Reflections on Jewish Spirituality

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Creation

To a religious person, the universe is filled with hidden voices and secret meanings. The natural world, being the creation of God, signals the awesomeness of its Creator.

The Torah opens with the dramatic words: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." It does not begin with the story of God's revelation to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, nor with specific commandments. The first chapter of Genesis establishes in powerful terms that God created the universe and everything within it.

An ancient Aramaic translation of the Torah interprets the Hebrew word "*bereishith*" (in the beginning) to mean "*behokhmah*" (with wisdom).[1] According to this translation, the Torah opens with the statement: "With wisdom did God create the heavens and the earth." A human being, by recognizing the vast wisdom of God as reflected in the universe He created, comes to a profound awareness and relationship with God. Indeed, experiencing God as Creator is the beginning of wisdom.

Moses Maimonides, the pre-eminent Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages, has understood this truth. He teaches: "Now what is the way that leads to the love of Him and the reverence for Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous acts and creations, obtaining from them a glimpse of His wisdom, which is beyond compare and infinite, he will promptly love and glorify Him, longing exceedingly to know the great Name of God, as David said: 'My whole being thirsts for God, the living God' (Psalms 42:3). When one ponders over these very same subjects, one will immediately recoil, startled, conceiving that he is a lowly, obscure creature…as David said: 'As I look up to the heavens Your fingers made…what is man that You should think of him (Psalm 8:4–5)'"[2]

The source of the love and fear of God rests in the contemplation of the world which God created.

The Torah and the Natural Universe

By opening with the story of creation, the Torah teaches that one must have a living relationship with the natural world in order to enter and maintain a living relationship with God. Jewish spirituality flowers and deepens through this relationship. The ancient sacred texts of Judaism, beginning with the Torah itself, guide us to live with a keen awareness of the rhythms of nature.

Jewish spirituality is organically linked to the natural rhythms of the universe. To a great extent, Jewish religious traditions serve to bring us into a sensitive relationship with the natural world.

An ancient teaching is that God "looked into the Torah and created the world."[3] This statement reflects a belief that the Torah actually predated Creation and served as the blueprint for the universe. This enigmatic teaching has been subject to various interpretations. But perhaps its main intent is to reveal the organic connection between the Torah and the universe. Since the laws of the Torah are linked to nature, it is as though nature had been created to fit these laws. The natural world was created in harmony with the revealed words of the Torah. A talmudic statement teaches that God created the world only on condition that Israel would accept the Torah. If not, the world would again be reduced to chaos and void.[4]

The Talmud (*Makkot* 23b) suggests that God gave the people of Israel 613 commandments. There are 248 positive commandments, corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body. There are 365 negative commandments, corresponding to the number of days in the solar year. This means that the Torah's commandments are ingrained in our very being: in our limbs, in the years of our lives. God's original design in Creation was related to His original design of the Torah and its commandments. The natural universe and the spiritual universe coalesce.

This harmony may also be implied in the blessing recited after reading from the Torah. The blessing extols God "Who has given us His Torah, the Torah of truth, and has planted within us eternal life (*hayyei olam)*." The phrase *hayyei olam* has been understood to refer to the eternal soul of each person; or to the Torah, which is the source of eternal life for the people of Israel. Yet, perhaps the blessing also suggests another dimension of meaning.

The word *olam* in biblical Hebrew usually refers to time—a long duration, eternity. In later Hebrew, it came to mean "the world," referring to space rather than specifically to time. *Hayyei olam*, therefore, may be understood as "eternal life," but also as "the life of the world." The blessing may be echoing both meanings. Aside from relating to eternal life, the blessing might be understood as praising God for planting within us the life of the world. That is, though His Torah, God has tied our lives to the rhythms of the natural world. Through this connection with the natural world, we are brought into a living relationship with God.

Jewish tradition, thus, has two roads to God: the natural world, which reveals God as Creator; and the Torah, which records the words of God to the people of Israel. But the Torah itself leads us back to the first road, the road of experiencing God the Creator. The Torah and nature are bound together.

The relationship of Torah and nature is evident in Psalm 19. This psalm has played an important role in Jewish religious consciousness, since it is included in the Sabbath liturgy (and is read daily in some communities). The Psalm has two distinct parts, which at first glance seem to be unconnected. It begins: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament tells His handiwork. Day unto day utters the tale, night unto night unfolds knowledge. There is no word, no speech, their voice is not heard; yet their course extends through all the world, and their theme to the end of the world." It goes on to describe the sun which rejoices as a strong man prepared to run his course. "Its setting forth is from one end of the skies, its circuit unto the other extreme, and nothing is hidden from its heat." But

then the Psalm makes an abrupt shift. It continues: “The Torah of the Lord is perfect, comforting the soul…the precepts of the Lord are rights, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes.” From a description of the glory of God as manifested in the natural world, the Psalm jumps to a praise of the Torah, God’s special revelation to the people of Israel. The Psalm seems to be composed of two separate segments.

