

Clarity of Mind

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Before reading this essay, it might be helpful to take a look at these passages from Isaiah: 5:11-23, 28:1-7, 29:9-15

Knowledge

What exactly is knowledge? The Malbim, commenting on Isaiah 11:2, wrote that *De'ah* ("דעה") is the knowledge a person acquires through the direct experience of his senses or through the use of proofs developed through logical methodology. The knowledge about which this essay is concerned is made up of things that we know - or at least, that we should know - with certainty. We are especially concerned with those things that we need in order to make intelligent choices concerning our personal and Torah lives - both being deeply complex areas of activity.

The final redemption, Isaiah teaches, will "uncover the eyes of the blind" while "the ears of the deaf shall open" (35:5 - see also Deut. 30:6). Only then will we enjoy unrestrained *de'ah*. In the meantime, our exile experience is colored by at least some level of intellectual and emotional numbness. Our job until the redemption must therefore involve expending significant effort to fight this numbness. The simple awareness of our state can also be humbling, leaving us with a healthy skepticism of our own assumptions and conclusions.

Those are our goals. The rest of this essay will try to describe how we can get there; Isaiah's tried and tested program.

Clarity: What it takes to get it

Justice

Justice is a determinant of clarity. Or, in other words, through the establishment of just and fair practices, a society provides its citizens with greater access to both personal and communal clarity.

"Behold, for (the purpose of) righteousness is a king crowned, and ministers rule for justice...The heart of the hasty will (as a result) understand to know, the tongue of the confused will (therefore) quickly speak with clarity." (32:1,4)

Somehow, a generation that willingly allows itself to be governed by leaders who are just will enjoy easier access to more productive thinking. By contrast (as we will later see), the absence of justice invites corrosive and corrupting flattery (see verse 5).

Intensity

More than for any inborn inability to understand or even for willful neglect of our own education, Isaiah bitterly criticizes us for our laziness and lack of intensity.

"Rabbi Avahu said: Jerusalem was certainly destroyed (at least partly) because they failed to recite the Shema in the morning and evening, as it says: 'Woe! Those who rise in the morning and chase intoxicating drinks; who tarry in the evening, wine inflaming them. They have harp and lyre, timbrel and flute and wine as their drink and to the work of God they do not gaze; the acts of His Hands they do not see.'" (TB Shabbos 119b and Isaiah 5:11-12)

What is it about these of Isaiah's words that drew the Talmud's attention specifically to the recitation of

Shema? Rashi explains:

"The verse concludes 'and to the work of God they do not gaze' - they didn't (use the opportunity of reciting the *Shema*) to associate God's name (i.e., acknowledge His influence) on all creations."

The *Sefer Hachinuch* (#420) wrote that the Torah commanded us to recite *Shema* twice daily (as least partly) in order to institutionalize regular periods of intense focus on God and our duties to Him. The proper minimal performance of this particular activity requires that for a few moments at least, all extraneous thoughts be pushed aside and that one's emotional energy be targeted exclusively on the words and their meanings. This, wrote the *Sefer Hachinuch*, is to force us, at least once in a while, to use all of our intellectual energy for a Torah-task...thereby protecting us from the risk of complacency and superficiality that our immersion in common daily tasks poses.

The Torah, in other words, wants us fully engaged in life and not just going through the motions.

As we will see, there are many areas of common, everyday Jewish life (both ancient and very modern) in which intensity is chronically lacking. Perhaps, however, Isaiah's main target is drunkenness.

It must be understood that Torah law does not forbid the consumption of alcohol. Even drunkenness is technically allowed as long as one carefully maintains control over himself and doesn't engage in inappropriate and irresponsible behavior. Nevertheless, drunkenness is the analogy Isaiah chooses to illustrate a more general area of weakness in the Jewish people. Besides the verses quoted above, we find others, including:

"Woe! They are heroes in drinking wine; men of valor in mixing intoxicants" (5:22)

"Woe! The drunkards of Ephraim are the crown of arrogance; a wilting blossom is his glory; wounds of drunkenness [from having stumbled and injured themselves in a drunken stupor] adorn the perfumed heads." (28:1)

"So too these err through wine; priest and prophet stray through intoxicating drinks. They err through intoxicating drinks, are destroyed by wine; they err from intoxicating drinks, err in seeing; (they) corrupt justice." (28:7)

Wine and music. Neither need be in any way contradictory to a Torah life. What then is Isaiah criticizing? Could it not be deep focus represented by the "rising in the morning" and the "tarrying at evening"? The many musical instruments (or, put differently, the all-absorbing search for the perfect sound and transformative mood) and the drunkenness as source of excitement (it, more than anything, "inflames" a man's mind)? The elevation of drinking to a sport or even a noble pursuit all of its own in which heroes, able to "hold their liquor" are canonized?

