

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, INTRODUCTION - PART 7

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Ibn Pakudah finally resolved to delve into the duties of the heart on his own. And he leapt from one Torah citation to another, and one implication to another, till he grew dizzy with the rich spiritual undertones he was unearthing. But he was afraid he'd forget it all. So he decided to actually write *The Duties of the Heart* itself, which was to serve as a primer on how to achieve spiritual excellence **from the inside out**.

Then he engaged in a process of self-examination we'd all do well to follow (especially those of us who write, or teach others). He set out to determine just how true he himself was to what he was saying; how genuine and rooted in personal integrity his own dictates were.

As he put it, when my deeds agreed with my own words, I thanked G-d for helping me in that and guiding me on the path. But when my deeds contradicted or were beneath what I said, I blamed and reproached myself, and used my own arguments against myself, contrasting my deeds with the righteousness of my words. Which is to say, he set out to determine whether or not he had a right to say what he was saying, and to improve himself when he saw that his own actions were off the mark.

But being human as we all are, and having the kinds of limitations and reservations we all do, he began to have second thoughts. It occurred to me he wrote, that someone like me wasn't equipped to write it, i.e., such a book. After all, it would call for systematizing and literary skills he didn't think he had (though he clearly did). I was afraid I was burdening myself with something that would only demonstrate my limitations, and that I was overstepping my bounds he said in all humility. So I convinced myself to... not do what I'd decided to.

But fortunately for us it occurred to him that many good ideas were rejected because of fear, and that dread causes a lot of damage. Which is to say that many great and important projects go by the waysides simply because their authors lapse into uncertainty and self-doubt. And he began to realize that if everyone who ever resolved to do something good or to instruct others in the path of righteousness kept still until he himself could accomplish everything he set out, **then nothing would have been said since the days of the prophets**. For while they were told what to say straight-out by G-d, were certainly not; we have to depend on self-evaluation and the guidance of teachers and friends.

And he realized as well that if everyone who ever resolved to advance goodness but couldn't, then abandoned whatever he'd already accomplished instead-- humanity would be without goodness or

nobility, everyone would just chase after empty fantasies, the paths of goodness would turn to ruin, and the abodes of kindness would be deserted. Which is to say that if everyone who was capable of enlightening us in how to better ourselves had to wait till he himself had become the very best he could be, that the rest of us would never benefit from his insights. And that mankind as a whole would suffer.

Ibn Pakudah also knew full well that people were reticent to act kindly, and that they were lazy when it came to pursuing goodness. So he knew that a work like his was necessary. But he was also convinced that with G-d's help... and a strong determination to subjugate himself to the service of G-d, that man **can** indeed improve himself. So he put pen to paper and followed through on his idea to compose *The Duties of the Heart*.

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