THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 10:7 - PART 2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

What's most remarkable about people who love G-d through-and-through, we're told, "is the fact that they find the number of mitzvot that G-d gave (us) to be too few in light of (our) obligations to Him for all His kindness".

After all, they said, while there are indeed 613 mitzvot (248 imperatives and 365 prohibitives), a number of the imperatives are exclusively communal obligations, others are for specific days and times of the year, some are only obligatory in the Land of Israel, and others yet are only circumstantial and occasional. And they reasoned that the prohibitives shouldn't really be taken as requirements per se, since we "fulfill them by merely *avoiding* certain things". Wasn't it true then, they pointed out, that the only thing incumbent upon us all the time was Torah-study? And so they came to consider what's required of us to serve G-d as actually quite minimal "in relation to the yearnings and longings to please" Him we should have. So they engaged in "special spiritual disciplines and practices" as well as all The Duties of the Heart we'd explained, epitomized by the love of G-d, and "added them onto the established mitzvot with a pure heart and for the sake of G-d".

"If you want to be affiliated with them, brother, and to be on their level," Ibn Pakudah counsels us, "then forsake and divest yourself of worldly luxuries, be satisfied with the bare minimum; train yourself to do without, and lessen your worldly burdens and allow your heart to not concentrate on them; and hurry to do the physical things you must do, but with your body only, not wholeheartedly or willfully -- like someone who swallows a bitter pill reluctantly, who's only willing to put up with its abhorrent bitterness in order to be cured."

Finally, we're exhorted to accentuate the spiritual over the material in our lives: to "favor things that will rescue you (from life's untoward temptations) and that bring you peace in your Torah and worldly affairs"; to "accept reason as your king, humility as your commander, wisdom as your guide, and abstinence as your beloved"; to "beware of negligence, laziness, and idleness, and to (instead) allow one instance of enthusiasm to follow another one, ever-increasing patience to follow increasing patience, and for each level of good qualities to be followed by the next"; and to "try to keep the world's desires from your heart" by replacing them with "thoughts of your ultimate destiny and the duties of your heart".

"Delve into this book" and read it again and again, we're told, "memorize its contents, observe its principles, and ponder your progress at all times". Do that and "you'll reach the most coveted of all (spiritual) levels, as well as the ultimate of exalted qualities that please G-d.

Bachya Ibn Pakudah then concludes this most precious and divine book with the following prayer, to which nothing could possibly be added: "May G-d in His compassion and greatness teach us all how to serve Him." Amen.

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