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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Va'et'hanan
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In the Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yaacov is quoted (3:9): “One who is walking along while studying [words of Torah] and interrupts his study and says ‘how beautiful is this tree, how beautiful is this field’—the Torah considers him as though he is guilty of death.” The source for this statement is usually given as a verse in this week’s Torah portion that teaches that one is supposed to contemplate words of Torah when walking on one’s way (Devarim 6:7). The assumption is that if one interrupts Torah study, even to admire the beauties of nature, one risks one’s life.

Rabbi Yaacov’s statement has often been understood to reflect a Torah-centered religious vision that denigrates the natural world. Presumably, one should be so engrossed in Torah so as not to be distracted by beautiful trees or fields!

I suggest that Rabbi Yaacov’s statement actually may have something else in mind. It is not anti-nature or anti-aesthetics. It reflects an entirely different message.

There are two basic paths to the Almighty: Torah and Nature. These are not mutually exclusive paths, but are complementary. When we study Torah, we study the word of God. When we experience the beauties of nature, we confront the awesome creations of God. A proper religious worldview entails proper appreciation of both Torah and Nature, and sees the ultimate harmony and unity of both.

If one seeks God only through Torah, one’s religious outlook lacks the sense of wonder and aesthetics that Nature provides. If one seeks God only through Nature, one’s religious outlook lacks the direct contact with God’s words.

Rabbi Yaacov was teaching that we need to maintain sensitivity to both pathways to God: to Torah and to Nature. If we are studying Torah while walking, and we see a beautiful tree, it is appropriate to praise the tree’s beauty as a manifestation of God’s wisdom. There is no problem with admiring the tree or field or any other feature of the natural world. A problem arises, though, if we see our admiration of nature as an “interruption” in our Torah study. If we do not view

Torah and Nature as harmonious and complementary approaches to God, then we are “guilty of death”. Rabbi Yaacov was reminding us to maintain a unified religious vision, not to view Torah and Nature as two separate and unrelated entities.

In his code of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides highlighted the traditional emphasis on Torah study. “Among all the commandments, none is equal to the study of Torah. Study leads to proper action.” (Laws of Torah Study 3:3) Through Torah study and mitzvah observance, a person can find a direct relationship with the Almighty.

Yet, Maimonides also highlighted the role of Nature in our religious development. “What is the way to love and fear Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great works and creations, and he sees in them His infinite wisdom, immediately he loves and praises and exalts and yearns with an overwhelming yearning to know His great Name….On meditating these very things, one immediately recoils, fears, and trembles, realizing that he is a tiny, low and obscure being of small intelligence standing before the One with perfect wisdom…” (Laws of Foundations of the Torah 2:2)

So this is the real message of Rabbi Yaacov: study Torah as a manifestation of God’s words and will; admire Nature as a reflection of God’s wisdom and creative powers. View Torah and Nature as complementary paths to God. Do not “interrupt” between them; do not see them as distinct and separate domains.

As we read in this week’s Torah portion: Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. One God is the God of Torah and the God of Nature.

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