

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 5:4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The same goes for our inner life; for our thoughts and emotions also need to be subject to some level of self-control. And Rambam illustrates that with a list of the sorts of things we'd do best to read and study, and others that we'd be better off avoiding. Again the point is that if what we read allows us to comprehend G-d and to thus draw close to Him, then "there's nothing to argue against (it)", as Rambam puts it, and all is well and good -- even if it isn't Torah itself we're reading.

For since we're charged to study Torah as much as we can, because nothing draws us closer to G-d than that, we'd expect that we'd be discouraged from studying and reading anything else. But the truth is that other things serve that purpose, too -- though not as well. In any event, Rambam encourages us to study secular things that alert us to G-d's place in the universe and explain His ways.

Rambam tempers his opinion, though, when it comes to certain secular studies. He'd certainly and vehemently discourage us from delving into things that deny G-d's existence or that foster an unhealthy cynicism in general about our Tradition or a distrust in the Torah's authority, but that goes without saying.

But he also doesn't favor our spending time on "(solving) problems in algebra" and on reading about "mechanics, The Book of Cones (a classical geometry text that one needed to be familiar with if he or she wanted to go further in the sciences)" and the like, or our "raising a lot of questions in geometry or hydraulics". But let's explain. While those sorts of things, which intelligent and inquisitive people once concentrated on in antiquity, certainly "sharpen our mind", as Rambam put it, and inform us of many valuable things, they nonetheless don't draw anyone closer to our ultimate goal in life, which is key.

(Rambam doesn't mean to say that we're never to study such things or their modern equivalents, like computer science, chemistry, physics, economics and the like, which all help to explain the world as we know it today; and he certainly wouldn't discourage us from studying such things in the pursuit of a profession. His point, again, is that such things are of secondary importance at best, and that they often enough distract our attention from and even draw us away from what matters most.)

Nonetheless our inner life certainly goes far beyond studying this or that. So Rambam also asserts that we're to curb certain other things that touch upon our opinions. We're to "only speak about things that will either edify (us) or stave off personal or bodily harm; about virtues; or in praise of

virtues or of great people". That's to say that we're to not waste time or our inner resources by delving into chitchat and the like. Instead, we're to imbibe upon the rarefied air of uplifting conversation, and to concentrate on the good and those who manage to achieve it.

He does say, nonetheless, that we'd also do well to actually speak badly of wrongdoers and belittle them, and he makes the point that doing that wouldn't be small of us, but lofty in fact. Since it would "lower (such wrongdoers) in the eyes of others, who'd then learn a lesson and not do what those others did", which is all for the greater good and will likewise draw us all closer to G-d.

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