

THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 8:3 - PART 5

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Then ruminate about who and what you admire and venerate, and why; and what you'd do to reciprocate for his or her attention. For if someone important and admirable were to suddenly pay close attention to you, draw you close to him, and do you favors, you'd certainly love and admire him and do everything you possibly could to draw close to him and return the favor in full. "So, if that's how you'd behave toward some frail mortal," Ibn Pakudah points out, "then how much more so should you act that way toward G-d who loves you so" and who wants nothing more than to draw you close to Him.

But, what has us overlook that and to take G-d's generosity and love for granted? Our yetzer harah (our inborn pull toward the mundane). What would it take to overcome it? First, the realization that your yetzer harah always has something deleterious -- while tantalizing at the same time -- to say; and second, that it works by befuddling your thinking and persuading you to do absurd, destructive things you just *know* are wrong. Where do we go from there, then?

Ibn Pakudah suggests that we take this all very much to heart and to thus "awaken from our sleep" and "cast aside the curtain the yetzer harah has placed before our heart to separate us from the light of reason". After all, "the yetzer harah is like a spider-web woven over a window that (eventually) becomes so thick and dense that sunlight can't pass through it", i.e., it starts out weak and powerless but then lays one filament of rationalization upon another until it grows nearly as strong as the boldest truth. So beware, because if you're too nonchalant and indifferent to it when it first starts its machinations, "it will become stronger and withhold the light of reason from you (from that point on), making it even more difficult for you to banish it from your mind". So, "make every effort to bask in the light of wisdom" from the first, "and to sense the truth of these things in your heart".

Then dwell on the irony of how many plans we make for the future we know so little about. Just think about how much food we buy beforehand without knowing if we'll ever get to enjoy it, for example. Reflect upon the fact that we often times "spend days preparing for a far away business trip and thinking about which products we'll sell there, how we'll travel, how much food and whom we'll take along, where we'll stay once we get there and the like", when if the truth be known, "we don't know what G-d has decreed for us or if we'll even live that long", Ibn Pakudah chides us soberly.

For, as he reminds us, we actually need to be prepared for quite another journey: we always need to "be ready for ... the long journey to the world from which there's no escape and which can't be

avoided", the afterlife. So, "how can you ignore the world you're steadily heading to?" he remonstrates us, and yet always prepare for one ephemeral event or another. "Remember your (ultimate) destiny and plan for what you'll need for your stay in your final home" rather than plan for forays in this passing world.

Ibn Pakudah then goes deeper to core and focuses even more so on the daunting reality of death. "Be introspective about the length of your stay in this world" he says darkly, "and ponder the fact that your end is always in sight". Just "notice how suddenly, unwittingly, without warning and randomly others ... die. Notice too that there isn't a single month of the year when death doesn't come, nor is there a day of the month or an hour of the day when it can't". Notice too that death "doesn't necessarily come in old age rather than in middle-age, young adulthood, youth, childhood or infancy; for it can happen any time and any place", we're reminded.

But what's the advantage with dwelling upon death like that, which can be so saddening and debilitating? The truth is that "when you're introspective about life in this world, when you remember that many of your friends have already gone to the next world despite their hopes to keep their connection to this one, and when you realize that you don't necessarily deserve a longer life than they, you'll lower your expectations for the world, and start to prepare for your destiny", which is to say that you'll begin to put things into perspective and to concentrate on what matters most.

Then we're to dwell on our social life to see if we're indeed keeping things in perspective. And we're encouraged to set times aside to be alone, so as to think more about what matters and what doesn't. After all, consider all the drawbacks to regularly visiting with others for no particular reason. You'll find yourself in a situation in which you're forced to "listen to others' irrelevant chatter" we're told -- "all their 'he said's' and 'it's been said's', and other such nonsense".

And besides, people tend to speak against each other and to "cite others' faults and insult them" when they get together socially. And as we all know, we ourselves tend to lie when we're with others, to "swear falsely and unnecessarily", to "exhibit arrogance, sarcasm and antagonism ... and to act flippantly", to "act like a hypocrite", to "strut about and exaggerate our knowledge and accomplishments" and more, when we're with others. "The point is," Ibn Pakudah says, is that "most transgressions ... are committed by people in pairs and in the company of others. But solitude and isolation save you from all that, and they're the most effective way to acquire good traits".

That's not to say that we're to never associate with others, because that's simply not the Jewish way, which is indeed rooted in healthy companionship and human interaction. For indeed, "befriending *generous* and *learned* people is infinitely better than isolation" as a rule. As usual, the solution lies in balance and in forethought -- in weighing the advantages of solitude against the disadvantages and vice versa, and in making wise choices.

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