

Body and Soul:

Roots of Remezim in Philo of Alexandria

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Remezim: Clues to Torah's Deeper Meanings

The Torah commentary of Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.E. - 40 C.E.) combines Greek philosophy and Jewish spirituality in a technique that has since been widely used in Judaism across the centuries by early Rabbinic sages and medieval Kabbalists alike. This technique, called in Hebrew *remezim*, or clues, invites readers of scripture to look beyond the simple meanings of the Torah's stories and ritual prescriptions. Hidden within the simple meanings are clues that can lead a careful reader to the Torah's metaphysical meanings. Clues can be found using a variety of tools -- philosophical, numerological, or etymological. Clues are considered fruitful if they lead to a vision of the essential nature of reality and its revelation through Torah.

Philo's approach to identifying *remezim* is philosophical. He applies the metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics of Plato to reveal the essential nature of the human spiritual journey. His findings make their way into the *Zohar* where they appear as a description of the nature of the Torah. The

Zohar's view of Torah, particularly if it is understood in the context of Philo's ideas, offers a thoughtful foundation for the numerological practice of *gematriya*.

Body and Soul in Plato's Philosophy¹

Plato sets forth his metaphysical theory, his theory of the ultimate nature of reality, in his comprehensive dialogue the *Republic*. His metaphysical theory implies an epistemological theory as well, a theory of how reality can be known. The most well-known section of the *Republic* is the "Allegory of the Cave." In that short but powerful allegory, Plato describes prisoners chained to a bench in a dimly lit cave. Far removed from the outside world of reality, the prisoners can see only shadows of artistic representations of reality. If one prisoner were to break free and ascend to the outer world, that individual would be blinded at first by the bright sun of true vision. Upon returning to the cave, the newly enlightened teacher would be judged crazy and disruptive, and be greeted with jeers and violence.

Plato immediately interprets the allegory for his readers. The allegory illustrates the journey from enslavement in the "visible world" to enlightenment in the "invisible world." The visible world is accessible

through the senses. It is a world of "becoming," of temporary, ever-changing forms. Everything in it is a "faint copy" of real things located in the invisible world. This "faint" world is the only world known to the prisoners in the cave. The invisible world, on the other hand, is accessible through the intellect. It is a world of "Being," of eternal forms, stable and unchanging. This is the truly real world of ideas and essences. It can be "seen," i.e., perceived intellectually, only by those who escape from the cave. Plato's use of the metaphor of "seeing the light" to represent intellectual perception shows up again in the *Timaeus*, his philosophical retelling of an Egyptian creation myth. There Plato notes that the gods gave us eyes in order that we might practice philosophy.

Plato's much shorter dialogue *Phaedo* offers a moral dimension, describing what it might be like to live the philosophical journey from ignorance to enlightenment. The *Phaedo* is dramatically set just before the death of Plato's teacher Socrates. Socrates is surrounded by students who are already mourning his imminent death by execution. In an attempt to comfort them, he explains why he does not fear death. Death, he says, is the separation of the soul from the body. By studying philosophy, Socrates has spent his entire life learning to shun the body in favor of the soul. The body, which is temporary, is the source of desires whose satisfaction bring no

long-term gain. But the soul, which is eternal, can perceive the eternal forms of the invisible world.

Body and Soul in Philo's Reading of Torah ²

Philo brings to his reading of Torah two assumptions about its authorship. One, it is written by Moses. Two, Moses is the quintessential teacher of philosophy, pointing the way from the visible world of the body to the invisible world of the soul. In order to decode Moses' teaching, a reader must be a philosopher as well, looking beyond the body of the Torah to its soul. The body of the Torah would be its sensory content, the imagery offered by the lively stories and highly developed ritual prescriptions. But the soul of the Torah would be its philosophical content, its instructions for subduing the human body and developing the human soul.

In his commentary "On the Giants," Philo reads past the body of the Torah into its soul. This commentary offers an interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4, four cryptic verses that precede the story of Noah. The allusion in these verses to the sexual union between humans and divine beings is so enticing that most commentators dwell upon it alone. Philo, however, is not distracted by the lascivious story and reads right through it to find the philosophy. He quotes from the verses:

And it came to pass when there began to be many men upon the earth, that daughters also were born to them. And when the angels of God saw the daughters of men that they were beautiful, they took unto themselves wives of all of them whom they chose. For the Lord said, My spirit shall not remain among men forever, because they are flesh. And there were giants on the earth in those days.

