

# THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 4:3

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Unlike the people we'd highlighted before this, most of us wouldn't be particularly upset if we went off-the-mark and proved to be less than perfect. We would be upset, though, if we were somehow seen in a bad light for it, since nothing irks us more than being looked at with disapproval.

Ramchal's advice for us, whom he had termed "those of somewhat lesser understanding", wouldn't be rooted in a dream of closeness to G-d but rather in our need for respect and admiration. (As anyone who's honest with him- or herself knows, those sentiments matter very much to us. For while we may indeed yearn for spiritual excellence in theory, at bottom we crave honor -- perhaps fame -- and love even more so. There's no shame to that itself; for it too has been implanted in the human heart by G-d, like all other traits. The point is that it can be turned around and directed toward holiness, as we'll see.)

Ramchal offers that the best thing for us to take to heart is the following. "It's obvious to all thinking people" he begins, "that the division of spiritual levels in the world of truth, that is, the World to Come, is based upon the performance of righteous acts". And that "someone who's greater in such things than his friend will be exalted above him, while someone who's lacking in them will be deemed lower."

So, seeing how true that is, he goes on, "how can we hide our eyes from our actions, or diminish our efforts, if in the end -- when we can no longer repair what we have damaged-- they will cause us sorrow?" In other words, if status -- which is so important to us -- is so self-evident in the World to Come, and if our being less than spiritually excellent will be so clear at that point, when we can no longer do anything to improve our standing in others' eyes, it would clearly do us well to strive for excellence in the here and now rather than miss out in a chance to shine later on.

After all, as he puts it, we can't "stand seeing one of (our) friends honored and glorified more than (us), ... or, even more so, ... some pitiable, low pauper being honored, and not ... seethe in the sight" here, in our world. So, "if (we) find it so hard to be in an inferior position when it comes to illusory and unreal characteristics (here) ... how could (we) ever endure seeing (ourselves) being inferior to (such) people ... in ... the World to Come?" That's to say, if we'd feel miserable looking bad in this world when it comes to fundamentally unimportant things, how much more miserable would we feel looking bad when "looking good", being respectable and outstanding, really matters?

So it would behoove us to do all we can here to improve our spiritual standing while we still can. For,

"if you don't increase in righteous acts in your lifetime you won't be able to do it afterward ... for, 'There is no action, accounting for, knowledge or wisdom in the netherworld, where you are going' (Ecclesiastes 9:10)".

Now, this is a very cagey ruse on Ramchal's part. He doesn't tell us to rearrange our psyches and to somehow learn to strive for excellence. He accepts us for what and who we are but asks us to channel our very human drives toward better ends.

And so while it's true that we're the "fools" whom Ramchal terms, those who "only want to have it easy", who invariably say to ourselves, "Why should we burden ourselves with all this saintliness and abstention? Isn't it enough that we're not bad and doomed to Gehenom? ... If we don't get a big portion, we'll get a small one, and that will be just fine for us", in the end there's nonetheless hope for us yet.

This is arguably one of the most brilliant chapters in all of Mussar literature (as will be confirmed by the next section as well). For, rather than disparage us for our shortcomings, Ramchal asks us to own up to them and to do our level best to serve G-d in the end with what we have. And that itself will prove to be an element of spiritual excellence.

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