

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

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

The best way to "subsume your soul to G-d, to surrender it to Him; to exalt, praise and thank His name; and to cast all your burdens upon Him" on a daily basis is to pray, we're told at this point of the chapter, as Ibn Pakudah presents us with a short discourse on the subject.

The first thing to do when about to pray to G-d Almighty, he says, is to "divest yourself of everything of this world or the World to Come", which means to say, to aim for neither a worldly or otherworldly benefit from praying; and to "remove all distracting thoughts from your heart". Then after readying your body as well as your surroundings for an encounter with G-d also, you're to "realize Whom you are directing your prayers to, what you're asking of Him, and how to address Him". (In fact, we're advised to direct our heart toward G-d when we fulfill *any* mitzvah, not just that of praying.)

For if you don't do all that and merely recite the Hebrew words as if you were somehow engaging in a fetching mystical incantation rather than asking G-d Himself for help, you wouldn't be praying to Him so much as muttering to yourself. Besides, "prayers themselves are like a body, while your concentrations upon them is like a soul", we're told. "So when you pray with your tongue but you're really preoccupied with other things, your prayer is a body without a soul", which is to say that "your body is there but your heart is elsewhere".

We're also encouraged to "organize our prayers in our heart" before we begin, and to make sure they "agree with what we want to say, so that both we and they say the same thing". That is, we're to know what to ask for, prioritize our requests, ask for what we *really* need, and mean to have the prayer actually answered (which many people don't have in mind!).

Then Ibn Pakudah offers a fascinating insight. He portrays prayer as "a remarkable sign of G-d's faith in and reliance upon us!", because it's so powerful, and we have free reign to use it for good -- or for bad (G-d forbid). He likewise portrayed G-d as having "placed (prayer) in our care..." and as meaning it "to be hidden from everyone else." What that suggests is that we're to see prayer as a private conversation we'd have with G-d Almighty in which we'd cite names and circumstances, plead for things in detail, and ask for signs for when they were about to be answered. So we'd need to be trustworthy and wise enough to do that discreetly and lovingly.

Now, many people ask why we Jews have fixed prayers with ordered texts and set "scripts", so to speak (aside from the impromptu, spontaneous prayers we're all encouraged to express). Concluding this discourse with that subject, Ibn Pakudah wisely offers that a fixed text is a gift from G-d. After all,

it's hard to remember everything that it's important to ask for and express gratitude for "without well-kept notes"; so "our sages set down the things that most of us need and obviously depend upon G-d for, and which we'd be willing to surrender ourselves for, and made that the thrust of our fixed prayers." And we also have fixed prayers because "our thoughts are so changeable and ephemeral, and pass so quickly through our minds", so we'd need the help a prayer text offers.

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