The enigma of this Psalm’s organization, however, is easily solved. Psalm 19 is teaching that one may come to an understanding of God both through the natural world and through the Torah. God has provided us with two paths to Himself.

This concept underlies the organization of Jewish prayers, both for the morning and evening services. In both of these services, the recitation of the *Shema*—the biblical passage proclaiming the unity of God—is a central feature. In each service, the *Shema* is introduced by two sections, each concluding with a blessing. Although the words of these sections vary between the two services, their themes are identical. The first section praises God as Creator, the One Who called the universe into being, Who set the sun, moon, and stars in their rhythms, Who separated between day and night. The second section praises God as the giver of the Torah, as the One Who loves Israel. Only after reciting both sections do we recite the *Shema* and the subsequent prayers. The God of creation and the God of revelation are One, and we may find our way to Him through His world of creation and through His revealed word.

Sunrise

Certain moments of the day are particularly conducive to pensiveness. At dawn, with the rising of the sun, the sky in the east awakens with color and light. At sunrise, one experiences the still-fading darkness of night, along with the faintly emerging light of day. It is an in-between time, vague, pregnant with possibility.

Jewish tradition has long taught that the ideal time for morning prayer is at sunrise. It is considered particularly virtuous to pray at that time, when the prayer is in harmony with the emerging sun. The prayer of the morning extols God, Who “in His goodness ever revives each day anew His work of creation.” The rising sun is symbolic of this daily recreation of the universe. At the very moment when the sun rises and the world seems to be re-created—that is the preferred moment for the morning prayer. In that mysterious, quiet, in-between time, we experience God the Creator both in the skies and in the words of our prayer book.

Sunset

Sundown, too, is a mysterious and poetic time. The sun is dropping out of sight. The sky in the west is streaked with red and purple. In a short while, the world will be plunged into darkness.

Jewish tradition has understood the connection of human spirituality with the natural world. Jewish law prescribes that the afternoon prayers be recited before the sun sets. Many Jews recite the afternoon prayers just as the sun is setting. The night prayers are to be said ideally when the starts in the sky can be seen.

The daily prayer rhythm brings the worshipper into the natural rhythm of sunrise and sunset.

Changed Perceptions

The rhythms of the sun and moon govern our times of prayer, our religious festivals, our meditation of the universe[r1] . The phenomena of nature evoke within us responses to the greatness of God, the creator, and we recite blessings on witnessing the powers of nature.

Centuries of Westernization and urbanization have profoundly affected Jewish religious sensitivity. There has been a steady and increasing alienation between Jewish religious observance and the natural world, with a parallel diminution in sensing the awe of God as Creator of the natural universe.

To illustrate the changed perception, we may consider the commonly observed Jewish religious experiences that recur on a regular basis. Modern Jews identify their religious lives with such events as the Passover Seder, the High Holy Day synagogue services, Friday night Shabbat ceremonies and meal, the study of Torah, synagogue worship. The common denominator of these observances is that they generally happen indoors. They are observances in a synagogue, a home, or a place of study.

If we were to consider the situation of the ancient Israelites, we would be confronted with a different religious sensibility. The most important observances for them would have included the three pilgrimages to Jerusalem, when they would journey to the holy city to celebrate Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkoth. They would include the observance of *bikkurim*—the bringing of the first fruits to the Temple, a ceremony which was a great outdoor celebration. They would include the festivities that took place during the harvest festivals, the sharing of harvests with the poor, the bringing of animals to Jerusalem to be offered as sacrifices. Almost everything, in fact, would have involved being outdoors in contact with the natural world.

Obviously, we have moved a long way from the agricultural life of ancient Israel to the urban life of contemporary society. Our religious images and observances, the things we consider essential and meaningful, have been transformed over the generations due to the sociological and demographic changes. By urbanizing religion and by placing its most important events indoors, we have lost touch with the original religious insight which connected us with the rhythm of nature.

