

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 4:4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The rest of us, whom Ramchal termed "the great majority", would have to be prodded along in the sorts of ways that we could bear. For, while we're not especially moved by thoughts of spiritual magnificence and we don't really care if we aren't seen in the best of all lights, there's one thing we want to avoid at all costs if we can: having to suffer. So we'd have to learn how to channel that reality into goodness.

So, "the advice for the great majority of people" Ramchal declares, should be rooted in "filling in the details of reward and punishment" in the World to Come. For we believe that the good will be rewarded just as much as we believe that the wrongful will be punished there and then, so it would help to know how far that goes -- just because we don't want to suffer, as we said.

His point is that once we know what's to come our way if we keep on doing wrongful things that we're bound to stop, much the way any thinking person couldn't help but being moved to eat more healthily and to exercise if he or she were shown clear and closely detailed images of just what happens to the heart and circulation system when we don't.

Let's step back a bit, though, and recall the Jewish attitude toward "Hell" and "Damnation". While many others believe that the wrongful are doomed to eternal damnation along with all the hell-fire and brimstone associated with, we do not believe that. There is a price to be paid to be sure, but it's not that, and it certainly has nothing to do with bodily pain and tribulation (since the body and all its sensations will have died by then). But retribution will be real on some inchoate existential level that we can't quite fathom now nonetheless (and who among us, for example, would care to endure the non-physical so-called "unreal" and "imagined" terrors that the psychotic have to bear that are so real to them?). So it would serve us all well to take retribution seriously to some degree and to not dare think that it's only an issue for lesser souls.

For the truth of the matter is, "who could be accounted righteous before his Creator, whose observing eye is exacting upon everything, great and small?", as Ramchal puts it. Even the likes of Abraham "couldn't avoid judgment on the small things about which he was not particularly careful", which was also true of Jacob, Joseph, David, and other great souls.

The principle as our sages laid it out is that "Whoever says the Holy One blessed be He overlooks things will be overlooked by Him" (Baba Kama 50a). Indeed, all of us -- "those who fully understand", "those of somewhat lesser understanding", and "the great majority" -- will have to

respond for our wrongdoings at some point. Take that to heart and you could hardly help but have second thoughts about your actions, no matter how you'd otherwise rationalize them, and no matter your spiritual standing.

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