

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 8:3 - PART 4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Next we're asked to ruminate about how far-reaching the attention G-d lavishes on us is. After all, He "observes us outside and in, watches over us and recalls everything we do and think, good or bad". Now, many would find that rather daunting or even off-putting, since most of us would cringe if even our family saw us inside and out. But those in search of spiritual excellence would find it comforting and would be bolstered by the intimacy with G-d that all that speaks of.

In any event, knowing now how close He is to our inner being all the time and the care He takes to see us for what we really are, shouldn't that impel us to take His Presence seriously and to try to better ourselves? After all, as Ibn Pakudah puts it, "if another *person* were paying attention to you and watching your every move, would you dare do anything that would offend him?" So, isn't that all the more so true in light of G-d's watching over us? And since we readily "adorn ourselves with our best finery when we come before kings, princes and leaders" shouldn't we "adorn ourselves before G-d both outside and in" when in His presence?

Reflect on this all the time, we're told, and some absolutely wonderful things will happen to you. "The Creator will always be with you in your mind, you'll perceive Him (all the time), and you'll always be in awe of Him and exalt Him". Not only that, but if you always keep G-d's presence in mind, He'll "undo your sadness, alleviate your fears, open the gates of the knowledge of Him for you, reveal the secrets of His wisdom to you, and he'll guide and manage you rather than leave you to your own devices".

On top of that, you'll learn to "see without eyes, hear without ears, speak without a tongue, sense without senses, and grasp things without having to resort to analogy", which is to say that you'll understand things for what they are and in an unfettered, clear way. You'll find yourself "disagreeing with nothing nor preferring anything over what the Creator provided you with" knowing what you know; and you'll "direct your will to G-d's will and your love to the love of G-d; and you'll love what G-d loves, and be repulsed by what repulses Him", you'll be that aware of His presence.

We're next asked to reflect on whether we've been focusing our more creative energies on G-d or on our everyday needs instead, and we're presented with a parable to reflect on in the process. "Suppose a king were to give you money to spend a particular fashion, and that he warned you not to use it any other way", Ibn Pakudah proposes. Then suppose that "he let you know that he'll count it right in front of you at the end of the year, and that he wouldn't absolve you of any loss (you might have incurred)". That's to say, imagine you'd been given a fortune, told how to use it wisely, and that

you'd have to account for what you did with it in the end, without any excuses.

We'll, you'd "certainly count the money assiduously yourself each and every month ... to know what's been spent and why. And you'd certainly be careful about the rest of it, you'd be aware of the amount of time left you, and you wouldn't dare allow yourself to come upon the day of reckoning without knowing what was left and what could be claimed against you" would you? So, take this analogy to heart, we're told, "and use it to determine if you're serving G-d well" -- if you'd taken the days allotted you and dedicated them to spiritual growth or not. "If you find that you'd been negligent," in fact, "then at least begin to take stock of yourself *from then on*", while there's still time. After all, "it's said that our days are scrolls upon which we're to record the things we'd like to be remembered for". So, now is the time to set the records straight.

Then just consider how self-sacrificing and impassioned you are when it comes to your career or other interests, as opposed to how lackadaisical and offhanded you are about your service to G-d. Why, aren't "your worldly thoughts your most inspired ones, and your material hopes and expectations your loftiest ones?" And isn't it also clear that "all your heart's desires and plans are worldly; ... that you only love people who are able to help you in material ways", and that "you'd only consider someone who can make them come true a true friend".

"Will you never wake up, brother?" Ibn Pakudah importunes us, and stop putting your heart and soul into your body and its needs alone. After all, "your body will only be with you for a while". You know, of course, that "it becomes sick when full and weak when hungry; and that if you cover it with too much clothing it becomes too warm, while if you leave it uncovered it suffers cold" it's that vulnerable. And "not only that, but its health, well being, and life and death itself isn't in your hands, but in the Creator's" anyway. So, concentrate on your lofty soul instead, and "act self-sacrificingly and eagerly to uphold it" the way you do when it comes to your body! We're then advised to consider whether we do enough to reciprocate for all that G-d has done for us and continues to favor us with. And we're asked to most especially note the greatest favor G-d grants us day to day, aside from life itself: "the ability to comprehend Him and His Torah". For we have it within us to dwell on both G-d's overt *and* His covert, mystical presence in the world, as well as on what he expects of us in this world as he set it out for us in His Torah. We're thus abjured to then "align our deeds with our wisdom and our perceptions with our efforts", which is to say, to do what we know to be right. We do that best, we're told, by concentrating our time and energies on spiritual pursuits rather than on extraneous things, "for G-d gave man only as much strength as necessary to fulfill the Torah's and the world's requirements (altogether); so if you use your strength for things you can easily do without, it won't be there when you need it" to grow in your spirit.

And then we're advised not to "depend on, 'if-only's' and 'maybe's'" and to lapse into statements like, "If only I had X amount of money or wisdom I'd surely fulfil my obligations to G-d", or the like; for that's not true. And we're told to "consider life to be a gift of time which we'll eventually have to repay G-d for. For at bottom "the world is like a marketplace where people gather, then leave; where

those who profit rejoice, and those who lose regret having come".

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