Jewish law often speaks in the old “natural” language. It describes the times of prayer in relation to sunrise, sunset and the stars at night. Today, though, we are more likely to speak of prayers as taking place at 7:00 am or 6:00 pm, for example. In former times, Jews knew that the Sabbath had ended by going outside and looking for stars. If it was dark enough to be able to observe three stars, then the Sabbath was over. Today, calendars and synagogue schedules list the time when Sabbath ends with the precision of mathematics, with no need to witness the stars at all. A person may pray in the morning without having experienced sunrise; may pray in the afternoon without having experienced sunset; may say evening prayers without having seen a star in the sky. Religious life can be celebrated indoors with the assistance of clocks and calendars, without the need arising to go outside.

By bringing religion indoors, some of our feeling of awe for the universe and its Creator has been lost. The regular daily connections with nature which Jewish tradition has prescribed are no longer easily experienced. But losing contact with the natural world threatens to make religion increasingly artificial, removed from its basic life source.

The Jewish ideal of a religious person has undergone a change over the centuries. Until relatively modern times, the ideal religious personality would have spent much time outdoors, and would have had ample opportunity to contemplate the wonders of the universe and the wisdom of its

Maker. The ideal Jew lived in harmony with nature and participated in its rhythms. The notion that ideal piety can be found in a pale, scholarly, undernourished saint who spends his days and nights studying Torah in a study hall is not true to the original Jewish religious vision. The biblical heroes and prophets, the talmudic sages, the medieval pietists and mystics—all were involved in outdoor religion.

Prayer and Windows

Attitudes on spirituality are suggested by the kind of windows used in places of worship. Windows are the connection between the indoor world and the world outside. The location and transparency of the windows indicate the extent to which worshippers are expected to relate to the world outdoors while they are engaged in prayer in the synagogue.

The Talmud (*Berkahot* 34b) records the opinion of Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: "A person should not pray except in a house that has windows…." The proof text is drawn from the Book of Daniel. Since Daniel offered his prayers while looking through a window in the direction of Jerusalem, so this precedent should be followed by subsequent generations. Rashi, the great talmudic commentator, explains, "Windows cause one to concentrate the heart, since one looks toward the heavens and one's heart is humbled." According to this opinion, a person praying indoors may reach a higher spiritual level by looking out a window to see the heavens.

Yet, windows in synagogues have varied from place to place and generation to generation, reflecting different attitudes toward the outside world. In some synagogues, windows were built high up on the wall, above the height of any person. This was done in order to prevent people from being distracted from the prayers by letting their eyes wander to the outdoors during services. Windows, which serve to bring the outside in, also serve to connect the inside with the outside. If praying requires concentration on the words of the prayers, windows can be distracting. Indeed, a fear of the distraction of windows emerged in many communities. The Magen Avraham, a commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh* (O.H. 90:4), states that one's eyes should be directed downward during prayer. "Nevertheless, when one's concentration is broken, one may lift the eyes toward the heavens in order to awaken concentration." In a sense, windows—placed high on the walls of the synagogue—are a necessary evil to be used only if one's concentration on prayers is deficient.

Stained glass windows, though they may be very beautiful, were not incorporated into religious architecture merely for the sake of beauty. Rather, stained glass is an effective way to create an inside environment that shuts out the external world. There is no intrinsic need for us to place stained glass windows in our synagogues; indeed, these windows reflect a philosophical attitude on prayer and our sense of spirituality. They protect the indoor world from intrusions from the outside.

Sacred Space

The Torah records the dream of Jacob in which he saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending its steps. When he awoke from his dream, Jacob said: "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not." Jacob was frightened. He said: "How full of awe is this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Jacob took the stone

which he had used as a pillow and set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on it as a sign of consecration. He named that place Beth El, the house of God (Genesis 28:16–19).

The ladder in Jacob's dream symbolizes the connection between the physical world and the spiritual world, between the finitude of matter and the infinity of spirit. These two seemingly opposite domains are connected and related to each other. At the instant of that recognition, Jacob recognized that he was in a sacred place. His immediate response was to take a simple rock and sanctify it, making it a symbol of God's presence of earth. Certainly, God cannot be limited to a particular stone or any other specific place. God transcends space, just as He transcends time. Yet, Jacob consecrated the place so that this physical space was also to be considered "the gate of heaven."

This story dramatically demonstrates a key feature of religious understanding and experience. While God cannot be limited to a particular space, yet a human being can set aside a place and recognize it to be sacred, a point of connection between self and God. While the entire world is a manifestation of God's will and power, and as such is a reflection of sanctity, yet humans can designate specific places as being sacred. We can create new spiritual realities, new gates to heaven. Sacred and non-sacred space may appear objectively to be the same; but within the mind of a religious person, they are different kinds of worlds.

