

Better than the Will of God

When writing about a given topic sometimes it's worth taking the risk to start off with something that's as general as all get-out and see what comes from there. When I first entertained that thought it seemed to border upon being a cop-out. Some time passed before I realized it was a signal that somewhere in the unconscious I was entertaining an idea of what to do but couldn't put my fingers on it. After wrestling with this a bit, I discovered that being in this position was perfectly fine. With this firmly in mind, the next step presented itself all on its own. Now the green light was given to forage ahead. Why not? Taking such a general approach turned out to have the unexpected benefit of preventing what I call a freeze-up. I'd define that as an attempt to put down something whole and entire at one go, coming up with the best possible presentation that would surpass anything by anyone on this planet. Indeed, this is impossible unless you're some kind of genius. Even if you could pull it off, in the not so long run pride would rear its ugly head and bite you in the behind when you least expected it.

While we might restrict ourselves with this attitude in the solitude of our thoughts, we know better not to bring it to bear upon our work. Getting from point A to point B whole and entire at once is impossible. Both mentally and physically we're not made that way. As noted in the first paragraph, pride often can be a real bugaboo, so we're fortunate if we've caught it in time. Even if pride is present, it's important to see beyond it and focus upon a deep-seated desire we have inserted into our human nature to replicate what we have within us as a perfect mental form in order that others may recognize it. A more familiar way to put this is that we wish to incarnate an idea we hold close to ourselves. Because ideas are immaterial, they can be moved easily any which-way. It's another story when we take steps to move them on to physical reality.

Surprisingly recognizing this fundamental distinction isn't as obvious as we may think. It is so on paper but not in practice. Once we do see the big leap to jump, we've taken a huge step which frees us up from any inherent scruples we may bring to bear upon our work. Now we distinguish with greater clarity between this innate desire from those snares waiting to trap us. After all, the very definition of a snare is something hidden under familiar surroundings. To be more precise, a snare is camouflaged. It's purpose isn't to kill but to maim or hold its prey in place until the hunter who set it comes by. In the situation at hand, one such snare may be defined as a temptation to rush things through. Yes, we have a valid insight but are too quick to incarnate it without closer examination.

One way of avoiding this subtle trap is to bring to the table some prefab ideas or those which are whole and entire. They have an independent reality to which reference can be made. They are more than ideas. Let's call them archetypes which are accepted by the culture in which we live and give validity to how we express ourselves. Perhaps the most general ones are the classic truth, beauty and justice. For every valid model... archetype...there's one that runs counter to it. Consider an image taken from **Alice in Wonderland**. She descended a rabbit hole leading to deep underground which came out in a topsy-turvy world compared with the one above where most people live. She keeps on descending to what seems the center of the earth after which she suddenly find herself deposited in a subterranean world which has a definite dream-like quality. Constantly she's in movement, pausing just long enough to meet with a wide variety of odd characters.

While what goes on down below makes for entertaining reading and sheds light on our accepted values. However, it isn't one suited for the majority of people else society would quickly fracture. Upon returning home, Alice and her beloved cat Dinah are the only ones who recognize the existence of this parallel world right beneath their feet and are affected by it in a profound way. Never could they communicate it to their family and friends. This, it seems, is where **Alice in Wonderland** is a prelude of sorts to what follows and needs to be written, life above ground. Actually this secret world turns out to their own universe not to be shared by anyone. However, the satisfaction they have cannot help but infect all around them.

This contrast between two worlds had an indirect influence on writing this article, that is, as an attempt to maintain a balance between the two worlds, if you will already mentioned, our ideas and how we make them public. Instead of finding weird characters as did Alice, hopefully I'll come across some beneficial insights which for the most part we pass by unobserved. To reach them you require some courage in order to descend to a reality other than the familiar one above ground. You do this by willingly falling through a hole not so much underground but to a world full of innumerable treasures, not those out of wack with real life. At least that's one way of putting this endeavor. Of course it's subject to inaccuracies or statements that aren't developed as fully as they should. Still, this doesn't distract from the enjoyment involved which is immense.