In other words, when wine and music become life's focus and animating force rather than just tools for some greater good, then we have badly lost our way. More to the point: what is truly important to us is no longer moral growth and Torah knowledge, but utterly profane pursuits. We may still attend a regular Torah class and pay lip service to our Torah duties, but our hearts are elsewhere.

So drink and song are - at best - useful tools, but it is on God's Torah that our most meaningful time and attention should be focused. Yet the Talmud uses this same passage (5:2) to promote another enterprise entirely: applied science.

"Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi quoting bar Kappara, anyone who knows how to perform calendrical calculations (literally: to calculate seasons and astronomical movements) and doesn't, is referred to by the words 'and to the work of God they do not gaze; the acts of His Hands they do not see.'"

It doesn't seem quite likely that bar Kappara's concern was in maintaining a stable calendar, for that only requires a few individual specialists in each generation. The fact that bar Kappara demands the compliance of *everyone* with the intellectual ability, suggests that the study itself has some intrinsic and even universal benefit. In fact, the subsequent words of the Talmud provide a clue as to just what this benefit is:

"Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmeini said in the name of Rabbi Yonason, how do we know that a man is commanded to perform calendrical calculations? As is says: 'You should guard and keep them (the commandments) for it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations.' (Deut. 4:6)"

Which would seem to suggest that widespread understanding of the more complex astronomical sciences among Jews (with the primary goal, of course, of more precise mitzvah observance) will lead to increased respect for God's Torah among the world's nations (for, they will reason, if this Torah was indeed not a wondrous and beautiful thing, why else should such a wise people focus so much of their intellectual energy on its observance?).

Astronomy, then, is an appropriate focus of our intense attention. Its study will inspire a greater respect for Torah. But are musicology and oenology (the scientific study of the biology and chemistry of wine) not also demanding disciplines? Do they not also have their place in Torah life (concerning the appropriate use of both music and wine in the Temple service, for instance)? So why are they automatically relegated to minor roles in our intellectual and emotional lives while astronomy is considered primary?

Perhaps the difference lies in the greater social context of each pursuit: few astronomers are more prone to drunkenness as a direct result of their particular study and for fewer still does the discipline lead to wasted nights of dance and song. In other words, their particular work more readily allows for objective focus and thus will more likely lead to an appropriate sense of religious inspiration. On the other hand, while no one can deny the value of the honest study of wine or music, still, given the higher contextual risk, the sages could hardly in good conscience *require* its pursuit.

One should also note that Isaiah specifically criticizes song and drink when pursued *together*. Either one by itself could possibly provide a more positive experience.

Finally, one should consider that producing legions of trained and passionate musicologists and oenologists - as useful as they may indeed be - will be unlikely to enhance the nations' respect for Torah.

In any case, we can now reasonably conclude that, besides complacency, Isaiah's system discourages intense, distracting focus on activities that are primarily mundane while promoting (besides Torah study and thoughtful observance of the commandments) certain pursuits that hold the potential for a broader benefit.

One can only imagine what the prophet might have said about our community's current obsessions with consumerism and the constant demand for ever-higher standards in clothes, food, opulent home furnishings and weddings. He would probably also have shown little opposition to efforts to reduce our growing dependence on communication technologies.

Clarity: what gets in the way

Moral Confusion

When a society honors its drunkards¹, misers² and criminals³ more than scholars and role models of virtue and self-sacrifice, its sense of direction is skewed. Without any moral frame of reference, how well prepared are the members of such a community to objectively assess their ethical choices?

"From the time that 'their hearts follow after their pleasures' (Ez. 33:31)⁴ became rampant, '(those who call) evil, good and good, evil' (Isaiah 5:20) also increased. From the time that '(those who call) evil, good and good, evil' became rampant, 'Woe...woe' (Isaiah, throughout chapter 5) also increased." (TB Sotah 47b)

In other words, losing its inner drive for righteousness, weakens a society's ability to intuitively judge between good and evil⁵ - which leads in turn to the kind of behavior that invites Divine wrath.

Rationalizations

If people seek to justify their rejection of God's message - creating, for instance, "alternatives" to Torah principles and commandments (28:10 - see Rashi) and imagining themselves beyond the reach of death and disaster (28:15) - who then will remain sober and clear-headed enough to provide intelligent moral guidance?

Using a similar way of understanding 28:10, Rabbi Hirsch⁶ identifies Isaiah's criticism of Jews who minimize the value and consequences of Torah commandments, and

"...even worse, they [believed the commandments] were there to make life difficult for them, וְאֵלֶּיךָ יִצְטָרְפוּ, creating obstacles and hindrances at every step, to cause Israel to lag behind all other nations."

