Investigating and Seeking: Thoughts for Parashat Naso

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Naso

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Investigate (dirshu) the Lord and His strength, seek His face (bakeshu fanav) continually” (I Chronicles 16:11).

For a religious person, relationship with God is a central feature of life. But how does one investigate and seek for the Almighty?

Dirshu—investigate God and God’s strength. Study the universe and God’s vast wisdom and creative power. Engage in philosophic speculation. Maimonides lists the first commandment of Judaism to “know” that God exists and governs the universe “with an eternal and infinite power, a power that has no interruption.” (Yesodei Hatorah 1:5). Intellectual striving for God is key.

Bakeshu fanav—seek His face. Intellectual knowledge of God is not enough for a religious soul. A personal connection is needed. But how does one seek God’s “face”—when we believe God to be incorporeal, lacking any physical features including a face? The phrase should be understood not in its literal meaning, but as a poetic way of seeking a personal “face to face” encounter with God.

Dirshu is our way of thinking about God with our minds.

Bakeshu fanav is our way of feeling God’s continual presence with our hearts.

Dirshu is about intellectual, philosophical, scientific exploration.

Bakeshu fanav is about prayer, spiritual closeness, heartfelt yearning.

This week’s Torah reading includes the blessing the priests give to the people of Israel. Interestingly, two of the three lines of the blessing refer to God’s face. “May the Lord shine His face on you…May the Lord raise His face unto you…”

The blessing for God to shine His face is a blessing for spiritual enlightenment, insight, a feeling that God’s warmth and light are ever-present. The blessing for God to raise His face is a blessing for direct relationship, for peace and spiritual wholeness.

The priestly blessing underscores the personal, ongoing relationship between God and us. We don’t only need to investigate and “know” God, we need to feel God’s presence, to “seek His face” and be blessed by His “face.”

The late Rabbi Harold Kushner told a story of a man who stopped attending his usual synagogue and was now frequenting another minyan. One day he happened to meet the rabbi of his previous synagogue, and the rabbi asked him where he was praying these days. The man answered: “I am praying at a small minyan led by Rabbi Cohen.”

The rabbi was stunned. “Why would you want to pray there with that rabbi. I am a much better orator, I am more famous, I have a much larger following.”

The man replied: “Yes, but in my new synagogue the rabbi has taught me to read minds.”

The rabbi was surprised. “Alright, then, read my mind.”

The man said: “You are thinking of the verse in Psalms, ‘I have set the Lord before me at all times.’”

“You are wrong,” said the rabbi, “I was not thinking about that verse at all.”

The man replied: “Yes, I knew that, and that’s why I’ve moved to the other synagogue. The rabbi there is always thinking of this verse.”

Indeed, an authentically religious person is always thinking of this verse, either directly or in the back of one's mind. Such an individual lives in the presence of God, conducts him/herself with modesty and propriety.

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