Nature and Torah: Thoughts for Parashat Lekh Lekha

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Lekh Lekha

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In Chapter 2 of his “Laws of Foundations of Torah,” Maimonides discusses the commandments to love and fear God. “What is the way to love and fear Him? When one contemplates His wondrous and great works and creations and 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…”

Significantly, Maimonides locates love and fear of God in a universal context. Every human being can contemplate the wonders of nature and detect the greatness of the Creator. Maimonides might have written that one learns love and fear of God by studying the Torah…God’s word. But by specifically including this passage in his section on Foundations of Torah, he was teaching us that we are not only Jews with a Torah…but we are human beings who share in the universal human spiritual adventure.

This week’s Torah portion begins with God’s command to Abram to leave his land, his birthplace, the house of his parents. Abram was to go to a land that God would show him and start a new chapter in the history of humanity.

The Torah does not indicate why God chose Abram for this awesome challenge. Rabbinic tradition filled the void with various Midrashic stories that highlight Abram's spiritual greatness. Although his father Terah was an idolater, Abram repudiated idolatry and shattered his father's idols. Abram did not inherit faith in One God, but discovered God through philosophical questioning. In viewing the wondrous and great works and creations, he concluded that these things could not have just happened on their own. There must be a Creator who set things in order.

Abram discovered God centuries before the Torah was revealed to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The Midrashim underscore that God is accessible to us through our universal human capacities.

The opening chapters of the Torah, from the creation story, through Noah and Abram/Abraham, are directed at humanity at large…not just at the Jewish People. The message is: through philosophy and science, human beings can attain love and fear of God.

Jews have an additional route to God: the Torah. Each morning in our prayers, we thank the Almighty for having granted Torah to the People of Israel. The teachings and commandments of Torah put us in contact with God's word and God's will…and the more we study and internalize Torah, the more we are able to deepen our connection 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 as Creator. The Torah and nature are bound together.

The relationship of Torah and nature is evident in Psalm 19. 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." Then the psalm makes an abrupt shift. It continues: "The law of the Lord is perfect, comforting the soul…the precepts of the Lord are right, 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 is teaching that one may come to an understanding of God both through the natural world and through the Torah.

For the Jewish People, Abraham is our father (Avraham Avinu) and Moses is our teacher (Moshe Rabbeinu)…and both lead us to God.