

Judaism and The Rhythms of Nature

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Judaism offers two pathways to the Almighty: the Torah and Nature. Rabbi Marc Angel explores these themes in his book, *The Rhythms of Jewish Living*, and this is an excerpt from that book. The book may be ordered on this link:

<https://www.jewishideas.org/rhythms-jewish-living-sephardic-exploration-judaisms-spirituality>

THE RHYTHMS OF NATURE

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 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 *bereshith* (in the beginning) to mean *behokmah* (with wisdom). 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 of his relationship with God. Indeed, experiencing God as Creator is the beginning of religious wisdom.

Moses Maimonides, the pre-eminent Jewish thinker of the middle ages, has understood this truth. He wrote:

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 (Psalm 42:3)’. When he ponders over these very subjects, he 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)?

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 Jews into a sensitive relationship with the natural world. Many commandments and customs lead in this direction, drawing out the love and reverence which emerge from the contemplation of God's creations.

An ancient teaching is that God "looked into the Torah and created the world." 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 was 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.

The Talmud (Makkot 23b) teaches that God gave the people of Israel 613 commandments. There are 248 positive commandments, corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body. And 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 are in rhythm with each other.

This harmony may also be implicit 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 world *olam* in Biblical Hebrew usually refers to time—a long duration, eternity. In later Hebrew, *olam* 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, through 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 as 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." 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 seems to be composed of two separate segments, as if accidentally put together by a careless editor.

But the psalm, in its present form, has been part of the Jewish religious tradition for thousands of years. Its impact on Jews has been as a unitary literary piece.

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 given us two roads to Him.

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 the same. 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.