According to Philo, the angels of God are metaphors for the human soul. The air, he says, is in fact filled with hovering spirits. When the Torah says the angels see beautiful women and take wives, it allegorically describes the fact that spirits incarnate in human bodies. To a human body, God's spirit brings the gift of wisdom. But bodies, as the Torah points out, are made of flesh. They are drawn after material desires; they eventually decay. Thus wisdom -- God's spirit -- cannot remain in them forever. Some people understand this intuitively and know how to transform themselves into vessels for wisdom; they are the giants among us.

In order to penetrate to the soul of the Torah, as Philo does in his analysis of the giants, a reader must develop a special kind of intellectual vision. Philo finds in the Torah instructions for developing this kind of insight. In a commentary entitled "On Abraham," Philo interprets the deeper

meaning of the "five cities" who rebelled against King Chedarlaomer in Genesis 14:8. It seems that God destroyed four of the five rebellious cities, keeping only the city of Zoar intact (Genesis 19:29-30). The five cities, says Philo, correspond to our five senses. Four of those senses -- hearing, smelling, touching and tasting -- are closely allied with the body. Hence, they must be destroyed, or at least devalued, if we are to grow spiritually. But the sense of sight is most closely allied with the intellect. We are more in control of seeing than we are of the other senses. Thus, if we can train our vision to linger on sights that cultivate the soul, we can begin to develop intellectual insight.

Body and Soul of the Torah

The purpose of Torah, according to Philo, is to teach readers to understand that the human essence is the soul. To be sure, we have bodies that are animated by our souls, but the soul is source of our God-like nature. If our souls make proper use of our bodies, our senses will follow the clues that point us towards the invisible world of eternal truth.

The *Zohar* (c. 1280) elaborates on a matching structure for the Torah.³

R. Shimon said...

The Torah is clothed in "garments" which relate to this world, because otherwise the world would not be able to contain and absorb it.

The stories of the Torah are only the "garment" of the Torah, as opposed to the Torah itself...

Come and see: there are garments which everyone can see. When fools see a person in garments, which to them look beautiful, they look no further...

The Torah also has a "body" -- namely the precepts of the Torah, which are called *gufey Torah*, and that "body" is vested in "garments" -- namely the worldly tales.

The fools of this world look at the "garment," the narrations of the Torah, and do not know anything more. They do not consider what is beyond that "garment."

Those who realize more [than the fools] do not look at the "garment" but at the "body" beneath it.

But the wise -- the servants of the most high King, those who stood at Mount Sinai -- they look for the soul, the very essence of everything, the real Torah...

The soul of the Torah is its essence, invisible and eternal. Human beings, however, need a tangible gateway to the invisible. Thus, the Torah's body offers a plan for human living. The plan is meaningful because it is the physical representation of the Torah's soul. The Torah's body is dressed in garments that make it attractive. Engaging stories in which interesting characters receive Jewish moral and ritual precepts invite readers into the text. Anyone able to understand a story can perceive the Torah's garments; anyone engaged in thoughtful study can learn the precepts that make up the Torah's body. But only those involved in a consistent spiritual practice, the "servants of the most high King," can perceive the Torah's soul.

This portrait of the Torah's nature is a useful way to introduce the numerological practice of *gematriya*. *Gematriya* is based upon the double meanings of the characters that make up the Hebrew alphabet. Each character is both a letter and a number. Thus each intelligible string of Hebrew letters is both a word and a number. The numerical value of the word is the sum of the values of the individual characters that comprise it. Often, two words, apparently unrelated in etymology or location in the Torah, will have the same numerical value. In the practice of *gematriya*, this similarity is read not as a coincidence, but as a clue, a *remez*, inviting a deeper reading of the Torah. A *remez* invites readers to look beyond the

narrative threads that hold the garments of the Torah together, beyond even the moral or psychological explanations that give a sense to the body of the Torah. A *remez* invites readers to try to find their way into the invisible essence that constitutes the soul of the Torah.

