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Temple Bulletin Article (May)
Temple Shalom Lafayette, LA
04/28/2018

“Sweet as Honey”: The Purpose and Beauty of Sacred Learning

While studying at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I attended a session whose focus was the gradually increasing at which religious themes have been incorporated in to Israeli popular music. One of the many songs we discussed came from a band called *Habrera Hativit*, or “The Natural Choice”, which was one of the first Israeli rock bands to incorporate musical elements and instrumentation typical of their native Morocco in to a more modern rock sound. The song, entitled *Kfar Todra* or “The Village of Todra”, spoke of the singer’s nostalgic longing for the simple village life of this Jewish community in the Moroccan Atlas Mountains. In the first verse, we learn of a special coming-of-age ceremony performed for children having just reached the age of five. One of the central rituals of this celebration was the presence of a wooden board where the Hebrew alphabet had been written with honey. By licking the honey, the child symbolically embraced the communal hope that the words of Torah will become “sweet as honey” in their mouth. This simple, yet powerful moment in the life of both the child and community offers us the opportunity to discuss the importance of study in our personal and communal lives. As we approach the holiday of Shavuot, the enterprise of Torah study rises to the forefront of our attention.

The connection between the sweetness of honey and the sweetness of Torah is well-attested to in the works of Jewish sages throughout the past two millennia of our tradition. One instance of this image appears in Maimonides’ lengthy introduction to the tenth chapter of Tractate Sanhedrin in the Mishna. He explains that while the sole objective of the study of Torah is the achievement of “perfection” over the course of one’s life, this concept may not be sufficiently grasped until a person reaches, at the minimum, full adulthood. Accordingly, he describes how different motivating forces must be utilized in order to encourage a young student’s commitment to the study of Torah. He writes, “Thus, the teacher may say, ‘Read and I will give you some nuts or figs; I will give you a bit of honey.’” As the student grows in

knowledge and experience, other forms of encouragement come to replace the sweetness promised by the teacher of their childhood. With this approach the study of Torah may be understood as a means to a more fulfilling end over the course of one's life.

For Maimonides, this is a natural yet deplorable evaluation of the study of Torah. He explains, "it is unavoidable because of man's limited insight, as a result of which he makes the goal of wisdom something other than wisdom itself". For him, the study of Torah has intrinsic value regardless of what tangible benefits may come from it. As he understands it, "The truth has no other purpose than knowing that it is truth. Since the Torah is truth, the purpose of knowing it is to do it." For Maimonides, the study of Torah is not a means to an earthly end like money, prestige, or even sweet honey, but is instead an end in and of itself. As human beings in general, and Jews in particular, we must strive for wisdom and truth because it is the highest manifestation of our unique gifts of consciousness and rational insight.

Despite the eight centuries that separate us from Maimonides' particular social and cultural context, we find that the central issues addressed by one of the most erudite scholars our tradition has known still challenge us today. On the one hand, what is the ultimate goal of our collective commitment to the study of Torah and Jewish tradition? Is it simply a means to a more fulfilling end or rather an endeavor in to the study of our Holy Texts *lishmam*, for their own sake? As we stand on the cusp of renewing our communal devotion to the study of Jewish tradition in a few weeks time, such questions cause us to reflect on the higher purpose of our endeavor.

In the end, very few of us can be like Maimonides. We all embrace our own form of "honey", which awaits at the end of our studies. For some, it may be using our sacred texts to identify and work against the many injustices of our world today. For others, it may be the continuation of the culture and traditions of the Jewish people by the next generation. Even Maimonides' view of the study of Torah as enabling human perfection and eventual unity with the Eternal Source of Wisdom views this unity as the ultimate goal of study and Jewish living. We are all human and our human nature mandates constant pursuit of higher ends through a variety of means, and there is nothing wrong with that.

Whatever form of honey that precedes or succeeds of our Torah, may we also strive to experience the sweetness of studying for its own sake. Our Sacred Texts may not teach us about the biological processes that shape the natural world, but it can teach us about the spiritual processes that shape a human soul. It may not teach *how* the world is, but instead calls upon us to consider *why* the world is. May we open our hearts and our minds to this most holy form of learning and engage in the study of Torah with the eternal hope that in its words, we discover a form of ineffable truth that seeks to break free of the limitations of human language. Finally, may our learning together be a source of love and life, sanctity and sweetness, holiness and healing for many years to come.

כן יהי רצון

May it be the Eternal's will

L'Shalom,

Ross