

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 3:3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Anyone in search of spiritual excellence would want to do certain laudable things and avoid other base ones. But, which is better? Is it better to "stay out of trouble" as best you can, or better to go out of your way to do the sorts of things that would better yourself and everyone else?

We might think it's wiser to cautiously avoid the terribly spiritually-threatening things all around us, and to sort of hunker down and seat ourselves in a safe and warm lap-couch of purity.

But Rabbeinu Yonah says otherwise. He declares that in truth we'd be wiser yet to be spiritually pro-active.

(You could have the best of both worlds, though, at times. If you were faced head-on with an untoward temptation, for example, and you withstood the challenge right there and then, you'd have proven yourself to have been spiritually pro-active as well as *cautious*. Since you'd have tapped into the deep and abiding connection to G-d we referred to last time as "the fear of G-d" by withstanding temptation; and you'd also have *activated* the most potent power any of us has to reaffirm our relationship to G-d, known as "the love of G-d".)

But the sorts of laudable things we'd need to do in order to achieve spiritual excellence aren't necessarily world-shattering or cosmically intense (at least to the naked eye). They include the more everyday mitzvahs (commandments) like wearing "tsitsis" (ornamental fringes attached to the ends of certain garments), donning "t'phillin" (phylacteries), attaching "mezusos" (small-sized, inscribed sacred parchment scrolls) onto our doorways, offering "berachos" (acknowledgments of the blessings we each enjoy in life, like food, health, etc.), respecting your parents, etc.

For despite the ordinariness of those acts in an observant Jewish life, we're taught that the splendor and glow they lend to our souls is ineffable and other-worldly.

It would seem, then, that not taking advantage of these simple yet spiritually significant acts in an otherwise distracting day would be a tragedy of the highest order. And in fact it is, we're told.

Rabbeinu Yonah then encourages us to focus upon certain broader, potent pro-active mitzvahs as well, including: fostering peace (in the family, in the community, in the Jewish Nation, in the world), benevolence (or loving-kindness, which is "even greater than charity. Because while we're only able to offer charity to the poor, we're able to be benevolent to poor *and* rich" [Sukkah 49B], and also because while we can only be charitable with our money, we can be benevolent with our very being

as well), and studying Torah (which feeds and gladdens the soul so, and guides us in just how to do the sorts of things that would benefit the world in a G-dly, rather than in a self-serving way).

And he also focuses upon being spiritually pro-active by manifesting certain "noble virtues", as he calls them. Including acting out of free will (i.e., willfully, of your own volition, and purposefully rather than by rote), following G-d's ways, reflecting upon G-d's greatness, recalling G-d's kindness and reflecting upon it; manifesting holiness, submission, and devotion; being a dependable emissary and agent of G-d (i.e., depicting His best hopes for mankind), and the like.

For, as Rabbeinu Yonah points out, we "were created to realize just these virtues". As such, he asks us quite dauntingly, "what hope can there be for you if you don't direct all your efforts and interests toward the things you were created for?" Which is to say, what justification is there for anyone hoping to live a meaningful life to lapse into spiritual mediocrity?

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