only are they logically imperative, but that the Torah itself as well as the Tradition are quite blunt about how obliged we are to make them a part of our devotional life. In fact it even became clear to him by then that the heart's duties are the very foundation of all the mitzvot-- including the physical ones! And that if we were less than fully attuned to these duties of the heart it would be impossible for us to keep any of the physical mitzvot! on any substantive level.

After all, he reasoned, if we were comprised of an inner and outer being, if you will-- body and soul-- it follows that there'd need to be inner and outer ways of serving G-d. The outer way would involve the many physical mitzvot, and the inner way would involve the sorts of inner mitzvot well be delving into in this work. And it also seemed clear that we'd need to serve G-d on an inner level given that physical mitzvot could only be observed thoroughly when the heart was willing, the soul wanted, and the self yearned to do them, as Ibn Pakudah put it.

Then again, aren't these sorts of mitzvot stated straight-out in the Torah? Isn't it written, "Love G-d your L-rd with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your possessions. And the words I am commanding you today shall be on your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:5), "Love G-d your L-rd, listen to His voice and cling to Him" (Ibid. 30:20), "Love G-d your L-rd, and serve Him with all your heart and all your soul" (Ibid. 11:13), "Follow G-d your L-rd and fear Him" (Ibid. 13:5), "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18); "And now Israel, what does G-d your L-rd ask of you but to fear Him..." (Deuteronomy 10:12) and, "Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: fear G-d and serve Him" (Ibid. 10:19), and many more like them.

We find much the same said by our sages and even more outright, as in, "The Compassionate One demands the heart" (Sanhedrin 106b) and, "The heart and the eyes are the two instigators of sin" (Jerusalem Talmud, Brachos 1:8), aside from the many admonitions listed in Pirke Avot (the series of moral directives set forth by our sages known as The Ethics of the Fathers).

Could it be that such inner obligations are only binding from time to time, he wondered? But that certainly proved not to be so, considering their make-up. It became clear that they're relevant, as he put it, our whole lives long, all the time, without exception... each and every minute, in every way, for as long as we're conscious and alive.

So Ibn Pakudah continued to wonder why a book like this hadn't been written before.

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