

Torah versus Teva

Pirkei Avot 3:8

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

Rabbi Shimon says: If one is walking on the road and learning and he interrupts his learning to say, "How beautiful is this tree! How beautiful is this furrow!" Scripture considers him as if he is guilty of a mortal sin.

Deuteronomy 16:21

לֹא־תטע לך אֲשֶׁרָה כָּל־עֵץ אֲצִל מִזְבַּח ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ

You shall not plant for yourself an idolatrous tree- any tree- near the Altar of Adonai, your God that you shall make for yourself.

Etz Chayim ad loc.

One may not plant a tree alongside an altar to God, lest observers think that we are worshipping the tree, as some pagans do. True, God is the creator of the natural world's beauty and order, and nature is an example of God's handiwork, but God is not coterminous with the natural world as some scientists and philosophers have believed. Nature may be beautiful, but it is not moral. Therefore, while we may admire nature, we are not to worship it.

Rashi

The study of Torah protects the individual from the dangers of travel. To break off from such study puts one's life at risk.

Bartenura

This is true of all idle talk, but it is speaking according to what is common; as it is the way of wayfarers to speak about what they see with their eyes.

Rabbeinu Yonah

When a person is studying, he should not be involved in mundane conversation, since he needs to stand in fear and awe in front of the Torah.

Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz

There is value in admiring beauty whenever we see it. Whether we admire a natural wonder or a piece of art, pausing for such aesthetic pleasure is rare in a society that floods our consciousness with images... While the world offers plenty of beautiful vistas, rolling hills, and soaring seas, these are not enough to ensure spiritual fortitude.

It is tempting to be drawn excessively by the external world's allure- pleasure, enjoyment, and virtually every possible material distraction. In this Mishna, Rabbi Shimon nudges us to ignore the noise and to seek respite in our peaceful inner worlds. It is all too easy to get caught in the spiritual malaise of a vacuous life. If one is working through an important life issue, or a Torah lesson, or a spiritual matter and becomes distracted by the external world, one is in danger of never manifesting intrinsic spiritual potential.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

It is a mitzvah to admire nature and even say a blessing over beautiful, natural phenomena such as a rainbow or when the tree first blossoms in the spring, or when tasting fruit. However, here the sin is to break off from Torah study in order to appreciate beauty, thus pitting God's beautiful revelation against God's beautiful nature. The two do not contradict each other since they have one Creator. Each should be accorded its own respect and studied in its own time.

The Way into Judaism and the Environment, Jeremy Benstein, p. 77-78

[this Mishna] serves as a central proof-text for the claim that Judaism, at its core, is spiritually alienated from nature- that Jewish tradition stands squarely behind revelation (Torah) as its central religious category of experience and source of Truth, while creation (nature) is seen as a potentially dangerous competitor, an alternative and therefore heretical source of inspiration, or experience of the Divine, whose seductive charms must be constrained, or in this case, vehemently censured.

Most interpretations of this Mishna work from an unspoken assumption of the dichotomization between nature and Torah- the breaking off of Torah study in order to experience nature. This assumption results in a black-and-white, either-or world view: choose one or the other, for you can't have both. But what if we don't accept this assumption and reject a radical rupture between Creation and Revelation?

A key phrase in this text is "mafsik mi-mishnato ceases, breaks off from his study." Yes, if in order to relate to the world you have to cease your learning, then your soul is in grave danger. What previously was a working assumption is here the crux of the sin, the unbridgeable rift between Torah and nature. What is needed then is a synthesis, a supreme effort to mend that gap, to forge a common language for our disparate forms of spiritual experience.

One who perpetuates this dichotomy, this spiritual feud, is in truth risking great spiritual and physical harm. But one engaged in study, in developing Jewish identity and commitments, and who “mamshikh b’mishnato continues that study,” those Jewish values, and sees the beautiful tree and field, the world they represent and our relationship to it, as an extension, as an expansion, of that study, that person will have performed a great act of tikkun (repair): tikkun haolam, of the world, and tikkun hanefesh, of our (previously distorted) souls.

The Zohar apparently agrees with this interpretation as well:

Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Elazar, Rabbi Abba, and Rabbi Yossi were sitting under the trees in the valley of the Sea of Ginnosar (Kinneret). Rabbi Shimon said, “How beautiful (na’eh) is the shade with which these trees protect us. Let us crown them with words of Torah!

Ironically, this is the same Rabbi Shimon, but here he teaches of the mystical oneness of all, and of the need to merge physical and spiritual beauty deepening both.

True tikkun will only be possible when we can overcome that alienation, strengthen the bridge in both directions and deepen the relationship between Judaism and the world. Both Torah and the environment will profit from a renewed engagement and dialogue between them... because previously dichotomized realms of experience or sources of wisdom- the ruchani and the gashmi will be revealed to be aspects of a larger whole: complementary, interconnected, and interdependent.

