

# THE DUTIES OF THE HEART, GATE 8:3 - PART 7

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

We're then advised to take stock of how we interact with others and how our actions affect them. And we're implored to be altruistic and compassionate, and to strive for selfless communal service.

Ibn Pakudah tries to convince us of that by evoking a scenario that lays his point out. He speaks of "people who were traveling together to a far- away land upon a steep path, who had to spend many nights in camp together. Though there were few in number, each one had many animals bearing heavy loads which he had to load and unload by himself". The lot of them became exhausted by the end and barely managed to accomplish their goal. Why? -- because "they were at odds with one another and couldn't agree on a single plan, and because each one was only concerned for himself". What they should have done, we're told, was to have shared the burden. For indeed, "if they'd only have helped each other load and unload; if they'd only have been concerned with the well-being of the group as a whole and with an easing of the general burden (rather than with their own needs); and if they'd only have helped and assisted each other equally, they'd have succeeded". But they didn't.

Ibn Pakudah then goes on to add that it's our own self-absorption as well as our excesses that's our undoing in the end; and it's the reason "why the world bears down on its inhabitants so ... and why so much labor and effort is needed". For few of us are satisfied with what we have, and we all tend to "complain and cry because (we) demand luxuries".

"If people would only be satisfied with the essentials" Ibn Pakudah underscores, and "if they'd only try to improve everyone else's well-being and share in their common concerns, they'd conquer the world and have more than they ever wanted from it". But we don't, and not only "do (we) not help each other, (we) actually hinder each other, stand in each other's way and dilute each other's abilities", and as a consequence "no one gets what he wants" in the end.

We're then asked to allow ourselves to stand in stunned wonder at the marvel that is the world, and to speculate with fresh eyes about everything -- "from the smallest to the largest (things); ... about the attributes of the heavenly bodies; about the cycles of the sun, moon, constellations and stars; about rainfall and wind; about the birth of the infant from the womb; and about what's even more wondrous, subtle, obvious yet mysterious among the Creator's wonders, attesting to His utter wisdom and ability: His great governance, all-encompassing compassion and mercy, and His mighty guidance of the world".

But, who hasn't noticed much of that before? we might protest; and how many times can you see the same thing and not grow jaded? But Ibn Pakudah would castigate us for having such thoughts and he'd warn us "not to allow (our) constant awareness of those things and (our) being acclimated to them delude (us) into not being astonished by them or reflecting upon them".

He cautions us not to be blase about everyday wonders like "the flow of streams and the gushing forth of water ... day and night, non-stop", and to not only be moved by more dramatic things like "an eclipse of the sun or moon, lightning, thunder, an earthquake, hurricanes and the like". As such, we're told to study and reflect upon the sort of conventional wonders all around "as if (we'd) never seen them before" by acting as if "(we) were blind before (we) saw them, and (our) eyes have only just now opened".

Much along the same lines we're also advised to look anew at our "ideas about G-d and His Torah, about the sayings of the earlier masters, about the parables of the sages, and about various themes in prayer that (we) have known about since school" and to "not be satisfied with solutions (we) arrived at of things early on ... or with complex explanations (we) were faced with when (we) first began to study".

It would be far wiser to "look more deeply into G-d's Torah and the books of His prophets ... as if (we) had never read them before" by concentrating anew on the words, ideas, and challenges; and to "stop acting the way (we) did as a child" when we first encountered these immortal truths. "Don't settle for what was clear to you when you began studying" he says, "but demand of yourself that you study like a beginner" instead. And don't dare imagine that "what you learned back then couldn't possibly have changed", for while the words and themes certainly haven't, we ourselves surely have changed, and it would be foolish to rehash and rely upon the thinking of a ten year old our whole lives long.

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