

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 8:3 - PART 9

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We're then asked to consider how we respond to changes in fortune and in a sense, to prayers turned on their head. Because there are times when we ask G-d for health, family, a livelihood, and the like which He grants us - - then takes away. Do we handle that with some degree of levelheadedness or are we set on edge?

The truth is that G-d does what He alone knows to be best, and can thus take back anything He'd granted us (much the way someone who loaned us his home could ask for it back before he said he would, for his own good reasons). So it really wouldn't do to "lament when (G-d) treats you the way He wants to and guides you as He sees fit," Ibn Pakudah suggests, "though it doesn't *seem* to be for your own good". Because at bottom "it's important to accept what G-d does and to rely upon His superior guidance and decree" in sheer humility and wonder. After all, aren't we each nothing more than "one of His creations; (whom) He formed, sustains and guides for our own ... good, even when that isn't apparent"?

Then we're counseled to have a broader perspective on how different an order of entity our soul is than our body, much the way some individuals are of a whole other order of person than others. "In fact," we're told, if it's true that "one person can be worth a thousand others, and not because of his physical strength (or the like), but rather because of the superiority of his self" and the loftiness of his personality -- then that's all the more so true of the difference between our soul and our body.

"So attend to your soul" as much as you can (without overlooking your body, as we indicated before), strive for spiritual excellence, "and realize that it's easier to cure your body from the most ominous disease than to heal your soul from the disease of a domineering yetzer harah".

And lastly, it's suggested that we not accept our status in this world as the be-all and end-all of our self-definition. In fact Ibn Pakudah suggests that we learn to see ourselves as "aliens in a foreign country" here. We're to imagine that someone of substance had compassion on us because we were strangers, and that he took it upon himself to provide us with our needs and to teach us how to get by here. What would such a kind soul tell us?

He'd let us know that we'd be leaving this land someday without warning, and that it would do us well while we're here (in the world) to learn to be humble and acquiescent, to not quite settle down permanently wherever we wander but to always be ready to move on, to abide by and be loyal to the leadership and rules of the land, to be helpful to others in our situation, to settle for humble

accommodations and amenities, and to endure trial and tribulation as nobly and unassumedly as we can.

For indeed, we're each strangers in this world who have been wrought from foreign, otherworldly soil. And we'd all do well to accept that reality, and to accept G-d's rule over us, too. For we're each "nothing but a single, isolated individual" who'd be wise to "ally himself with G-d alone" who loves him. So, "dedicate yourself to His service, brother, just as He dedicates Himself to creating, guiding, sustaining you in life and in death. Always keep His Torah before your eyes; hope for reward from Him, and fear His punishment". For if you "accept your alienation while you're ... in this world" your home-away-from-home, "you'll enjoy the delight of the World to Come".

Ibn Pakudah then ends this lengthy chapter that's so chock-full of wisdom and broad perspective with one last suggestion. He asks us to realize that these thirty instances in which we're to be introspective about what really matters and what doesn't, who we really are and who we're not, are just the proverbial tip of the iceberg. "Don't be satisfied with my few observations, or my limited treatment" he tells us. "For each instance requires a lot more explanation and definition than I've given it". So we're to ruminate about these themes on our own. The best way to do that, we're told, is to "keep (the list of thirty instances enunciated in this entire chapter) before you all the time, set them in your heart and thoughts; and each time you review it you'll catch sight of another of the sublime mysteries and spiritual morals you didn't see before. But don't think you'll have unlocked their secrets" by settling for a quick rereading of the words. "Ponder them deeply and repeatedly, better yourself and others by means of them, and you'll earn G- d's greatest reward" -- closeness to Him.

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