

Philo & Pepys

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We Jews really are a funny people. We strive to acquire nice homes and the security of our own little palaces, yet at this time of the year we are busy putting up rickety shacks or garden huts without roves, or prefabricated enclosures in fabric, plastic, canvas or waterproof Burberry, or extensions with electronically operated roofs that have automatic sensors that respond to a drop of rain and immediately retract, or strange little holes in synagogue halls that open up and all to reveal branches or bamboos or special kosher rabbinically approved reusable fibers.

And then we go out and pay absolutely astronomical sums for a funny lemon-like citron, a palm branch of the sort that most Middle Easterners leave on their rubbish sites or compost heaps, common and garden willow branches that wilt after one day and strange but sweet smelling myrtle leaves that seem to miss their Eucalyptus relatives. Then we take them into our synagogues and shake them all over the place. And we buy mini sets for our kids so that they can joust and sword fight while we're not looking.

Then on the last intermediary day of the festival, we troop along to the synagogues where we go raving mad whacking willow branches on the floors, pews and anything or anyone handy, leaving an absolute mess all over the place.

No sooner does that mess get cleared up (if you're lucky) when we come back in synagogue half-drunk, cavort around the place doing the most silly and childish of things and dance the most peculiar and dysfunctional of dances and sing and drink some more and collapse in a heap, all to celebrate the completion of the annual cycle of reading the Torah on Simchat Torah. All this in the name of our religion. And one wonders why so many people think there's something funny about us Jews.

May I remind you of the famous (perhaps infamous) Englishman, Samuel Pepys, who entered into his diary the following entry on October 14, 1663 after he had visited Bevis Marks Synagogue on Simchat Torah:

But Lord, to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more; and indeed, I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.

Of course Pepys was a rather unethical, sexually promiscuous, pompous, social climbing, money grabbing sot. So I'd take his condemnation with a pinch of salt. But, nevertheless, for the uninitiated or the uneducated it does look very strange.

The truth is that our customs and laws do all achieve, or at least try to achieve, several important things. Firstly they give as a framework for creating a life pattern that requires us to spend time away from our work with our families and with our communities (surrounded as we are by pressures of work and materialism that can otherwise go on incessantly, 24/7 as the Americans say).

They emphasize the importance of self-reflection and self-analysis. They invite us to experience different emotions and different feelings. They remind us of the changing seasons and times, and bring us into contact with touches, smells and experiences that we normally take for granted. They focus on the natural world (and our obligations to be caring custodians) as well as the spiritual. They meet our need to put ourselves in situations where we might sense things of a more ethereal nature. Above all, they interlink social morality and responsibility with daily ritual, so that we are constantly reminded of our values and goals.

The fact that some humans are impervious in their abandonment of these traditions, or that others refuse to link ritual to the greater values, does not detract from their purpose or from the benefits that such a system offers for those who want to take it seriously. The trouble is that too many people too often reduce these laws to utilitarian placebos and lose both the beauty and the greater significance in the process.

This week I was phoned by a journalist who wanted to know why we Jews made such a fuss of circumcision. I was reminded of Philo. He lived from 25 BCE until 50 CE in Alexandria during Temple times. He was a philosopher, a wealthy intellectual dilettante who was roped in to diplomacy to represent the Jews of Alexandria in pleading with Roman Emperor Caligula to withdraw his support for the anti-Semitism that caused horrific massacres. His writings were preserved by the Church because nothing survives of his Hebrew and some have suggested he didn't know any. To make matters worse, his comments on the Torah show that he believed most of the narrative was allegorical (something not fashionable in Judaism until the Kabbalists). Either way, he was a philosopher of note and reputation and yet a practicing Jew and here is his justification for adhering to the laws.

There are some who, regard laws in the way that they regard symbols, as having value only that they point toward intellectual ideas. And so they are negligent with the former and over punctilious with the latter. But they ought to give significance to both.

It is quite true that the Seventh Day is meant to teach the power of the Almighty in comparison with whom our labours are puny and ineffectual. But let us not for this reason abrogate the laws laid down for its observance and light fires or till the ground or carry loads or institute proceedings in court or act as jurors or demand the restoration of deposits or recover loans or do all else that we are permitted to do on all days except for festival seasons.

It is true that circumcision does indeed symbolize the excision of pleasure and control of all passions and rejecting the improbable idea that man is capable of controlling itself without Divine influence. But let us not on this account dispense with this law.

Why, we should reject the Temple and a thousand other things if we are going to heed nothing except the inner meaning and theoretical purposes of the laws. Rather we should look at these outward observances as resembling the body and the inner meaning as resembling the soul. Because the body is the repository of the soul that is why we should pay attention to these outward signs and actions.

(On the Migration of Abraham IV)

I don't agree with Philo's explanations, or some of his allegorical ones; but the point he makes is that adherence is not a matter of logic. For two thousand years since Philo, intellectual fashions and philosophers have come and gone, but our unfashionable practices have remained pretty much the same (forgetting all the new strictnesses that are now in fashion). It is this loyalty to our traditions that has helped us survive. Whether you believe they are God-given or humanly inspired, they have stood the test of time.

Chag Sameach!

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