So how did the title of this article come about? I defer, that being a bit too specific a question to ask for the moment, albeit a good one. It has a hidden unmoved mover behind it if you will. That consists of one of the most general words anyone can come up with, experience. It covers a multitude of sins and then some. By that I mean everything and anything within the range of what we as humans come in contact with. Putting it as

such made me realize that there's really no good alternative word for "experience." That seems to stand in and by itself admitting no comers. However, let me borrow from the online site of Merriam-Webster, "knowledge gained by actually doing or living through something." This definition is backed up by offering the following synonyms, some of which are quite humorous: relevance, expertise, skills, proficiency, background, know-how, savvy, chops, familiarity, acquaintance, moxie, intimacy, mastery, conversance and command. All are quite diverse and in this way or that approach experience, but not straight on, if you will. That means the word needs to be respected for its inclusiveness.

So using the word experience as a take-off point, I thought of seeing how it applies to real life situations. Because real-life is what we do each day, things should flow more or less naturally and not be overlaid with artificial constructs we tend to put on it. We use the phrase "real life" quite often for some reason or other. It intimates that part of the time we're not focused on...well, life. That is to say, most of the time our focus is upon something artificial we impose upon life. In other words, it's at odds with experience commonly understood. As we know, virtual reality has its perils as well as benefits. It reminds me of a book I had read some years back where a scientist (unfortunately I forgot his name off hand) said of this that if we manage to make all life virtual we end up with two which in some distance future would be indistinguishable. The key point he makes: this overlooks not so much human creativity but human imitation, the innate desire to replicate something for the sheer pleasure in replicating it. In other words, it's akin to play.

At the time when I started this article with a view of how we go about comporting ourselves in the most general way possible, I happened to read about a group of post-grad students at a local Catholic university doing some research on the actual word experience as it ties in with spirituality. When I asked for further information, one participant told me that the group's interest in the word is tied in with the context of monastic life around the twelfth century. Indeed, the interest was not as esoteric at first glance but played an important roll in the development of Christian spirituality. However, the time frame is crucial or when the word Christendom was applied to society *in toto*. Religion filled every nook and cranny, no exception. For some it represents a bygone era that can't be recreated but longed for unrealistically. Participants were like fish in water. Never did anyone question the existence of water nor knew anything outside it. If there was an exception, it'd be considered as heresy and to be dealt with harshly.

Although I wasn't particularly interested in the research of this group, nevertheless I was struck by the Latin derivation of the actual word "experience." Because at the moment I

was dealing with some really general stuff and how it could be made more particular and therefore concrete, why not see if the Latin word was equivalent or had something more to say. At first glance, nothing. It required some more digging. That word happens to be...obviously enough...*experientia* meaning a trial, proof as well as knowledge. What's crucial, it seems, is the knowledge attained comes about through repeated trials. It isn't a one shot deal but open to an indefinite number of possibilities. As for the verbal root *experior*, it involves testing, finding out and seems centered upon doing something certainly more than once. The preposition *ex-* signifying from-ness is important to understand because it intimates something is being taken or extracted. Either what's left is impoverished or has benefitted from what had been removed akin to a surgical operation.

Focusing upon this word in the Latin is helpful because we sometimes hear about the need to experience spiritual reality, that is, God in whatever form that appeals to us. It seems to approach favoring a gnostic stance, attaining knowledge applied to transcendent reality which can be manipulated. That, of course, is a no-no. Also it has a note of appropriating something...here *ex-* in the negative sense...and putting it at the service of our personal end with little or no concern otherwise. As we know, if this were applicable to someone we love dearly, at once that person would pick up on our attitude and see right through any attempt to disguise our motives. Thus by reason of the manipulative character we attribute to this word, experience is something that generally doesn't apply to meaningful relationships. Even speaking of this word relative to God has a way of making us feel uneasy.

Why, then, the unease? The common understanding of experience intimates an attempt to manipulate what cannot be manipulated even if we're unaware of the fact. It can run into trouble when applied to talk about how we contact God. At this point it's helpful to keep in mind that so much discussion about God revolves around that which we don't know. So instead of pursuing this further, we can turn attention to something that attempts to come to terms with transcendent reality. People recoil when they hear any phrase related to the fear of the Lord. That's too biblical, too archaic. Fear is something belonging to the Testament designated by the unfortunate adjective "old" which infers it's out of place, that something better has superseded it. However, a closer look says that the action is precisely at work in this Testament.

