

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 5:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We come now to the end of the first trait we'd have to achieve if we're to draw close to G-d Almighty, which is our life's aim -- caution. We'd learned so far that in order to be truly cautious we'd have to be earnestly and honestly aware of ourselves and our actions all the time (2:2, 3:1), to set time aside for serious reflection (2:3, 3:2), to be aware of how little of the world we actually catch sight of in the end (3:3), and to thus know ourselves well enough to be able to draw on our natural proclivities to grow (Ch. 4).

But it's equally important to know that there are a number of things that distract a person from being cautious and self-aware. For, as Ramchal points out in another work, "It's only natural for a person to be inspired to try to achieve" things that are important for him -- "unless there are deterrents," unless he's held back by one thing or another that throws him off course and dashes his dreams.

He follows this with the idea that if we're ever "to incline someone" -- or ourselves -- "toward something important, then we should first clearly point out to him how truly important that thing is". And then if, after that, there prove to be deterrents indeed, then we'd need to "to make him aware (of them)" and to encourage that individual to try to "rid himself of the deterrents" in order to be truly inspired to achieve his goal (Sefer Hamalitza).

The operative principle here is that, as everyone knows, there are always things to discourage us, either from within us or from outside circumstances. For, we each have our personal flaws that blind us to truths right before our eyes, and there are notions that we all seem to "fall for" no matter how harmful they are (or simply because they're harmful and something about us won't allow ourselves to transcend them).

It's nonetheless true that outside circumstances deter us, as well. So, we'd have to learn to recognize those deterrents, acknowledge their draw upon us, and take pains to avoid them if possible, or to at least channel them to our goals (the way we'd have to learn how to channel our lesser instincts toward spiritual excellence.)

Ramchal specifies three specific deterrents to caution: "over-involvement in the things of this world, levity and mockery, and bad companionship". So, let's delve into them one at a time.

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