

A note from Rabbi Seth

May 15, 2020

Dear ones-

Before your weekly Judaism-related email, a few quick notes:

- 1) Friday night services are **today at 5pm EDT**. It would be great to see you at <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/8321750148?pwd=eUVKRFRwNHhBdm1hR1FISnhEaTd6dz09>
- 2) Do you want to know more about the COVID-19 grief support group for students taking place on Wednesdays? Email me for the details.
- 3) Are you looking to connect, talk, or just be with a listening ear during this time? Email me or any of the chaplains; we're here to help.
- 4) Do you know someone who is in need of healing and you'd like them to be included in a prayer for healing as part of WCJA's weekly Shabbat service? Please feel free to pass along their name to me. You can share their Hebrew name (if they have one), but that is by no means required.

As classes come to an end today, and we move into reading period (although in some ways, I suppose these last two months have been a kind of unofficial reading period...), I wanted to share a piece of Jewish text that I learned recently. At a time when many of us are writing final papers, completing projects, and reviewing our readings and notes, it seems like a good opportunity to reflect on how we relate to the experience of being a learner and the material we are exposed to in the course of our lives.

The passage that appears below is from the *Zohar*, a classic of Jewish mystical thought that was composed in the late 13th century in northern Spain. The passage here, which is part of a longer discussion of the mystical experience of learning Torah or sacred text, is about concealment and revelation. It talks about how mystical secrets are hidden within the Torah, momentarily peak out, and then go back into hiding. But those who are keyed into the mystery within are able to lay eyes upon the secret when it is both while it is revealed and concealed.

All the hidden things that the Holy One of Blessing has made, He placed within the holy Torah. Indeed, everything is found in the Torah. A hidden word is revealed by the Torah, but then it is immediately concealed in another garment, hidden there and not revealed. Yet even though the matter is concealed in a garment, wise ones who are full of eyes see it through its garment. And then when the matter is revealed again, before it enters into another garment, they catch it with their open eye. So even though it is hidden, it is not lost from their eyes. (Zohar II:98b)

In some ways, I feel like the beginning of this passage describes my experience of learning something new, especially when it is something I do not understand well (like when I am studying something in a language I'm not fluent in or anything in Division III). I might be looking at words or symbols on a page, but because I don't have enough background or experience with them, they are not meaningful to me. I trust that there is something meaningful there, but it is hidden from me. If I spend enough time studying or if I have help from a teacher, the inner meaning might be revealed. But the truth is, even if I grasp it for a moment, it often quickly disappears. And even when I do begin

to grasp the material, my understanding is often superficial, so I do not fully penetrate into what I am learning.

I think this can be true not only for academic material, but also for more personal or, for lack of a better term, spiritual truths. Often, it can feel like my inner life is hidden from me, as are spiritual teachings that resonate but which I am unable to articulate or express in my own words. The author of this passage felt that way about the words of Torah. Hidden within the letters and words, the stories and laws, of Torah, there is deep mystery. Occasionally the inner meaning will flash out momentarily, but only before being garbed in something else, as the meaning disappears from our view.

But according to this text, there are those who are "who are full of eyes." They see the inner meaning "through its garment." They have cultivated a sense of intuition, skill, and watchfulness to be able to catch the inner meaning of Torah when it jumps out of the words and stories for a moment. And as it jumps back into another covering, they can lay eyes upon it and internalize it even as it is hidden in another form.

I find this deeply inspiring. It suggests that the words of Torah - or to my mind, any meaningful text, piece of art, or thing to be studied - are imbued with a mystery that is not readily perceptible. But by expanding our capacity for watchfulness - by becoming more "full of eyes" - we can access that mystery and allow ourselves to be transformed by it. If we take these instructions more expansively, then any meaningful material - be it a coding language, slides of works of art, or maybe even verb charts - could be concealing some deep truths just waiting for us to discover them.

At a time of year when we are, by necessity, cramming large amounts of material and trying to get through our assignments as quickly as possible, I think this teaching might be useful. It can invite us to look at whatever it is we are studying and see it as a potential source of illumination and transformation. That is, after all, what a liberal arts education promises.

As you complete your finals, I wish you moments of illumination, such that whatever you are studying opens your eyes, expands your heart, and enables you to live more fully.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Seth

Rabbi Seth Wax
Jewish Chaplain
Williams College
39 Chapin Hall Drive, Room 205
Williamstown, MA 01267
413-597-2483

Please note: I do not read or respond to emails on Shabbat (sundown Friday to sundown Saturday) or on Jewish holidays