

Bereshit – 5783

A little learning is a dangerous thing
Drink deep or taste not the Pierian Spring
There shallow drafts intoxicate the brain
And drinking largely sobers us again.

So wrote Alexander Pope in around 1774. I have thought of the opening lines of this simple poem that Pope wrote as I pondered where to begin today's Davar Torah. After I read a couple of various commentaries, I am even more convinced that what Pope had to say about knowledge applies to what the text in today's parsha tells the story of. After all, we are reading the first pages of a story that took place over hundreds of years. It begins with creation and the Garden of Eden and ends with the Children of Israel, Am Yisrael in fact, on the cusp of taking over the Holy Land promised to them by HaShem first in the presence of Abraham and then, yet again, at Mount Sinai in the presence of the entire people. If we look at the Five Books of Moses through the lens of what Pope was writing about, we could make a cogent argument for the fact that from the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs through Moses, we are gaining knowledge not only of ourselves but of HaShem as well.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, of blessed memory, who was taken at the height of his leadership of the Jews of England, wrote in one of his Divrei Torah for this parsha how he was, like the rabbis of old, trying to understand just what kind of knowledge it was that Adam and Eve were warned against by eating the fruit of the tree of Knowledge. On the face of it, we could ask why HaShem would be warning Adam and Eve NOT to eat if that very tree.

After all, isn't it one of our goals in life to gain knowledge? So why was this such a bad thing that they did? If we listen again to the words of Pope, perhaps it was because they didn't eat enough of it. But Rabbi Sachs would suggest that it precisely because we are only looking on the FACE of it, not deeply enough.

Sachs goes on to remind his readers that like Maimonides who helped him gain insight with the text, we need to consider that when Adam and Eve ate the apple, they became aware of the fact that they were naked. The knowledge they gained was that they were unclothed, and this was not a good thing. They were ashamed of their nudity. They understood that they were not meant to be nude. However, this line of reasoning goes on to suggest that while a little bit of knowledge helps us to understand when we must be ashamed, we are lacking insight into why. It is this lack of insight that I think Pope was referring to when he suggested a little bit of learning is dangerous. Being ashamed does not elicit the proper response from us unless we then come to understand why we are ashamed and that leads to guilt.

Let me share a personal reflection here to perhaps illustrate. When I was maybe 11, I was beginning to become aware of what the others around me were doing and I was not immune to the stories of some of my friends stealing things from the bins at Woolworth's or Kresge's on St. Paul Street. I can remember what amounts to stealing a pencil case from Woolworth's and running. I have to guess I was pretty proud of myself for a while, at least until my way too smart mother caught me using it and questioned where it came from. The moment of shame had arrived. But then my father made me take the case back to the manager of Woolworth's who he happened to know. I had to knock on that man's door and apologize. At the moment, I

went from shame to guilt. And it was at that moment that I came to understand what I had done wrong. I had gained insight into my own behaviour and from then on, a still, small voice kept me from repeating that particular crime.

Rabbi Sachs argues that when we stop seeing and start hearing or listening to the voice inside our head guiding us towards the knowledge of good and evil, we are gaining insight into who we are and what is expected of us. Sachs points out that the text in today's parsha clearly argues that it is when Adam and Eve listened to the voice of HaShem that they realized the folly of their act. Now I would take this line of reasoning even further because when you go searching for the place in the Torah scroll for a parsha you see a lot of lines that begin And God Said to Moses or and God said toit could have been Abraham, Isaac or Jacob or Sarah or Rebecca or Leah or Rachel..... Because the stories of the patriarchs and the matriarchs often form themselves around learning a lesson because they listened to an inner voice. Our Torah and its attendant commentaries are meant to lead us to insight into human actions and to choose Yetzer HaTov rather than Yetzer HaRah. Drinking deeply of the lessons of the Torah leads us to gain insight into what it means to become a holy people, a just people. Unless we make a mistake like I did by stealing something, and then learn an important lesson about life as a result, we will never really gain true knowledge.

My maternal grandfather was not a popular man with all his grandchildren or even his children all the time because he always said and lived his life following the mantra that sometimes you have to hurt to do good. Adam and Eve were made to hurt plenty by the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. But if they had not hurt, and we never read about it, what lessons about life might we never have acquired? We are forced as a people to relive

the experiences for good and for bad of our patriarchs and matriarchs and thereby hopefully learn from their mistakes and become the better for it. WE are continually drinking deeply of the waters of the Pieria Spring so that our knowledge will not be a dangerous thing but the opposite. Who are we to argue any differently? Aren't we still here, as a people beginning again with In the Beginning when God began to create the heaven and the earth.....

Shabbat Shalom.