

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, INTRODUCTION - PART 6

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Finally deciding that there were indeed legitimate reasons to lay out the duties of the heart, Ibn Pakudah then wondered about something else. Would the people of his generation appreciate them?

It seemed to him that the people of past generations worked very hard on the duties of the heart to the exclusion of some other certainly good things that still and all didn't directly spur on spiritual excellence. So, for example, rather than delve at length into the details of rarely-applicable halachot (practices), scholars of the past concentrated on general halachic principles, and on knowing exactly what to do in their daily lives. And should a more exotic question come up, they'd research the matter there and then, and arrive at a practical decision. But not before.

They were thus able to spend a lot more time on the duties of the heart-- and to achieve spiritual excellence.

And so it's said, "In the days of Rav Yehudah they only studied the (Talmudic) Order of Nezikim, while we study more than that. Yet rain would come down when Rav Yehudah would (only have to) take off one of his sandals, while we were overlooked (and our prayers go unanswered) when we fast incessantly."

That's to say that Rav Yehudah and his contemporaries had achieved a higher level of closeness to G-d than the latter day scholars, despite their having studied less than the latter day scholars. And why? Because Rav Yehudah and his contemporaries sacrificed their lives for the sanctification of G-d's name. That is, they dedicated their beings to their spiritual practices, while we (the latter day scholars) don't" (Berachot 20A).

Ibn Pakudah's point was that his contemporaries were like those latter day scholars. For they, too, spent far too much time delving into halachot that don't touch upon the duties of the heart. And they weren't very likely to appreciate them. In fact, the same can be said of many of us today.

Ibn Pakudah also came to realize that our spiritual practice has to be rooted in good-heartedness and pure intentions if it's to be effective. And that the whole point of observing the duties of the heart is to align (our) inner and outer self in the service of G-d, which is to say-- to be the same, inside and out; to be a person of **integrity**, rather than someone whose "heart is not whole with G-d his L-rd" (Kings I 11:4) or with other people.

Ironically, we also have to **start off** with integrity. For it serves as the very core of the duties of the heart. After all, if I say one thing and do another, my insides are obviously dissociated from my outside. I couldn't be expected to be anything but a hypocrite. And I certainly couldn't be trusted to be sincere when it came to my relationship to G-d..

Ibn Pakudah then offered an original insight. He declared that a single deed is oftentimes more effective than many others, depending on the integrity (and loftiness) of our intentions.

For if we set out to do things because we love G-d or are in awe of Him-- **inside and out**-- and all we intend to do is fulfill His wishes, then what we manage to do then will be worth far more than what we'd do without those feelings and intentions.

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