

Nature Appreciation for Religious People

Rav Moshe Taragin

A strident mishnah in Avot (3: 7) condemns the disruption of Torah study to ponder the beauty of Nature: "Whoever halts Torah study to appreciate natural beauty (a tree) has committed a crime sinful enough to warrant death." Rav Kook reinterpreted this severe admonition: Ideally, Nature should be experienced as an integral aspect of religious experience and not as an interruption. The mishnah warns against Nature appreciation which doesn't evoke a spiritual response and should not disturb actual religious experience such as torah study. We all sense that, in Nature, lies spiritual meaning. How do religious people experience Nature?

Judaism's seminal moment occurred at Har Sinai when God directly revealed His word and His will to His chosen people. Ever since that epic moment, we have been deeply engrossed in the study of His Torah. Our avot however, lived prior to this revelation and discovered God by studying Nature. In identifying God, they didn't just ponder the 'cold' science and physics of Nature, but detected a moral spirit which supported life and human welfare. The midrash depicts Avraham as strolling through a city "alive" with light and life, and intuiting the Creator of this "world of welfare". Hashem implanted moral spirit and traits within the Nature allowing our avot to identify Him. Even after Har Sinai, we can still trace Divine morality through in the world we inhabit. Sadly, Darwin tarnished our view of Nature by depicting a natural world of violence, rivalries and survival of the fittest. Unlike Darwin, we don't view our world as hostile or violent but delicately balanced by its Creator to support life and, especially, human life.

Nature also provides a song to G-d: the midrash documents Dovid Hamelech eavesdropping on the actual melodic song of every organism in Nature – anthologized in a collection known as pirkei shira. Our ears may no longer detect this supernatural poetry, but science has empowered us to detect a different chord of Nature's song. Unlike ancients who were befuddled by Nature,

we fully understand how she operates and the delicate coordination necessary for the entire system to function. The "synchronization of Nature" is the song we are capable of hearing. We may no longer be capable of hearing the actual song of the trees described in Tehilim as "az yeranenu atzei haya'ar", but science has unlocked the secrets of the Amazon rain forests! God's delicate management of this complex ecosystem is the exquisite song of Nature discernible to modern ears.

Nature also should also humble us by her vastness and her enormity. Exposure to the immensity of Nature can open our imaginations to the incalculability and infinity of God. Having scanned the Heavens and pondered infinity, Dovid Hamelech (Tehilim chapter 8) exclaims "what is Man that he should even merit mention". Religious sin or malfunction are often the product of the "shrinking of human imagination" and the narrowing of human perspective. Sin always entails a tragic barter in which we forfeit long-term future for short-term needs. Resetting healthy vision avoids moral myopia and protects against religious failure. The poet John Keats described the ability of Nature to provide religious proportion:

Then on the shore

Of the wide world I stand alone, and think,

Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink

Hopefully this 'wide world' helps maintain 'wide imagination' rather than narrow self-interest.

A religious Jew doesn't only look to Nature to detect Divine morality, or to reset human proportion. Nature is dynamic system which is impacted by human behavior. Under ideal conditions, Nature exists in a perfect state, in complete harmony with Man and in full cooperation with human interest. So it was in Gan Eden at the beginning of time, and so it will be when history concludes and human beings recover religious utopia. Likewise, at certain milestones in history, as humanity veered closer to God, Nature became revitalized. The spies return from Israel with enormous outsized fruit; the pending entry of the Jews into

their homeland has awakened Nature's bounty. Similarly, the renewed blooming of the modern State of Israel, after centuries of parched infertility, signals that history is veering toward its redemptive terminus.

Finally, Nature can remind us of something we all have lost- our primal innocence. We were all born into this world pure and noble, but life has taken its toll and has corrupted our native virtue. Watching Nature daily renew herself, rebuilds hope in our own ability to restore our own purity. The poet William Wordsworth wrote

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a man;”.

As we grow from children to Men, we lose our innocence but teshuva and the dream of "chadesh yameinu c'kedem" exhorts us to restore that lost purity. Nature makes us believe that we can.

To summarize, Nature allows us to detect the moral imprint of God while Nature's beauty and synchronicity are songs to God. Nature's vastness and sweep can humble us and open our imagination to true "proportion". Finally, Nature's constant renewal demonstrates our own search for the restoration of innocence.

The ability to feel religion within Nature is even more crucial in the aftermath of the corona crisis. A natural force has wreaked havoc with human civilization. This tragedy cannot paint Nature as hostile or menacing to Man. For whatever reason the boundaries between Man and animal which normally insure against the spread of animal viruses to the human realm dissolved and allowed this tragic contagion. However the system of Nature and even the intricate system of microorganism isn't threatening to human experience. Humans as well as animals

depend upon a vast array of bacteria and viruses to survive. Sadly this equilibrium was upturned and human lives were lost. However Nature remains G-d's handiwork and a system Divinely and delicately assembled to support human life and welfare.