

Enkindling the Imagination of Poetry

The philosopher noted that “The owl of Minerva flies at dusk.” At dusk, I realize that in later years, nudged by the surgeon’s scalpel, my hand turned to poetry. That turn signaled a change in me.

I imbibed from my studies, secular or religious, a winking condescension towards poetry. At the yeshiva, seminary and university, poetry lacked the status of analytic prose. Scholarly faculties steeped in the legal Talmudic tradition, in Wissenschaft des Judentums or analytic philosophy paid scant attention to the world of poetry. Poetry lacked the rigor of syllogistic argument, the precision of linear thinking and the grammar of intellectual debate. The life of the emotions had no place in the academy, but were better left at the door of the private self, where spontaneity and subjectivity could reign.

The poet Robert Frost once explained why he eschewed writing in blank verse, without meter or rhyme. To write in blank verse, he said, was like “playing tennis with the net down.” But that was precisely what drew me to blank verse poetry. The lowering of the net that did not call fantasy foul, or sentiment out of the chalked line. The net of analytic prose was too restrictive, set too high, blocking free swinging association.

Socrates and Maimonides were tough-minded. I needed to balance that with tender-mindedness. I reread Abraham Isaac Kook, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber with new eyes. Their poetic prose opened unsuspected dreams and passions of my own. Reading with poetic sensibility, I was less interested in finding flaws in the argument or faults in the syntax.

I sought more than precision, decisiveness and certainty, more than the constraining rhymes and lines drawn around the four cubits of the syllogism. With poetry came also a greater softness, a more empathic intelligence, a new respect for metaphor and allusion.

The philosopher George Santayana once defined prayer as, “poetry believed in.” The phrase struck the right balance. The prayer I sought had to be creative and credible. Poetry without belief is empty; belief without poetry is tepid.

These poems remind us of a personal past that informs the present, inspires the future and points to the reality of Godliness in time that is hidden in space, place and things. These poems interrupt the impersonal flow of time and ceremonies to remind us that we are more than atoms and molecules. We are the light and language of God.

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