

Distinguishing the Natural from the Man-made: How & Why?

Science and Synagogue Series: Part 2

Specific topic: The Partnership of Man and God

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Bereshit Rabbah 2:3

Based on the verse “and God blessed the seventh day,” the *Midrash* (rabbinic lore) teaches that Adam feared the darkness as the sun began to set and the end of Shabbat approached. God made two flints for Adam which Adam struck together. Fire came forth and Adam uttered a blessing over it.

Question for Consideration

Why does God teach man how to make fire?

Unlike the gods of other ancient Near-Eastern religions, the God of Israel cares for humanity and relates to people as his children. According to mythology, other gods often viewed people as transactional interlocutors who could provide them with necessities such as scarified meat.

Key Point

According to the Talmud there are 39 *Malachot Machshevot* (creative labors) that are forbidden to be performed on Shabbat, the kindling of fire being one of them. It is significant that at times these 39 forbidden labors are referred to as “forty minus one” because the number forty symbolizes the creative process. For example, Moses was on Sinai when he received the *Torah*, and the giving of the *Torah* serves as an integral part of God’s creative process. The *Torah* serves as a guide book for how to perfect the world by closing the gap between God and humanity, a gap that was caused by Adam and Eve’s sin. This is

illustrated by *Chagigah 12a*, which teaches that before Adam sinned he reached from the world below to the heaven above, but after the sin he no longer did. The very 39 labors that we are forbidden to perform on Shabbat are the very same labors that the Israelites performed to build the *Mishkan* (tabernacle), which was built around the time of the giving of the Torah. In other words, God taught humanity creative skills (which often include the harnessing of a natural process, such as fire) in order that humanity could create a man-made house for the Lord. God acted as the science teacher, teaching Israel how to create scientifically in order that they could become his partner in improving the world. We should note that now, instead of viewing all humanity as simply his children, God views Israel also as a spouse.

The Example of the Sukkah

1. The *Schach* (roof of a Sukkah) is made by human labor, though the *Schach* must be made of plants that cannot be used for food, are in their natural state (i.e. not wooden boards), and are detached from the ground.
2. The *Schach* should be arranged so that there is more shade (covered space) than sunshine in the Sukkah during the day (Sukkot 9b 10a).

Key Point

The *Sukkah* is associated with God's protection. During *Ma'ariv* (the Friday night prayer) on *Shabbat*, we conclude the *Hashkevinu* prayer by beseeching God to spread his *Sukkah* (Tabernacle) of peace over Israel. From the above-mentioned law regarding the building of the *Sukkah*, we see that though we beseech God we do not solely rely on God or nature to protect us. We use the creative skills that God has taught in order to manipulate nature to achieve God's desired condition of peace. This allowing of man to use his God-given creativity as a tool for drawing closer to God explains why Moses' face only radiated after receiving the second set of tablets. The first set of tablets were written by God but the second set were carved by Moses; therefore, Moses now

felt that humanity had been empowered to use its God-given creativity to improve the world.

The *Arba Minim* (four species) example

The four natural species; *Lulav* (date palm tree), *Etrog* (Citron) *Hadas* (myrtle) and *Arava* (willow) are brought together in order to beseech God to provide water for the land of Israel during the rainy season.

Key Point

We do not rely on nature; rather we use natural objects in order to beseech God to bless the land of Israel with a year of fertility. It should be noted that even the shape of the *Lulav* and *Etrog* are reminiscent of human fertility and remind us that human fertility is not a mere act of nature but a gift from God. An example of this is found in 1 Samuel 1:19, when we are told that God remembered barren Hana and she then conceived.

Conclusion

Unlike animals humans are created in the image of God, who is above nature, and therefore their creative activities might appear to be outside of nature. Yet, the examples above demonstrate that humans can manipulate nature in a positive fashion in an attempt to reach God.