

Response to Erich Auerbach's paper on Odysseus' Scar  
by Judah Lazarus

What I write here is a response to an article by Eric Auerbach on Odysseus' Scar. Auerbach points out that Homer's writing is personal, specific and creates a sense of almost hypnotic tranquility while the Bible's style (specifically the story of Abraham going to sacrifice his son Issac) feels impersonal, disjointed and creates a sense of nervous energy. I have no issue with Auerbach's analysis save one. I don't believe Auerbach fully appreciates the implications born out by his comparisons between the Greek and Jewish texts. I doubt he is familiar with the traditional Talmudic perspective (Hashkafah), as it relates to his analysis. I also assume, from his writing, that like most others in his position, his secular orientation and education have distorted much of what he thinks he knows about Jewish belief and thought.

My views here draw on my understanding of the Torah sources I have studied with two in particular: 1 – The Maharal in his book "The Mitzvah Candle" where The Maharal explains the epic philosophical battle between the Torah perspective and that of the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. 2 – The teachings of the Bal Hasulam, the Master Kabalist who, with unrivaled clarity, explains the inner aspect of Torah regarding the nature of reality, the physical and spiritual dimensions, the process and purpose of creation and the evolution of human consciousness.

The Maharal explains that the Jews with their Torah have been engaged in an ongoing battle spanning the six thousand years of development of human consciousness. This battle is being waged by design. (Yes! G-d's design.) Humanity is climbing a ladder of consciousness, towards a point in the future, where mankind will unite, transcend the ego (leave Egypt) and unite in brotherhood and peace (enter Zion). When, and as, this happens, G-d's presence will be revealed; manifest, not in a physical form as misconceived by some, but as an undeniable awareness in the hearts and minds of united people. This supra-tangible awareness is described in terms of G-d's Names or attributes – Love, Kindness, kind, Savior, Infinite One, etc. This sensation is referred to as the "resting of the Shechina" (G-dly Presence) in Torah parlance.

This multi-generational process of development is messy. As man develops, he finds himself at various degrees of awareness, each stage defined and limited by the specific vantage point, from which he perceives reality.

Therefore, and in this way, each nation attempts to define the world as they perceive it and then structure their society accordingly. Any nation which rises to power does so on the strength of their philosophical worldview and its ability to displace the preceding philosophy. In this way, each empire is an evolutionary step forward. To be sure, this forward movement is not a straight line but a series of ascents and descents, ultimately leading forward.

Each empire asserts that their "new" understanding is, in fact, the final and absolute pinnacle of truth – it is, after all, exactly what they see.

It is certainly the case that the Torah is the most adamant about being the sole purveyor of the absolute truth, as Auerbach points out on page 14, "The Torah's claim to the truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical – excludes all other claims." Auerbach has got this right, the Torah leaves no room for any other truth outside of its own, and this is precisely why various societies – now and throughout history – feel the need to destroy the Jews and their Torah. The conflict with the Jews is over the nature of reality and how humankind should (must) allocate resources in the pursuit of personal success and survival.

The Greeks attacked the Jews because they did not believe that the Jewish worldview was attainable or desirable. The science of the times seemed to support their conclusion that man is stuck in the lower world. A world dominated by ego and, therefore, by violence. Logic dictates that man should, therefore, structure society accordingly. (This was the stated position of Tubal-Cain, the character in Darren Aronofsky's movie Noah.)

(It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss, but there is a full explanation in Kaballah as to how and why the Jews attained the secrets -held within the Torah – which gave them the ability to perceive a higher reality and escape the prison of lower consciousness, while other societies did not.)

Suffice to say that after thousands of years of human development, most people believe in the propriety of pursuing justice, unity, and brotherhood. The evolution is not complete; of course, as materialism, idolatry and subjugation are alive and well in the modern world, and unity and brotherhood have yet to be achieved.

This takes us to Homer and the reality he illustrates in the Odyssey. Auerbach does a fine job showing how Homer focuses the reader on the exterior, the physically tangible, on a world ruled by time and space. (I won't give examples here since Auerbach gives many) Auerbach explains how Homer glorifies the prison in which his characters exist.

Auerbach hints that these gods might have different lives when they are somewhere else, but when they are on earth, they are trapped by the tragic laws, which govern this low world. But Homer and the Greeks do not despair in their comprehension of their predicament, they delight in it! It is famously said that a pig loves shit! Instead of crying out for escape, Homer says embrace the muck! Homer's agenda is to inculcate the masses! There is no spiritual world; Homer seems to say. Or, perhaps more accurately, he is saying that if there is a higher world, there is no getting there from here. The mountain cannot be climbed!

The best we can do, say the Greeks, is enjoy what there is here and act heroically in the face of our tragic, meaningless lives. This is why, as Auerbach says, Homer creates such a sensual material world. Homer's world, as Auerbach points out, seems devoid of forward momentum, even as things are happening! This is because Homer wants to seduce and sedate the reader. He wants to calm us down, reassuring us, console us as he dares us to swallow the poison pill of pointless, endless, physicality. This is porn. It is propaganda at its best. It is no less than an act of rebellion against G-d's goal of correcting the world, uniting humankind, and achieving opened awareness and connection to G-d. The Torah demands that we transcend the physical while the Greeks ask us to drown in it.

One important clarification here: The Torah does not seek to destroy physicality; instead, the Torah system seeks to harness it, in the pursuit of a G-d's design and goal, to build a world filled with abundance, meaning, connection, and bliss for all the created beings.

King Achashverosh had a similar agenda, which is recorded in the Purim Megillah (scroll). Achashverosh throws a grand party to celebrate, what he believed to be, the finality of the destruction of the Jewish Temple, and with it the goal of drawing down spiritual energy into our world. All the Jews were invited, most came, some willingly, some coerced, to bear witness that the Persian's worldview (that the world was created for beauty) had triumphed over the Jewish agenda (that man must serve G-d by making an abode for Him in the lower world).

We now understand the dangerous beliefs, which the Jewish people battles against, throughout history. There is a philosophical light which the Jews are tasked with bringing to the nations. The Torah sees selfish egoism and the material world as a prison, from which one can and must break free. The Torah is, in fact, a manual on how to fix the world! Nevertheless, for it to work, the reader must believe that the world can be fixed.

We can understand why the Greeks and Persians could not accept the affront of the Jews and their Torah. The Torah mocks the entire premise of their belief systems and the structure of their society. As with Purim and the Persians, the victory over the Greeks on Chanukah was a victory of the Torah's truth. For a society to succeed, it must be built on truth and imbued with the correct spiritual beliefs.