

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 6:9

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

One of the most perplexing of spiritual dilemmas is how to mix G-d and oneself together without losing either. Or in other words, how to somehow affirm ourselves in a healthy way, yet reach out to G-d humbly and obediently at the same time. What we're told here is that there are good and bad ways to affirm oneself, and that the difference lies in the fact that the good ways still allow for G-d in the equation.

It comes down to the fact that we especially tend to exclude G-d when we take pride in our physical and worldly achievements, as when we're proud of our professional rank, for example, or our good looks. For when we concentrate on those kinds of things, we signal that we take G-d's direct role in them lightly, we disregard the ephemeral nature of those sorts of things, and we take personal credit for it (which is no more logical when it comes to intellect, good looks, and the like than taking credit for the wealth you inherited).

On the other hand, when we affirm our *spiritual* achievements, we tend to allude to and include G-d. But there are in fact good and bad ways to take pride in those sorts of things, since we could slip up and exclude G-d from them, too.

So Ibn Pakudah states that it's wrong for those of us who have achieved some modicum of spiritual excellence to take pride in what we've already done. Since that also tends to focus on the self, and "makes you content with what you have already done", as he put it. His point seems to be that once you feel that you can "rest on your laurels" like that, you set yourself above G-d's will and wishes, and show that you feel that your actions are *your's* to determine (which flies in the face of surrendering to G-d's will).

That sort of pride also demonstrates that you believe that what you're doing can be evaluated in human terms, and it sets you up as the final arbiter of who else has succeeded or failed at *their* spiritual goals. But who, other than G-d Almighty, can determine that?

It's nonetheless *important and commendable* to affirm your good deeds when you know you engaged in them in return for all the great good that G-d has granted you; when having done them spurs you on to do yet more; when it makes it easier for you to humble yourself to those who have done even more than you; when it has you love, sympathize with, defend, and respect others; and when it has you thank G-d for enabling you to accrue such spiritual wealth.

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