With these brief introductory remarks, it's time to get down to business and consider the title, **Better Than the Will of God**. Anyone interested in things spiritual might find the choice not a bit odd but really odd, perfectly understandable at first glance. What could be better than that which is most intimate to God, his will where everything he

thinks and does has it's starting point? Focus on the will, and you're in the cat-bird seat. It turns out that we model the divine will on our own which most people consider the most personal and sacrosanct part of ourselves. Indeed, countless generations of spiritual seekers, especially those who are Catholic, got a lot of mileage from this insight, and that is to be honored. Yet emphasis upon the faculty of will...human or divine...lacks appeal over the long haul. Let's face it. The will is something you can't feel comfortable snuggling up to. In fact, the will as applied to God has an association with what some spiritual authors of the Catholic vein call dryness, spiritual darkness being a more intense form. Because it's so absolute, anything else, even the slightest, is perceived as sin. Thus will and spiritual blah-ness fit in perfectly. It goes a long way to foster a kind of grin-and-bear-it attitude.

Are there any alternatives to this tried n' true approach to God, so well accepted that it doesn't require to be spelled out beyond the bare bones already presented? Yes. Even though there are numerous references to fear in the Bible, the best example may be found in Proverbs 9.10 which partly reads, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." It's a fairly well-known verse quoted often but often not laid out as much as it should. Perhaps this stems that when people hear the term "beginning" they agree all endeavors, human or divine have by necessity a starting point. It's important to be aware of this and throw it out there, but as for what follows, that's secondary and not worth exploring. Focus on the beginning, and that will get you through come what may.

When properly understood, fear comes across as more attractive than the "will of God." Hopefully the following break-down serves to bring this to the fore:

Part One

-*Techilath* or beginning whose verbal root *chala* means to pierce through, to lay open, the idea of beginning tied in with an opening to a given occasion or the like.

-*Chakmah* or wisdom also connotes skill or dexterity and thus leans towards a certain crafty attitude in doing things.

-*Yer'ath* or fear from the verbal root *yare'* or to give reverence. This is the central word of this verse, the one most misunderstood for obvious reasons.

Part Two

-*Dahath* or knowledge; from the verbal root *yadah* which is applicable to intimate relationships as with marriage.

-*Qedoshym* or holy from the verbal root *qadash* or to be separate or set apart, the opposite of profane but parallel to it. In the verse at hand it's in the plural, holy ones, and most likely applies to those with *yare'* of the Lord.

-*Bynah* or understanding; from the verbal root *byn* meaning to separate and related to the preposition *bayn* or between. Thus *bynah* occupies the space in between two places, having no share in either in an exclusive manner yet knowing both sides at once. While *bynah* is more comprehensive, it remains elusive, difficult to track down.

The key word, of course, is *techilath* or beginning. It locates the somewhat amorphous *chakmah* or wisdom which until it was able to be tracked down, had remained floating around out there waiting to be identified. As for *chakmah* which has a lot to do with skill, that implying a process of acquisition in place of being naturally endowed. Let's say someone by divine intervention hits upon this notion of skill which offsets our common understanding of wisdom. That's step one. The second step hones in on the skill at hand. Lo and behold, with a bit more divine intervention it turns out to be fear of the Lord, *yer'ath* also defined as reverence. To revere someone or something means that person or object is filled with a quality wholly other while at the same is present within the person who hit upon it.

Yer'ath of course is what all this revolves around. When we come across something as such...and this noun is derived from the verbal root *yare'* which connotes standing in awe...the suddenness involved pretty much makes us stop dead in our tracks and go no further. It compels us to stay put until that which made us slam on the brakes until it says we can move on. In all this we have no say in governing what is transpiring. It's the other way around. Something is governing us which is infinitely better than any puny ideas we may come up with. And so *yer'ath* and *techilath*...fear/reverence and beginning...are synonymous. We can't have one unless we have the other, the two being almost interchangeable.

The trouble with the first part of the verse is that most people stop right there, that is, at the beginning. Literally. They don't bother to ask if there's something akin to part two or a follow-up as well as how long this sequence might be. While such questions are legitimate, the verse's intent is to shake us from our innate lethargy in order to be present with the Lord right now, not off somewhere in the distance. Of importance is coming to grips with the fact that our desire for God always is intermittent and never constant. We can deal with this on our own but are subject to confusion when we read in spiritual literature that such constancy is possible. Fine, but always a monkey wrench is thrown in. That is, we have to pay a very heavy price. Similarly saints are given as examples of this, but beware. They can be blown up out of proportion. And so coming to realize the limitations as well as benefits involved indeed is worthy as being designated as *techilah* or beginning.

