

Dear Community,

The study of philosophy has disappeared from the zeitgeist of our time. In a moment when trite banalities infect our communal discourse, the objective, analytical study of the thought systems that created those soundbites has disappeared from the mainstream. It is relegated to bow-tie wearing, herbal tea-sipping academics or to pot-smoking, kombucha-drinking denizens of the Village. The vanishing of this discipline from the intellectual mainstream can be construed as a threat to our collective future.

Philosophy, the love of wisdom, is separated by Plato from wisdom itself (Symposium). Socrates describes it as the median between wisdom and foolishness: the pursuit of wisdom, but not the work of the already-wise. Judaism begs to differ. The love of wisdom, to us, is wisdom. In fact, wisdom is conferred only upon those who are enthralled with its beauty: “Give wisdom to the wise (Daniel 2, 21).”

The Passover Hagadda quotes the wise son as asking, “What are these laws which you practice?” Why is he described as wise if he is professing ignorance? Paradoxically, the lack is the proof: it is his sincere desire to know which makes him wise. Similarly, Rabbeinu Yonah interprets Pirkei Avot “A wise man is one who learns from everyone” as characterizing the individual so hungry for knowledge that he seeks it from everyone. How do we understand this debate about wisdom? While intellectual curiosity may be laudable, how can Judaism claim that the pursuit of knowledge defines wisdom more than its very attainment?

In this week's Torah portion, the work of constructing the Mishkan begins. The Torah describes the people designated to lead its construction as those who have “lent their hearts.” The Ramban comments that as former slaves, the Jews were not trained in intricate arts of fine craftsmanship. How can they be expected to have the skills and the knowledge to complete this incredibly ambitious project? The Torah answers that G-d inspired them with the knowledge of how to build and what to do. If this was the case, what were the criteria to be accepted to this elite corp of engineers? The Ramban explains that the metric on which they were judged was how much they desired this wisdom, how much they had ‘lent their heart’ and dedicated themselves to its acquisition.

The Hebrew term for the quintessential Torah scholar is the Talmid Chacham: the wise student. Wisdom is infinite, and nobody can assert that they have consumed even an infinitesimal share of the entire pie. What is valued and useful is the desire and ability to keep learning, continue developing, and persist in leveraging our existing knowledge to know even more.

We wring our hands about the state of our national dialogue. We have devolved into tribal creatures, seeking affirmation from members of our own herd, and accepting without question the dogmas of our particular mob. We can no longer argue without creating animosity and disrespect. I believe that this decline goes hand in hand with our national disengagement in the importance of ideas and objective thought. We have devalued intellectual development where there is no vocational merit, and instead embraced emotional affirmation and subjective relativity. If we do not strive to be “Chachmei Lev,” of the tribe who love and seek knowledge, we condemn ourselves to the avarices of enlightened ignorance, and lose the chance to restore our ability to seek truth and real civility in our society.

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein