

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 1:3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We're then told something quite extraordinary: that we "stand in the midst of a great balance" in this life. In fact, it's a terribly consequential one at that, since both our own future and the world's will be determined by what we do in the end. And it could be said to entail the greatest existential trial imaginable, for it hinges on our choice of what matters most to us.

It comes down to this. "Should we be attracted to the world and distanced from our Creator" as so many of us are, then "both we and the world with us would be harmed" in the process. On the other hand, "if we would master ourselves and clutch onto our Creator, and make use of the world's things to help us in our Divine service", then "both we and the world with us will be elevated" in the end.

That is, should we opt for spiritual excellence and reject spiritual mediocrity, both we and all we come in contact with will excel, whereas if we snub spiritual excellence and settle instead for spiritual mediocrity, then we and everything else will ultimately be lackluster and have failed.

How daunting and breathtaking a notion that is! For it signifies that G-d has placed humankind at the very center of the universe and lays the responsibility for the successful workings of the world on our shoulders alone. (Don't dare scoff at such a world view, dear reader, and cast it aside as a vestige of medieval anthropocentric -- human-centered -- thought. For who among us today who takes "global warming" seriously doesn't lay the blame at the foot of humankind alone!)

The point is that we have it within us to become pious indeed and to thus elevate the world in our wake; or to descend into wrongfulness and sin, and take the world down with us -- we're that powerful.

Ramchal describes elsewhere what life would be like should humanity incline toward goodness and piety. As he puts it, people would "cling onto wisdom and serve their Creator", and as a consequence of that, "the truth would be forthright and clear-cut," and "the wrongful would be pursued and overcome, and deception would be undone." It's also true that "no one would serve anyone or anything but G-d" and "only good qualities would exist", while "wrongful ones would be rejected and despised." And as a result, "tranquility and quietude will prevail, and there'll no longer be tribulation, pain, or harm. And there'll come a point when "G-d will openly display His Glory to the world, and He'll rejoice in His handiwork as His handiwork rejoices in Him."

Sad to say, that's not at all the world we know of, which Ramchal represents as one in which we're all "awash in desires"; where the great majority of us "despise wisdom and are far removed from it";

where "very, very few if any" of us "tend to serve G-d"; where "truth has been dashed to the ground, wrongdoing is reinforced and succeeds, and where there's more and more deception and misjudgment".

And as a consequence, "there's hardly any quietude and no tranquility" and "a lot of tribulation and harm" prevails instead. For indeed as we all sense for ourselves, "G-d is hiding His Glory from the world" now, "and everything seems to go about as if by chance and entrusted to the laws of nature" alone. "G-d doesn't (seem to) rejoice in His handiwork, mankind doesn't rejoice in Him, and no one even recognizes or knows what it means for all of creation to rejoice before its Creator." As such "the wrongful are powerful while the good are subordinate" (Derech Hashem 2:8).

But we can turn that all around. For as Ramchal puts it in another work, we "are both the initiators of repair as well as the (potential) repaired" thanks to our efforts. For if instead of "following the dictates of (our) eyes and too-human hearts and descending, we were to follow "the ways of the Torah and its mitzvot", our souls would ascend and the world would, too (Da'at Tevunot 78).

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