Rebbe Nachman (19th C., Ukraine)

רבּונוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם זְכַנִּי לְהִרְבּוֹת בְּהִתְבּוֹדְדוּת
תְּמִיד, וְאַזְכָּה לְהִיּוֹת רְגִיל לְצֵאת בְּכָל יוֹם לְשָׂדֶה
בֵּין אֵילָנוֹת וְעֵשְׂבִים וְכָל שִׂיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה, וְשֵׁם אֲזַכָּה
לְהִתְבּוֹדֵד וּלְהִרְבּוֹת בְּשִׂיחָה זֹאת תְּפִילָה בֵּינִי לְבִין
קוֹנִי,

Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone; may it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass — among all growing things and there may I be alone, and enter into the hitbodedut [hitbodedut] prayer, to talk with the One to whom I belong.

לְשׁוֹחַ שֵׁם כָּל אֲשֶׁר עִם לִבִּי וְכָל שִׂיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה
וְכָל הָעֵשְׂבִים וְהָאֵילָנוֹת וְכָל הָצִמְחִים, כְּלֵם
יִתְעוֹרְרוּ לְקִרְאתִי, וַיַּעֲלוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ כֹחַם וְחַיּוּתָם
לְתוֹךְ דְּבָרֵי שִׂיחָתִי וְתַפְלָתִי, עַד שֶׁתִּהְיֶה תַּפְלָתִי
וְשִׂיחָתִי נִשְׁלֶמֶת בְּתַכְלִית הַשְּׁלֵמוֹת עַל יְדֵי כָּל
שִׂיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה, שִׂיכְלְלוּ כְּלֵם, עִם כָּל פְּחוּתָם
וְחַיּוּתָם וְרוּחַנְיּוּתָם עַד שֶׁרָשָׁם הָעֲלִיוֹן, כְּלֵם
יִכְלְלוּ בְּתוֹךְ תַּפְלָתִי וְעַל יְדֵי זֶה אֲזַכָּה לִפְתּוֹחַ אֶת
לִבִּי לְהִרְבּוֹת בְּתַפְלִילָה וְתַחֲנוּגִים וּבְשִׂיחָה קְדוּשָׁה
לְפָנֶיךָ מְלֵא רַחֲמִים רַבִּים,

May I express there everything in my heart, and may all the foliage of the field — all grasses, trees, and plants — awake at my coming, to send the powers of their life into the words of my prayer so that my prayer and speech are made whole through all the foliage of the field whose life-force, spirit and supernal root are included in my prayer. And through them may I merit to open my heart to multiply my prayers, supplications and holy conversation before You who is full of mercy.

וּלְפָנֶיךָ אֲשַׁפֵּךְ כָּל שִׂיחִי, עַד שֶׁאֲזַכָּה לְשַׁפֵּךְ לְבִי
כְּמֵים נוֹכַח פָּנֶיךָ יְהוָה, וְאַשָּׂא אֶלַיִךְ כַּפֵּי, עַל
נַפְשִׁי וְנַפְשׁ עוֹלָלֵי וְטַפֵּי.

May I then pour out the words of my heart before your Presence like water, יהוה, and lift up my hands to You in worship, on my behalf, and that of my children!

Song of the Grasses (Shirat Haasavim)

Lyrics based on Rebbe Nachman

Music: Naomi Shemer

Da lecha shekol roeh v'roeh, yesh lo niggun m'yuchad mishelo. דע לך שכל רועה ורועה יש לו ניגון מיוחד משלו.

Da lecha shekol esev v'eshev, yesh lo shirah m'yuchedet mishelo, דע לך שכל עשב ועשב יש לו שירה מיוחדת משלו.

Umishirat ha'asabim, na'aseh niggun shel roeh. ומשירת העשבים נעשה ניגון של רועה.

Kamah yafeh, kamah yafeh v'naeh ksheshom'im hashir shelahem. כמה יפה, כמה יפה ונאה כששומעים השירה שלהם.

Tov me'od l'hitpalel beineihem, uvyirah la'avod et Hashem, טוב מאוד להתפלל ביניהם ובשמחה וביראה לעבוד את ה'.

Um'shirat ha'asabim, mitorerr halev umishtokek. ומשירת העשבים מתעורר הלב ומשתוקק.

Ukshehalev min hashirah mitorerr umishtotek el eretz Yisrael. וכשהלב מן השירה מתעורר ומשתוקק אל ארץ ישראל

Or gadol azai nimshach v'oleh mikdushat ha'aretz alav. אור גדול אזי נמשך ועולה מקדושתה של הארץ עליו.

Umishirat ha'asabim, na'aseh niggun shel halev. ומשירת העשבים נעשה ניגון של הלב.

Know that each and every shepherd has his or her own unique tune.

Know that each and every blade of grass has its own unique song.

And from the songs of the grass, the tune of the shepherd is created.

How beautiful, how beautiful and fine when we hear their song.

It is very good to pray between them and to labor for God with awe.

And the song of the grass causes the heart to awaken and to long.

And when, from the song, the heart awakens and longs towards the Land of Israel,

A great light is drawn out and rises because it has the holiness of the land upon it.

And from the song of the grass the tune of the heart is fashioned.