If a person convinces himself that God's Torah has no far-reaching impact and, in the final analysis, is little more than an impediment to "getting on in life", then he has effectively created for himself the intellectual framework of apostasy. Hardly a blueprint for successful objectivity.

Superficial Observance

"Deliberate and be amazed, engage in cries and cry out; be drunk but not from wine, stagger but not from intoxicants. For God has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep, He has squeezed tight your eyes, your prophets and your visionary leaders He has covered...And God said: 'for this people has approached (to serve Me) with its mouth and with its lips they honor Me. But its heart is far from Me; their fear of Me is (that of) men acting to satisfy some habit (מִצְוַת אֲנֹכִי שִׁמְרָה מְלִמְדָה). Therefore, I will again astound this people with wonders, and the wisdom of scholars will be lost, and the understanding of the wise will be hidden.' Woe are those who employ deep efforts to hide their true intentions and as they hide their actions they say 'who sees and who knows?'" (29:9-10, 13-15)

Clarity of mind - like success in understanding Torah - depends on God's good will and assistance.

1 5:22

2 32:5

3 5:20

4 That is, rather than eagerly seeking the guidance of God and His prophets, some people followed their own base desires and even mocked those "foolish" enough to remain loyal to the Torah.

5 This moral blindness can sometimes even be willful. See Isaiah 6:10

6 Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch Vol IV, 88

Without sincerity, even a generation that busily serves God will not only lack clarity, but their confusion will be so great as to appear to come from God Himself.⁷ The result is a spiritual blindness and a consequent frantic search for philosophies and superstitious rituals to fill the disturbing new intellectual hole that's left behind. The rush to "hide" ones neglect of Torah responsibilities even from oneself, will, in turn, lead to yet more blindness - often taking the form of largely superficial observance of the Torah's laws.

Clarity: why we must have it

Our clarity (האד), it seems, is what makes us human:

"And Rabbi Elazer said: it is forbidden to offer compassion to any man who has no *de'ah*, as it says: 'For this is not a nation of understanding therefore their Maker will not be compassionate and their Founder will not be gracious' (Isaiah 27:11)." (TB Sanhedrin 92a)

The Maharsha points out an apparent contradiction between this passage and the well-known (if often-ignored) duty to show compassion to all God's creatures. Are those who lack clarity any worse than the humblest of creations for whom God desires good? In fact, wrote the Maharsha, they are worse: we must be generous to those of God's creations who have not corrupted the basic good qualities with which they were made. However, someone who has chosen to deviate from his inborn, straightforward nature has indeed lost some of his Divine image. Clear thinking, then, is at least in theory available to everyone - but it's ours to lose.

Our clarity, it seems, is what lies at the foundation of our national existence:

"Rabbi Yochanan said: anyone who drinks (alcohol) to (the accompaniment of) four types of (musical instruments) brings five (types of) punishment to the world as it says: 'Woe! Those who rise in the morning and chase intoxicating drinks...' (Isaiah 5:11) What does (Isaiah) then say? 'Therefore, exile My people for (their) lack of knowledge...' (TB Sotah 48a)

"Rabbi Avahu said, Jerusalem was certainly destroyed [at least partly] because they failed to recite the *Shema* in the morning and evening, as it says: 'Woe! Those who rise in the morning and chase intoxicating drinks; who tarry in the evening, wine inflaming them. They have harp and lyre, timbrel and flute and wine as their drink and to the work of God they do not gaze; the acts of His Hands they do not see.' (Isaiah 5:11-12)" (TB Shabbos 119b)

"And Rabbi Elazer said: any man who has no *deah* will, in the end, be exiled, as it says: 'Therefore, exile My people for (their) lack of knowledge'" (TB Sanhedrin 92a)

Our clarity, it seems, is an irreplaceable component of our nation's basic social integrity. The word "Woe" ("הוי") which precedes many of the prophet's criticisms of the Jews - including that of 5:11 mentioned above - is, according to Rashi, symptomatic of a society's deep vulnerability:

"The word 'ashrei' is repeated 22 times in Psalms (as an indication of the merits of) those who fulfill the Torah's laws, and Isaiah used the word 'Woe' 22 times (regarding) evil men." (Rashi to Isaiah 5:8).

⁷ See Radak to 29:10

Finally, **our clarity**, it seems, is an absolute prerequisite for growth and repentance:

"Why did (the sages) place '*Teshuva*' (the fifth blessing of the weekday *amidah* and the one that concerns repentance) following '*Bina*' (the fourth blessing, in which we pray for understanding)? Because it says: "(The heart of this nation is fat and its ears are heavy and its eyes are covered, lest it should see with its eyes and its ears should hear) and its heart will understand and he will return and be healed.' (Isaiah 6:10)" (TB Megila 17b)