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Torah Tidbits

## Perspectives on the Study of Nature

We in Israel read/learn the 3rd perek of Avot this Shabbat. In Chutz LaAretz, they have the 3rd perek next week. Let's look at the 9th mishna (some texts number the mishnayot differently). This mishna is sometimes attributed to a R' Yaakov.

רבי שמעון אומר: המהלך בדרך ושונה, ומפסיק  
ממשנתו ואומר: מה נאה אילן זה ומה נאה ניר זה, מעלה  
עליו הכתוב כאלו מתחייב בנפשו.

R' Shimon says: He who walks on the road and is reviewing (his Torah learning in his mind), and stops his learning and says - How beautiful is this tree, how beautiful is this field - the verse considers him to have put his life in jeopardy.

The obvious question is what is so terrible about admiring a tree or a field while walking on the road? The admiration of nature is the admiration of G-d's World. We even have brachot for different elements of nature.

The standard explanation is that when one is engrossed in Torah study, nothing should cause him to interrupt himself - even the beauties of nature. Studying

Torah is above all.

There is another way to understand this mishna. The key words to this understanding is UMAFSIK MIMISHNATO, and he stops his learning to admire nature. Admiration of nature must be part of the Torah in which we are engrossed as we walk on the 'road of life'.

The study of nature, of the life sciences, needs a very special perspective. On the one hand, to view nature as something different from G-d is problematic. It short changes G-d. This attitude manifests itself with making a sharp distinction between Limudei Kodesh and Limudei Chol - studying holy matters and mundane matters. The Torah way of life does not recognize the pursuit of any area of knowledge as being outside the Jew's lifetime challenge of Knowing G-d, better and better. This, says the Rambam, leads to a deeper and richer Love of G-d.

When one studies biology or chemistry or physics or astronomy... (any topic, really), he should close the part of his mind and heart that is reserved for Torah Learning, and open up a different part for other disciplines. A beloved biology professor I was privileged to have for several courses at Yeshiva University - Dr. William Etkin ז"ל - said to us once, a Torah person's mind must always be open (he would have

said 24/7, but that phrase wasn't popular yet) and everything that he learns, sees, experiences, should be seen within a Torah perspective.

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## Study of nature can and has led some people and societies to forget about the one G-d and worship many other things

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The above touches on one side of this issue. MAFSIK MIMISHNATO is problematic.

There is another side of the study and admiration of nature, that is just as problematic.

When admiration of nature, of the Sun and the Moon, of lofty mountains and magnificent animals and trees, leads to veneration and worship. This is the dire concern Moshe Rabeinu expresses in the beginning of next week's sedra (Va'etchanan) about seeing various impressive elements of G-d's Creation, and either making the grave mistake of worshiping them, even in the misguided thinking that it is a way to serve and worship G-d.

If a person is rightly impressed with the Sun (for example), its light, warmth, energy, life-force, and this leads to Sun-worship (as it did in generations of long ago), then that is a very serious situation, to say the least.

But being equally impressed with the Sun

as a ball of fiery plasma with internal convective motion that creates a magnetic field... that it is 109 times the diameter of the Earth and 330,000 times as massive... The Sun currently fuses about 600 million tons of hydrogen into helium every second, converting 4 million tons of matter into energy every second as a result... Wow, look at what G-d created - that's fine. What does G-d have to do with the Sun which formed about 4,600,000,000 years ago from the collapse of part of a giant molecular cloud that consisted mostly of hydrogen and helium and that probably gave birth to many other stars. - that's the problem!

Study of nature can and has led some people and societies to forget about the one G-d and worship many other things. Study of nature has led other people and societies to leave G-d to the spiritual matters in the world (if that) and consider nature as we know it and are still learning about, to have nothing to do with G-d at all.

Wikipedia's entry on the Sun is huge. I did a search for God in the entry - gods and goddesses were mentioned numerous times in the article. Not G-d as Creator of All.

If the study and admiration of nature is so fraught with pitfalls for the G-d-fearing person, may it be better not to study nature.

No, says the Navi Yeshayahu in next week's haftara of Nachamu. He says, S'U MAROM EINEICHEM UR-U MI VARA EILEH..., lift your eyes heavenward and see (and understand and appreciate) Who created it all. ■