

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 6:5 - PART 1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

But, how does anyone ever learn to succumb to G-d's wishes as we're asked to? After all, we tend to be very feisty and bullheaded, and we'd seem to need some very convincing, muscular help!

So the only thing that will work at bottom, we're told, would be to accept and *internalize* the following fundamental truisms about ourselves and the world. Do so and you'll be dumbstruck by things about your life you might not have dwelt on before, you'll grow humble (which is a vital aspect of the process), and you'll indeed begin to serve G-d fully and selflessly.

All of these realizations are sobering and no-nonsense, and some are even off-putting and daunting. But we'd expect nothing less of the truth, and we'd need just that if we're to base our lives on G-d's decisions for us.

(Incidentally -- we'll be quoting Ibn Pakudah's own remarks somewhat extensively in this chapter, since they're so pithy and rich. For his language seems to indicate that he realized the truth of what he was saying as he wrote them, and was very moved himself.)

The first truism put bluntly is that what we are (on a *physical* level) is a clod of flesh teeming with blood, bones and all, that lives only so long then dies. Is there any truth more fundamental (though discomfiting) than that?

Yet we're very much taken by ourselves as a rule, aren't we? So we'd need an outsider's perspective like that of Ibn Pakudah's to "keep us grounded". But in order to bring the point home even more so Ibn Pakudah quotes another sage who once quipped, "I'm amazed by how arrogant and insolent people who (as a fetus) passed through a urinary tract and the blood system a couple of times can be!"

The second truism is based on the realization of "all the tribulations we have to endure in this world - all the thirst and hunger, extremes of cold and heat, illness, misfortune and fears ... as well as all our limitations, and our inability to escape from all that", which no one can deny.

And if that weren't enough we're also asked to contemplate the fact that "we aren't only *like* prisoners in the world -- we actually *are* prisoners!" For after all, who among us is truly free enough

to rise above the limitations of his or her body, mind, and circumstances?

The third truism is rooted in the consideration of "how quickly things change, and how swiftly death comes" -- when "all you'd ever wanted and hoped for comes to an end; when you're forced to relinquish everything you own and to give up the idea of taking them along (with you)", and when "your face no longer shines (with life) but blackens instead, when you start to breed worms in your body and to putrefy and decay, and when your good looks disappear as your corpse starts to desiccate, grow foul, filthy, and malodorous".

The fourth truism (a less off-putting, but still haunting one) is based on your coming to fully understand how good indeed G-d has been to us all and how much He loves us, and yet how "neglectful and negligent ... in the performance of His mitzvot" we've been -- when that's the *least* we could do to repay Him.

We'll cite some more things next time that we'd need to internalize in order to come to true humility and to the point where we indeed surrender to G-d's wishes.

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