This manner by which we relate to God is no longer in vogue, if you will, though it had been for a long time. The disparity involved often is explained by the phrase original sin. It's a convenient point of reference all the way back to the Garden of Eden but upon closer inspection, really doesn't hold water. Original sin is based on the assumption that the first man and first man are held responsible for all eternity because they now have knowledge of good and evil. In other words, they are rivals to God who sees this. He's really pissed off because of a certain immaturity on his part and needed to be shaken free of it. The descendants of our so-called first parents now have the task of educating the Lord, if you will, but helping him to act in a more civil manner. That will take many generations or until the incarnation of Jesus Christ. With recognition of the incompleteness at hand, the Proverbs verse at last furnishes us with a pretty good foundation how to comport ourselves with regard to the Lord. As for the beginning, it has the capacity to convey us to the next step. That, of course, isn't put out there in black and white but intimated by the fact that we must consult other persons to help us out. Enter the *qedoshym* of Part Two.

Now we've been prevented in the good sense from succumbing to the common sluggishness of not bothering to see if anything follows after the beginning. Without speaking openly in terms of a part two or the like, the second part of the Proverbs verse can be taken an independent sentence. However, it's bound at the hip to the first part which also an independent sentence. The tiny conjunctive *v-* translated as "and" is the actual connecting point. Here emphasis has shifted from fear or *yer'ath* to knowledge or *dahath*, the latter intimating a personal, intimate relationship as already noted. At first glance we expect *dahath* to apply to the Lord in the same manner as *chakmah*. The surprise turns out to be that *dahath* applies to *qedoshym* or persons who are holy or set apart. Sounds disappointing? Perhaps at first because we were expecting that same direct contact with the transcendent God as presented above and are let down once we find it is not so. However, hanging around with flesh and blood persons who are *qadesh*...set apart...is better suited to our needs. They impart to us what they've experienced and help us grow. In other words, they turn out to be mediators, a better role than teachers.

How do the *qedoshym* mediate on our behalf? Continue with the second half of the Proverbs verse to find out. Actually the last word holds the answer. That word happens to be *bynah* or understanding which as noted above, connotes between-ness. Such is the type of understanding in which the *qedoshym* excel, a real surprise and humiliation to us who thought it'd be otherwise. Actually we'd prefer something along the lines of experience as defined earlier. We can run with that. In essence we can manipulate the information we receive in ways to our liking. This doesn't mean the approach at hand is

bad, just one that can be labeled incomplete.

Thus what we can learn from the *qedoshym* is unique, of how to insert ourselves in between a given circumstance instead of the usual approach of facing it head on. Actually I prefer to say we learn to worm ourselves in between because it's more intimate, somewhat subversive and to the point. This approach is more comprehensive and takes the Proverbs quote in all at once. We bring to bear our awareness on all the elements simultaneously. That I feel...if I may put it as such...is an approach God loves, a manifestation of boldness on our part wrought from awareness of our humility and desperation. In sum, we can get in between the words, if you will, which allows for easier access to God through fear or *yer'ath* of him. Here the very notion of *yer'ath* precludes any "experience" we may put on him which humanly put, is mutual.

In between-ness seems to be where the Proverbs verse is going. It allows for a certain ebb and flow of the divine presence interacting with us. For now I'd call presence direct awareness minus self-awareness. Most likely that requires more explanation but not at the moment. What's special is that the idea of being in between counters perfectly our puny attempts to want an "experience" of God. It represents a discreetness we can easily overlook, not conforming to any tool for manipulation we have at our disposal. On the other hand, by no means are we restricted from coming up with a suitable image. For example, consider a father who has a tacit understanding of where his child is at and takes it from there. Unfortunately nowadays we don't run into this positive image as much as in the past, for it's somewhat a rare quality. In this instance memory obviously has a lasting impact and is more than a memory. It has sunken deep within lasts not just for one person's life time but for those who come after him. In other words, it's a perfect antidote to the memory that our first parents had.

If anyone ever wanted evidence for the reality of the faculty of memory described in the paragraph above, consider the Greek term *anamnesis*. This is our faculty of recollecting propounded by Socrates and is essential to our human constitution but seems not so much appreciated nowadays. That's okay because *anamnesis* is a hard-core reality that won't go away even if forgotten over a long period of time. At all times we are receptive to it, so it's not a matter of our being in charge, of trying to "experience" it now and again. So the Proverbs verse in its very succinct yet loaded presentation is a pattern enabling us to dispose ourselves more readily for its contents. There is, of course, a temptation to use the word "experience," but somehow that would resort to the usual way we go about doing things. This is fine for the short haul but lacks staying power for the long haul.

