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How Should We Know God?

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It's well known that Jewish tradition assigns specific readings from the Torah and the Prophets for all the holidays. Less well known are several traditions that assign holiday readings from the Book of Psalms.[1] An Ashkenazic tradition associated with Rabbi Elijah, the Vilna Gaon (1720–1797), assigns Psalm 19 for recitation at the end of the Musaf service on the first day of Shavuot. This psalm deals with an appropriate question for the holiday of revelation: How do we come to know about God and God's will? More specifically, the psalm compares two ways that we can acquire valid knowledge of the divine: through looking at God's creations, and through receiving God's commandments.

The psalm reads:

> The skies recount God's splendor, the expanse above proclaims His handiwork. / One day utters a word to the next, one night conveys knowledge to another. / There is no speech, there are no words whose voice cannot be heard. / Their sound goes through all the world, their words, to the end of the earth. / In the skies He set a tent for the sun, which is like a groom who comes out of his chamber, like a hero, delighted to run the course. / It rises at one end of the sky, and its circuit goes to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.
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> Hashem's Torah is wholesome, renewing life; Hashem's covenant is trustworthy, making the simpleminded wise; / Hashem's orders are fair, gladdening one's mind; Hashem's command is bright, bringing light to one's eyes; / Hashem's awe is pure, enduring forever; Hashem's judgements are true, they are always correct, / More desirable than gold, than quantities of platinum; Sweeter than honey, than drippings from the comb. / Your servant, too, takes care with them; in obeying them there is great bounty. / Who can see his own errors? Cleanse me of what is hidden, / From presumption, too, guard Your servant; Let them not rule me; then shall I become wholehearted and be cleansed of terrible sins. / May speech from my mouth and thoughts of my mind find acceptance before You, Hashem, my rock and redeemer.

The first part of the poem describes the cosmos God created, focusing on the sky and the sun. The second concentrates on God's law or teaching. We might say, then, that the psalm contains a nature stanza and a Torah stanza. Surprisingly, the Torah stanza is full of words that ancient Near Eastern literature uses to describe the sun: "bringing light to one's eyes," "golden," "renewing life" (for in the ancient world, the rising sun rather than an alarm clock brought people back to life each morning), "judgements" that "make the simple wise" (since sun-gods in the ancient Near East were also deities of justice and learning), as well as "sweet" and "honey" (probably because light-colored honey, like gold, recalls the color of the sun). Further, the scholar Michael Carasik has pointed out that the first, or nature, stanza, is full of words relating to texts and scribes, which remind us of the Torah and learning: "recount," "proclaim," "utters," "word," "conveys knowledge," and "speech." The nature stanza alludes to the world of Torah, even as the Torah stanza hints at nature. This mirror-imaging shows that the two parts of the poem are in dialogue with each other. **What comment does the nature stanza make about Torah, and the Torah stanza about nature?**

[1] These traditions vary; there are Sephardic, Yemenite, Italian, and two main Ashkenazic customs.

One can come to know God through observing the world God created, and one can come to know God by observing God's laws, but these two different senses of "observing"—watching and obeying—lead to different kinds of connection. The psalm distinguishes between two types of disclosure of the divine: one that takes place constantly and impersonally in nature, and another that takes place when God provides guidance to a human being or a human community. The psalm forces us to ask: **Must our connection to God involve covenant and law? To what extent and in what ways can a divine-human relationship exist without the institutions listed in the second stanza?**

The different terms used for God in each stanza help answer these questions. The first stanza refers to God with the Hebrew term *el*, a word that simply means "deity." It is a noun, not a name; more specifically, it is a job title. The second stanza uses God's personal name, spelled in Hebrew with the four letters *yod, heh, waw,* and *heh*, which, in Jewish tradition, we never pronounce out loud. (I render this name above as "Hashem.") To refer to a being by the being's job title suggests respect but distance. To refer to someone by name evinces a personal relationship. From observing the cosmos, one knows *about* God. From observing the terms of God's covenant, one begins directly to know God. In addition, many ancient Semitic nations used the word *el*; that term or some close cognate means "god" in the languages of the Israelites' near and far neighbors in Phoenicia, Edom, Moab, the Aramean kingdoms, Babylonia, and Assyria. But the four-letter name was peculiar to the Israelites. Consequently, we may speak of the *knowledge of* God in the first stanza as universal; it is available to all humanity. The *relationship with* God in the second is particular; God made it specifically available to the Jewish people.

Knowledge about God in the first stanza requires action on humanity's part: we must turn to creation, observe it, think about what we perceive, and come to conclusions. The relationship with God in the second stanza, on the other hand, requires God to turn to humanity, and thus this relationship is based on divine grace. In the first stanza God is object, while in the second God is subject. This contrast becomes more pointed in the very last verse of the poem, which opens us up to dialogue and redemption, for here for the first time the speaker addresses Hashem directly, referring to the deity as redeemer. God's turning to us in Torah at the beginning of the second stanza is what allows us to begin speaking to God towards the end of that stanza. Creation does not quite do this on its own.

Revelation through nature, this psalm suggests, is valid, but limited in comparison with revelation through Torah. This is why the second stanza, alluding to the sun, tells us that

Hashem's Torah, covenant, and judgments are "More desirable than gold, than quantities of platinum, Sweeter than honey, than drippings from the comb." When we recall that gold and honey symbolized the sun in ancient Near Eastern religions, we can recognize that these lines acknowledge the value and sweetness of what we learn from nature, even as they assert the superiority of the relationship we develop with God through carrying out the Torah's covenantal law.

Our Shavuot psalm, then, is concerned with a journey that we make on Shavuot—and every day of the Jewish year—when we receive the Torah anew. It moves us from knowledge of God to relationship with God, from propositions about God to covenant with God, from speculation to law, from reasoning to action, from detachment to grace.

But both parts of the poem are relevant for modern Jews. The first part reminds us that God is not only found in books, in the beit midrash, and in Jewish law. There can be religious value in interrupting one's study of the law to observe the beauty of a tree or the loveliness of a meadow; and it behooves us to recall that all religions, and also people not connected to a specific religion, can acquire authentic and true knowledge of the one God by studying God's creations. But the second part teaches that for Jews, that type of knowledge, while necessary, is not sufficient. The relationship to which God called us at Sinai, and to which God calls again in every generation, requires covenant and law, relationship and observance.

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