Decoding Remezim

Remezim, then, are physical traces of the metaphysical. They are clues that suggest a hidden structure of meaning in the words of the Torah. But in and of themselves, they are only clues. They are not the hidden meaning itself. Other tools are necessary if a reader of Torah is to follow the clues into the heights of the Torah's soul. A strong background in Jewish intellectual history and religious tradition gives knowledge of a range of tools for identifying and interpreting *remezim*. This background teaches an interpreter what has already been thoughtfully established or rejected. Outstanding skills in logic and philosophy enable an interpreter to assemble clues into a unified and consistent structure that yields an intelligible meaning. A high level of spiritual development enables an interpreter to distinguish true gateways to spiritual insight from other exciting, but false, leads. To return to the language of Philo, a reader of Torah must be practiced in looking beyond the body to the soul. Otherwise, the activity of

collecting and examining *remezim* would merely be an exercise in looking at the garments and body of the Torah under a microscope.

The history of Jewish thought shows that the soul of the Torah has many faces. The Torah holds not one hidden meaning, but many. The Torah's epistemology, philosophy of history, moral system, and metaphysics can all be revealed through the creative and disciplined study of *remezim*.

Philo, as we have seen, reads Torah using Plato's philosophy to find clues to a deeper meaning. In so doing, he reveals an epistemological truth: In order to discern the soul of the Torah, one must commit to soul development in every aspect of life.

Genesis Rabbah (c. 425 C.E.) reveals the Torah's philosophy of history.⁴ Talmudic sages read the Book of Genesis with the aid of etymology, double meanings of words, and *gematriya*. Dressed in the garments of ancestral stories they find the essential structure that governs the unfolding of world history and justifies the Jewish remnant in clinging to the Torah: God's plan to redeem Israel at the end of days.

In his commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*, Sa'adia Gaon (882-942) reveals the deeper meaning of the Torah's moral system.⁵ Sa'adia borrows from Aristotle's metaphysics ten categories of ideas that give shape to physical matter. He shows that each metaphysical category is applied in one of the

ten moral rules given at Sinai. Thus living according to Torah is living in harmony with the essential shape of reality.

In *Gates of Light*, Rabbi Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla (c.1300) reveals the Torah as a metaphysical document.⁶ He uses *gematriya*, wordplays, and other metaphorical techniques to show that the Torah's events and characters illuminate the meaning of God's names. God's names, properly ordered and understood, contain the code for the order of the universe. Thus the Torah -- garments, body, and soul -- exists in order to reveal the code to the wise.

Each of these interpreters proceeds upon Philo's basic premises. The practice of philosophy is the study of looking beyond the body to cultivate the soul. One who is skilled in this practice will see beyond the body of the Torah into its soul. Thus, the Torah is ultimately a philosophical document, pointing its readers beyond the visible world of the senses to the purely intellectual-spiritual world of unchanging essences. The view of the Torah as philosophical does not come from outside the text, for pointers are found within the Torah itself, available to those willing to learn how to identify *remezim* and follow them through to a new vision of the whole.

Notes

¹ Plato, *Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1961.

² Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo*, transl. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers), 1993.

³ Quoted in Immanuel Shochet, "Gimatria: The Principle of Numerical Interpretation" in Gutman G. Locks, *The Spice of Torah-Gematria* (New York: Judaica Press), 1998.

⁴ H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, trans., *The Midrash Rabbah* (New York: Soncino Press), 1977.

⁵ Saadia ben Joseph (al-Fayyumi), *Commentaire sur le Sefer Yesira ou Livre de la Creation par Le Gaon Saadya de Fayyoun*, trans. and ed. M. Lambert (Paris: Emile Bouillon), 1891. Translated into English from the French and Hebrew by Scott Thompson and Dominique Marson, San Francisco, 1985. Excerpts posted at Walter Benjamin Research Institute website, <http://www.wbenjamin.org/saadia.html#commentary>.

⁶ Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla, *Gates of Light: Sha'Are Orah*, trans. Avi Weinstein (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press), 1998.