View PDF

By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bereishith

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Talmud (Hagiga 12b) records an enigmatic statement by Rabbi Yosei: “Woe unto people, who see but do not know what they see; who stand, but do not know on what they stand.”

Rabbi Yosef Hayyim, the great rabbinic sage of 19th century Baghdad, interpreted this statement to be reflecting on the need to know about the world in which we live. There are those who wish to devote themselves to heavenly spiritual matters…but who are ignorant about the workings of this world. They do not study the sciences, or mathematics, or geography. “One who does not know what occurs on the earth below will not succeed in understanding what occurs in the heavens above. A lack in the wisdoms of the world is a bar to knowledge of the Torah”(*Imrei Binah*, 1:2).

Knowledge of the sciences and humanities enables us to see…and know what we see. It deepens our relationship with the Almighty by allowing us to better understand His creations. It enlarges the scope of our thinking; it prods us to reach a greater “wholeness” and balance in our religious worldview.

The Torah’s majestic opening verses give poetic expression to God’s creation of the universe. This is an invitation to come closer to God by taking notice of His works. If we seek God without also seeking to understand the world, our religious vision is deficient. If we seek to understand the world without recognizing God as Creator, our scientific vision is deficient.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his classic work *The Lonely Man of Faith*, identifies two “Adams,” two dimensions within each human being. One part of us—Adam the first-- is scientifically-bent, desiring mastery over the universe. The other part of us—Adam the second-- is spiritual, seeking communion with God. Adam the first strives for majesty; Adam the second yearns for redemption.

The “whole” human being encompasses a practical, social, creative and scientific dimension; as well as a spiritual, intensely personal and lonely dimension. To eliminate either dimension is to deny one’s full humanity.

Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that contemporary Westerners tend to focus on Adam the first—the scientific, sociable, technologically-directed personality. The spiritual, God-seeking Adam the second is downplayed or denied. He writes: “Contemporary Adam the first, extremely successful in his cosmic-majestic enterprise, refuses to pay earnest heed to the duality in man and tries to deny the undeniable, that another Adam exists beside or, rather, in him. By rejecting Adam the second, contemporary man, *eo ipso*, dismisses the covenantal faith community as something superfluous and obsolete.”

A striking example of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s concern is the current best-selling book, *Sapiens*, by an Israeli academic Yuval Noah Harari. This book is very well written, full of fascinating information, and has won high praise from many critics and the public at large. Dr. Harari is solely concerned with Adam the first. He dismisses God, the soul, and spirituality as things not scientifically provable…and therefore not real. When reading *Sapiens*—with all its erudition and literary style—one does not come into meaningful contact with Adam the second. Dr. Harari—a highly regarded Israeli scholar—essentially negates the central teaching of the historic People of Israel who received and transmitted the Torah to humanity. He is surely a successful Adam the first; but his lack of awareness of the reality of Adam the second leaves a serious void in his understanding of homo sapiens.

Rabbi Soloveitchik points out. “An atheist cosmonaut circling the earth, advising his superiors who placed him in orbit that he did not encounter any angels, might lay claim to dignity because he courageously mastered space; he is, however, very far from experiencing a redeemed existence.”

Our challenge as thinking human beings is to develop the fullness of our humanity—the majestic and the redemptive. By studying the universe with keen vision, we learn to understand what we see and upon what we stand; we learn to value the relationship between our material and spiritual natures; we learn to live with the "wholeness" of internalizing both Adam the first and Adam the second.

Rabbi Yosei warned: "Woe unto people, who see but do not know what they see; who stand, but do not know on what they stand."

Angel for Shabbat