So when we first looked at *techilath* it was natural to think of it as some kind of hard and fast pole or marker from which to start our adventure. Now that we've been armed with the valuable insight provided by *bynah*...understanding as in between-ness...we can see that it's a vital means or *chakmah* (wisdom) used to dispose us for reverence or *yer'ath* with regard to God. Here the skillfulness of *chakmah* comes to be recognized not for manipulation but as a way to describe how we implement the *bynah*. We didn't acquire this *bynah* on our own but have learned it through our contact with those who are *qedoshym* or set apart. So this process as outlined has a unique way of setting people apart, putting them in a safe space not so much to isolate them but to be in a better position to assess what's going on in the world.

Now that Proverbs 9.10 has been spun out in a way to some may consider *ad nauseam*, let's return to the "will of God," that phrase which pretty much got the ball rolling with regard to this article. In the long run, it doesn't matter which of the two work. It depends upon each individual. However, favoring the Proverbs verse is more inclusive and gives plenty of wiggle room for a person with all his sins, defects and good qualities to adjust and find a home. Not so much with the good intentioned "will of God." Too cold and unyielding though those who subscribe to it would be quick and right to point how it works so well for them.

The benefit of the last word of the verse under discussion, that is *bynah*, consists in being able to lay out and include so much by reason of the in between-ness which it represents. You'll be hard pressed to find a word that embraces so much. Now we can look back at all the talk concerning dryness, dark night and of course, suffering. Dryness is mentioned frequently when it comes to prayer. It signifies the opposite or wetness, I guess, when prayer is going well or however that's determined. While each or these or a combination thereof may be present in a person, there's the possibility that something better may be an option. As ordinary people who get things done as through the aide of communication, consider a favorite Greek word found, for example, in two sources: Plato as used by Socrates and the New Testament. That word is *parresia*, difficult to render in English, and applies to freedom of speech or the ability to express oneself publically. It's a precious right of citizens belonging to a *polis* or city state. An added benefit is that it's confined to a relatively small group of people who know each other.

Parresia doesn't give a hoot about such disembodied things as "will of God." However, as noted several times it's important not to denigrate those who might adhere to it. If you're rooted in *parresia* you're rooted in the citizenship of your *polis*, a precious right as anyone deprived of freedom can tell you. This freedom of speech isn't to equated with brashness or spouting of downright stupid things. Rather, it's a discipline that gives the

air of spontaneity and is not so much difficult to practice but nevertheless rare because we're unfamiliar with it. One such application in the situation at hand is when we come up against the formidable obstacles already outlined and moving toward resolution as through the Proverbs verse.

Parresia also involves a certain desperation. You realize that you have your back up against the wall and can go nowhere. Thus to speak freely and honestly is the only way out. Even if you're killed, your conscience is at rest, actually alive in a very real way. A person can take all his or her faults, sins and defects and cast them right back into God's face, walking away without fear of recrimination. This is done without the expectation of having him come begging after you or the like. You mean it for real. It comes close to an attitude of "How dare you," telling God basically to shove all the suffering and apparatus that comes with it. When you come down to it, that's living and living right to the hilt. It's pretty difficult to get anything better than that.

So where do you end up after this? You find that you're with yourself and no other. However, this time all the stuff about God has more or less receded but receded in order to give way to a deeper appreciation of the Proverbs verse. "Receded" isn't quite accurate because it implies something essential that is withdrawing. Appealing yet again to that verse's last word *bynah*, you find yourself in an in between land, as it were, where everything you could wish is laid out before you. You jump for it with *parresia* basically because you're desperate to the nth degree and have no other option. So strange, then, to end up in a place where there's only you and no other. It's turns out not to be as unnerving as some would make it. Perhaps that's why the Proverbs verse starts off with "beginning" and moves through several stages until it ends up in *bynah* or understanding as a state of in between-ness.

In conclusion, the Proverbs verse proves to be very flexible. It doesn't lay out a plan informing us where and how to go but simply tells it like it is. We find ourselves suddenly in the face of divine fear or *ye'rath* and have come to terms living with it almost as a new found friend. Such is another way of looking at *techilath* or beginning. This can viewed in a way other than what was outlined through the word experience. Rather, it is something active we take up and make present in large part to the degree of *parresia* we dare to embody. Indeed, it has brought us to a better place from which we don't want to leave. The possibility of actually slipping away exists which also adds to the excitement. However, from here we can move on, for always there's plenty of stuff waiting to be discovered.

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