

EIGHT CHAPTERS □ CHAPTER 5:5

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Even though we're to speak about things that edify us, once we come to understand that our goal in this life is to dwell upon G-d we'll find ourselves speaking less in fact. After all, what would anyone who wants to draw close to G-d have to say about anything else, other than for a good reason? Would a mountain-climber discuss the weather unless it affected his climb? Would a surgeon talk about the sea unless his patient had nearly drowned?

Not only would such a person hardly engage in small talk, he'd also never dream small dreams. He "wouldn't be moved to adorn his walls or hem his clothing with gold" as Rambam put it; which is to say, he wouldn't dwell on inconsequentialities.

But as everyone knows -- even the most serious of us, sometimes a person needs to disentangle him or herself and digress. To step away from what matters most for a while so as to come back to it fresh and bright, or to regain his composure if he'd grown discouraged. And so even someone dwelling on G-d would nevertheless need to concentrate on more trivial things once in a while to do that, to perhaps "lift his spirit", "stay healthy and avoid illness", or "to be clear minded".

In fact we're taught that "scholars should enjoy an attractive home, an attractive spouse, beautiful dishes, and a well-made bed" (Shabbat 25B) since they "amplify one's mind" (Berachot 57B).

For as Rambam explains it, "one grows tired and his thoughts become befuddled when he constantly delves into difficult things, much the way the body tires when one does heavy work -- unless he rests and relaxes, and allows it to return to equilibrium".

"In much the same way," he continues, "one should quiet and relax his senses by gazing upon paintings and other attractive things until he's no longer fatigued". In such a context, he reasons, "it's probably neither wrong nor unnecessary to decorate and adorn buildings, vessels, or clothing". Since your ultimate goal would still be lofty; you'd simply be stepping aside for a while so as to come back: your overarching passion is still be the pursuit of spiritual excellence.

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