



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

“Reflecting on the Wonders of Nature”

I’m a Brooklyn boy, born and bred. I had few, if any, opportunities to experience the wonders of nature. I grew up in a totally urban environment, except for an occasional visit to the Prospect Park Zoo and the adjacent lake and skimpy woods.

My teenage years, during which I was beginning to form my religious beliefs, were spent in a yeshiva in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. There I had even less of an opportunity to absorb the beauty of nature. The local Hester Street Park was a great place to play basketball and chat with aged Russian Jewish survivors of the Communist Revolution. But I do not recall a single blade, let alone a small patch, of green grass there.

Fast forward to my post high-school years, during which I was exposed to the tutelage of several teachers who had studied in the prominent pre-Holocaust Lithuanian yeshivas.

One might say that I was more than exposed. Better said, I was indoctrinated into their teaching methodologies, which included intensive Talmud study along with heavy emphasis upon classic early medieval theological works. Those works included the opening chapters of *Mishneh Torah* by Rambam (Maimonides 1138-1204) and *Chovot HaLevavot* by Rabbenu Bahya ibn Paquda (1050-1120).

Viewed chronologically, it was Rabbenu Bahya who first shocked me into the recognition that the preferred manner with which to undertake a relationship with the *Ribbono shel Olam*, the “Master of the Universe,” was to contemplate the wonders of nature.

In the second section of his *Chovot HaLevavot* (*Duties of the Heart*), he advocates for a careful study of the world around us. He entitled this section *Shaar HaBechinah*, the “Gate of Analysis.” Through careful study of nature—mountains, forests, climate, animal behavior, and the remarkable workings of the human body—one can come to appreciate the Almighty and develop a relationship with

**In loving memory of
our beloved father and grandfather
Joachim Ignace Weindling z”l**

**May the Torah learning
from this issue be לעילוי נשמת
חיים יצחק בן נפתלי ז”ל
on his 20th yahrtzeit - כ חשוון**

**Greatly missed by his children
and grandchildren
Marsha, Melissa, and Becky Pottash
Steven & Lizzie Weindling
Shoshanah-Ruth, Naftalia Maya,
and Yaira Rachel Weindling
Nan Abbot and Lee DiTullio**

Him.

Even more powerful than Rabbenu Bahya were the words of Rambam:

“This revered and mighty God—it is a *mitzvah* to love and stand in awe of Him, as it written, ‘And thou shall love the Lord thy God’ (Deuteronomy 6:4), and ‘of the Lord thy God thou shall stand in awe’ (ibid. verse 13).

“What is the path to His love and awe? The moment when a person beholds His actions and His wondrous great creations and discovers in them His immeasurable and endless wisdom, he will immediately love, and praise, and glorify, and profoundly desire to know His great name! As David said: ‘My soul thirsts for God, the living God!’ (Psalms 42:3).

“As he further meditates upon these very matters, he reflexively falls backwards with fear and trembling and realizes that he is but a tiny creature, lowly and dim, who stands with a trivial and puny intelligence before Perfect Intelligence. As David said: ‘When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers...what is man that You are mindful of him?’ As our Sages have taught us, ‘Only thus can you truly recognize He who spoke and created a world!’”

I must confess that, as a youth deprived of the opportunity to encounter raw nature, I was initially overwhelmed by these teachings. My earliest memories of communion with the divine were the times when my cousin and I observed our great-grandmother, Yitta Leah Kriegel, may she rest in peace, bake the challah for Shabbos every Friday morning. As she

kneaded the dough, and more fervently as she turned on the oven, she would gaze heaven-ward and speak to the *bashefer*, the Creator, and plead with Him to assure that the *kinderlach*, her great-grandchildren, would have delicious challah for Shabbos!

That person-to-person connection with the *Ribbono Shel Olam* was reinforced in



Rav Shlomo Aviner

the various synagogues prevalent in our neighborhood. Men and women who had gone through displacement from the *alter heim*, their “old homes” in pre-holocaust Europe, knew how to “love God and stand in awe of Him.” They knew how to pray to Him as they wept and sobbed, and even more so as they sang and danced. Ah,

did they know how to sing!

I grew up with faith in the One Above that arose from watching humans who lived their faith. It was difficult for me to attempt to find faith by contemplating nature and its wonders. This difficulty troubled me for many years.

Much later in life, I came across a passage in the writings of Rav Shlomo Aviner, a contemporary Religious Zionist rabbi of great renown, may he be well. It is contained in his collection of sermons on the weekly Torah portions entitled *Tal Chermon*. In his sermon on this week’s *Parashat Vayera* (Genesis 18:1-22:24), he writes:

“Abraham was the “knower-believer-lover”

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of the Lord, par excellence! It is by virtue of this knowledge-faith-love that he came to love other people, all creatures, and the beauty of nature itself. [It is o]ut of his ability to reveal the Light of the Almighty that he came to appreciate all of creation at its many levels.”

I remember first coming across this passage and exclaiming to myself, “Wow! He is reversing the teachings of his medieval predecessors! It is not from nature that we learn to appreciate the Almighty, but it is from our connection to the Almighty that we come to appreciate nature!”

Rav Aviner bolsters his contention with an observation garnered from his experience with modern man. He writes, “There are those who think that reflection upon the wonders of nature can bring one to faith in the Creator. They therefore find

great value in physics and biology and the like and thereby fail to discern that contemplation of nature without a basis in religious faith swiftly leads to paganism, heresy, and falsely deifying nature itself, a kind of pantheism... At best it leads to aesthetic pleasures, to the exclusion of true spirituality.”

I recommend that you, the reader, consult the full passage in Rav Aviner’s work. I didn’t write this column to disabuse you of the great wisdom of Rabbenu Bahya and Maimonides. I merely suggest that by writing so long ago, they were not yet aware of the abuse of nature-worship which typifies our modern and postmodern world, the world in which we now live, and the world which Rav Aviner knows so well.

Food for thought, for sure. I look forward, dear reader, to your response. ■



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