Upon entering a synagogue with stained glass windows, we enter a religious realm, a world unto itself without reference to anything outside. It is irrelevant where such a synagogue is actually located: it might be in the middle of New York City or in Jerusalem or atop a mountain or along a sea shore. To a person inside the synagogue, the outside world is closed out; it cannot penetrate the colored windows.

The underlying motivation for creating such windows is the belief—whether acknowledged or not—that prayer can best be experienced in a place which is closed off from the distraction of the outside world. When one enters a synagogue with stained glass windows, one knows immediately that this is a place of worship. The "inwardness" of the building makes its message known.

There have been many synagogues where windows have been clear, where worshippers could see what was going on outside. In such synagogues, people could recite their prayers while also viewing the gardens, trees and other outdoor scenery. The synagogue of Rabbi Joseph Karo in Safed, for example, has clear windows through which one can see the wonderful mountainous scenery of the Galilee.

Since the natural world and the spiritual world are organically connected, the Talmudic requirement of praying only in a building with windows makes much sense. The windows, though, should provide an opening between the person praying and God, Creator of heaven and earth. The windows in our synagogues are also windows to our souls. They represent our attitudes toward the outside world and toward the inside world, and toward the world inside each of us. Even when we pray in synagogues that have stained glass windows, we should keep our minds open and receptive to the world outside the synagogue buildings.

Halakha

Jewish religious tradition provides observances and symbols that bring one into as full an awareness of God's presence as possible. The natural world unfolds the glory of God the creator; but one can grow accustomed to the phenomena of nature and take them for granted much of the time. Halakha, Jewish law, adds a dimension of specificity to Jewish spirituality. It is not merely a poetic,

artistic experience; it also involves specific activities to do and not to do. It is a full system and guide for life; through its precepts, one maintains a continuous relationship with God.

Since halakha is an all-encompassing guide to life which describes what God wants us to do, it is essential that we understand its role in our lives. Observing the mitzvoth is a way of connecting with the eternal reality of God. To treat halakha as a mechanical system of laws is to miss its meaning and significance. Halakha provides the framework for spiritual awareness, religious insight, and even spontaneity.

At the root of halakha is the awareness that God is overwhelmingly great, and that human beings are overwhelmingly limited. Humility is the hallmark of the truly religious person. One must be open to the spirit of God that flows through the halakha. Halakha is the ever-present link between God and the Jewish people. Through observance of halakha in the spirit of humility, one has the opportunity to live life on a deep, spiritual level. The goal of halakha is to crate righteous, saintly people—those who live their lives in constant relationship with the Almighty.

Renewing Jewish Spirituality

A rabbinic teaching has it that the way of Torah is a narrow path. On the right is fire and on the left is ice. If one veers from the path, one will be destroyed by either the fire or the ice.

The Torah way of life is balanced, harmonious and sensible. It imbues life with depth, meaning and true happiness. Yet, it has not always been easy to stay on the narrow path.

Veering to the left freezes the soul of Judaism. Classic Judaism expresses itself through its connection with nature and its commitment to the basic texts of Judaism—the Bible, Talmud, halakhic codes, philosophical works. These are the sourced of its warmth and harmony that imbue the rhythms of Jewish living with meaning. When one abandons Jewish belief and observance, this is a turn toward the ice. Inevitably, it leads to a breakdown in Jewish experience and Jewish identity.

Veering to the right leads to the spiritual destruction cause by fire, or excessive zeal, religious extremism. This tendency manifests itself in a spirit of isolationism, self-righteousness, and xenophobia. It reduces the Torah way of life to self-imposed physical and spiritual ghettos.

A basic challenge for modern Jews is to re-capture and renew the sources of spiritual vitality within the vast Jewish tradition. We need to reconnect with the sacred, and reconstruct Jacob’s ladder that linked heaven and earth. We need to avoid the ice and the fire—and to maintain a clear, serene and focused path in our relationship with the Almighty.

[1]*Targum Yerushalmi*, Genesis 1:1. See also Benzion Uziel, *Hegyonei Uziel*, vol. 1, Jerusalem, 5713, p. 1.
[2]*Mishneh Torah, Yesodei haTorah*, 2:2.
[3]*Bereishith Rabba* 1:1. A number of rabbinic sources express the belief that the Torah predated Creation. Among them are *Bereishith Rabba* 1:4; *Vayikra Rabba* 19:1; *Pesahim* 54a.
[4]*Avodah Zara* 3a.

[r1]Meditations on the universe?