

# The Second Innocence

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Thou shalt be innocent with the Lord thy God. (Deut. 18:13)

The Hebrew word for “innocent” in the verse above, “*tamim*,” can also be translated as “naïve” or “guileless,” and derives from the same root as “*tam*,” the simpleton son in the Haggada (who is imbued with the quality of “*temimut*”).

According to the dictionary definitions, innocence is often synonymous with naiveté, artlessness, and gullibility; with ignorance as to the ways of the world. It is inconsistent with sophistication and a critical outlook. Indeed, there are sources that put the two qualities in opposition, including, famously, the Rabbi Nahman story “The Sophisticate and the Simpleton (*tam*).”

But *temimut* also evokes integrity, in the sense of both moral purity and completeness, a connotation that Onkelos favors in his translation of the above verse. On the face of it, the two connotations are contradictory; indeed, the *temimut* associated with the Torah is described as having the capacity to grant wisdom to the simpleton: “The [Torah] of the Lord is perfect (*temima*), restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:8). The Midrash (psalms 119) even considers *temimut* a divine attribute that people should strive to emulate. What, then, is the innocence connoted by *temimut*? Is it wisdom or the lack thereof? Is it the sublime and profound or perhaps the trivial and superficial?

## From First to Second Innocence

The kabbalistic reading of the word “*tam*” sheds light on the link between the two connotations of innocence:

Through the merit of Abraham, who was worthy of the attribute of Kindness, Isaac was worthy of the attribute of Terror. And because Isaac was worthy of the attribute of Terror, Jacob was worthy of the attribute of Truth, which is the attribute of Peace. God bestowed to him according to his measure. It is thus written (Gen. 25:27), “Jacob was a complete man (*tam*), dwelling in tents.”

The word “complete” means nothing other than peace. It is thus written (Deut. 18:13), “You shall be innocent (*tamim*) with the Lord your God,” and [Onkelos] renders this, “You shall be *shlim* [at peace or complete].” The word “*tam*” refers to nothing other than the Torah.<sup>[1]</sup>

*The Bahir* identifies the *tam* with peace and truth. The kabbalistic idea of truth and peace, is harmony between contrasting aspects of reality. *The Bahir* identifies this quality with Jacob, the innocent man, who represents completion and balance between the right, the loving-kindness associated with Abraham, and the left, the terror and judgment associated with Isaac. Jacob is the synthesis of the two.

The sixteenth-century kabbalist Meir ibn Gabbai, author of the *Tolaat Yaakov*, identifies *temimut* with the oral Torah, because it encompasses everything. The oral tradition is multifaceted, containing myriad interpretations, and that is

the source of its completeness.

If we were to offer a definition that is consonant with both connotations of the word, we would say that the *tam* is a person devoid of cynicism and sophistication, one who is capable of believing and accepting anyone and anything. Every day such a person looks upon life with fresh eyes, humbled and awed by the world.

Such a personality can arise from two separate sets of life circumstances. The first option is an innate lack of complexity, as in the case of the eponymous simpleton in Rabbi Nahman's story. But it can also stem from another source, what the philosopher Akiva Ernst Simon calls "second innocence."

Sometimes, the very realization of the complexity of reality can bring one to a state of true acceptance. Awareness of the awesomeness and power of life breeds humility.

Those who are in the first state of innocence do not see any of the flaws in the other and in the world because they do not possess a penetrating view of life. They accept reality at face value. One who is in a state of second innocence, on the other hand, sees the problems, the difficulties, and the ugliness, but is able to encompass them. The capacity to encompass stems from the understanding that flaws and limitations are inherent to the world and to human life. The *tam* thus does not treat others with condescension when he perceives their flaws, because he knows that he too is afflicted with those very same imperfections. He can accept and appreciate the other, for his holistic view of reality enables him to avoid attachment to negative things, and instead to see the good in them.

For the first *tam*, life and the world are an unfathomable mystery; for the second *tam*, the sense of mystery is generated by a profound internalization of the complexity of reality. He understands that there are many things whose nature and purpose he can never grasp.

### **The Four Sons**

One of the four sons who appear in the Passover Haggada is wise; another is a simpleton. The four archetypes can be seen as representing four stages in the life of an individual. At first one is incapable of asking. Then one becomes a simpleton who is willing, due to one's naiveté, to accept simplistic answers to life's big questions. These answers fail to plumb the depths of the perplexities and difficulties, but the simpleton is unbothered: he lives a life of harmony in which everything is fundamentally coherent and in order. There is charm and tranquility in such a state of innocence, but ultimately it is an illusion. The world and reality are complex, and the child will one day grow up and realize that there is more to life.

The wicked son is emblematic of the next stage in life, the realization that the questions are more compelling than the answers, which can lead to a crisis. He is angry at those who, he thinks, fed him lies, and contemptuous of those who still hold by the explanations that to him seem superficial and incomplete (if not outright falsehoods). He loses faith in the society that raised him and the culture that surrounds him. When he was a simpleton he believed everything; now he believes in nothing.

But ultimately, he wises up. Like the wicked son, the wise son is aware of the

complexity of reality, but that insight leads him to very different conclusions. Indeed, the world may be complex and full of contradictions, and the expectation of absolute explanations is an illusion. But the limited capacity to explain is very much a function of the nature of reality. The easy option is to throw it all away. It is harder to search for the hidden light and truths that can be found everywhere and in every person, and make meaning out of them. The wise son faces the world with humility, and mines beauty from the unknown, from those very hidden depths that defy explanation. That is the innocence to which we aspire, which has the power to “restore the soul.” As the hasidic proverb says, “Innocence is greater than wisdom, but one must be very wise to be innocent.”

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[\[1\]](#) Kaplan, *The Bahir*, 51.

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