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Parshat Bo: Renewing ourselves and advancing through the contemplation of wisdom

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What does philosophical contemplation have to do with the commandment to prepare a ritual meal remembering the exodus? Let us look at how Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, understands a verse in our sidra.

In this week's parsha, God tells Moses and Aaron, "Speak to the whole community of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household." If they are too few, they can share it with others.

The Children of Israel are to prepare a sacrificial ritual meal at the very moment when the final plague – the death of the firstborn– is occurring. While it is a tragedy for those who suffer, it is seen as a necessity under the circumstances.

We are commanded to commemorate the anniversary of this sacrificial ritual meal in future years by retelling the exodus story and engaging in certain rituals, many of which are connected to food and the ceremonial sit down supper. The Seder that so many of us participate in –even those of us who do little else that is recognizably Jewish–is the direct result of this command.

In his *Questions and Answers on Exodus*, Philo looks at chapter 12, verse 8: “They shall eat the flesh [of the lamb that had just been slaughtered for the ritual meal] that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs.”

Philo asks, why does God say that matzah with maror should be offered together with the Pesach sacrifice? He answers that God commanded this combination to be used because of the symbolism inherent in these ritual items. In order to understand the Torah, the reader needs to look at the symbolic as well as literal level.

On the literal level, matzah “is a sign of great haste and speed, while the bitter herbs are a sign of the life of bitterness and struggle which they endure as slaves.” But on a symbolic level, the leavened and unleavened represent different types of souls. “... [O]ne being haughty and swollen with arrogance, the other being unchangeable and prudent, choosing the middle way rather than extremes because of desire and zeal for equality.”

Bitter herbs, Philo writes, are a “...manifestation of a psychic migration, through which one removes from passion to impassivity and from wickedness to virtue.” Many are those who now regret that they wasted their youth (and maybe their adulthood as well!) pursuing the deceitful mistress called desire rather than having “renewed themselves” and having advanced “in the contemplation of wisdom.”

For Philo, this was not just a matter of wasting time that could have been spent studying something productive. Proper philosophic contemplation could lead to a “...happy, fortunate and immortal life.”

Happy we understand. In recent years, there have been dozens and dozens of books – perhaps hundreds—on how to be happy. For those of us fortunate to know that we can meet our basic needs without fear of going hungry or not having a roof over our heads, our thoughts turn to the question of how to be happy or be happier.

Fortunate we also understand. “There but by the grace of God” is an expression possibly said by one John Bradford, “There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford”, when he saw a group of prisoners being led to their execution. We are fortunate to live in a time of relative peace, stability, and prosperity and we know it.

But immortal life? Here is where we need to understand that the philosopher sees philosophic truth as the method of feeding our souls. If we utilize this life correctly, we can fortify our souls for eternity. That is our purpose on this earth.

Remembering previous misdeeds causes anxiety. By inhibiting misdeed through remembering how we did misdeeds and were worse for it, we can get on with what is important, which is philosophical contemplation.

One problem with Philo's idea –or at least my understanding of his interpretation – is that few of us in today's world are aspiring to achieve philosophical understanding. Making money — that we understand. As they say, money makes the world go 'round. Studying for its own sake? Why should we do that? Are you crazy?

So we don't. Religion becomes utilitarian—we demand that it relate directly to our emotional ups and downs, to family life, to practical issues, and so on. And we judge it by its effectiveness in helping us solve these various challenges. Can Judaism help us build stronger marriages? Can Judaism help us relate in a better way to our children? Can Judaism help us to feel better about the important life decisions we have made?

Maybe it can and maybe it cannot. But I think we lose the primary purpose of religion – to focus our attention on the theoretical questions. Those theoretical questions are precisely those issues which will not and cannot help us run our daily affairs. They are, nevertheless, of tremendous importance, whether or not you believe that they are essential to immortal life.

[Source: Philo, *Questions and Answers on Exodus*, Translated by Ralph Marcus, book 1, paragraph 15, Cambridge (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 24–25, <http://archive.org/stream/questionsanswers02philuoft#page/24/mode/2up>]

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