

The Divine & Human Relationship to Nature

Science and Synagogue series

Rabbi Steven Saks

April 2, 2017

Question 1: What is the relationship between God and nature?

Point 1

The Torah starts by making it clear that God created the universe. This is to emphasize that God is outside of nature.

□Bereshit 1:1

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

In the beginning God created the heavens and earth.

Point 2

Ancient cultures often viewed the sun as deity. Ra was the solar deity (high God) of ancient Egypt and Pharaoh's came to be associated with him over time.

Point 3

The Hebrew word for sun is שֶׁמֶשׁ

shemesh. If you change the vowels under the letters, the word can be pronounced *shamash*, meaning "servant." The point is that nature serves God. Furthermore, since God is outside of nature he does not have natural needs. Other ancient cultures believed that their Gods had human needs such as the need to eat and therefore humanity could service their God's in exchange for divine blessing. For example, one could provide their God with sacrificial meat in return for rain fall. In Aristophanes "The Birds," humanity refuses to provide the God's with food until the Gods meet their conditions.

Point 4

The Ten Plagues are meant to demonstrate God's mastery over the universe.

a. God first attacks the Egyptian water source by turning it to blood. Plagues 1-6 all show that God can manipulate nature to perform his will. It should be noted that the Egyptian magicians were able to duplicate the first two plagues. They were able to turn their staffs into לַתְּנִין which Rashi

understands to refer to a snake. It should be noted that the typical word for snake is not לַתְּנִין but תַּנְחָשׁ therefore it has been suggested that לַתְּנִין

can also refer to a crocodile. In Ezekiel 29:3 Pharaoh is referred to as

פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ-מִצְרַיִם תְּהֵתֵנִים הַגְּדֹל

Pharaoh the king of Egypt, the big crocodile.

The Egyptian magicians are not able to duplicate the third plague of lice and declare in Exodus 8:15

אָצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים הוּא

It is the finger of God.

The Egyptians have come to realize that the plagues are indeed the work of a deity. The use of the term Elochim אֱלֹהִים to refer to God is significant

because it simply means "God" but does not denote the God of Israel.

The seventh plague of hail, God appears to defy nature by sending flaming hail. Rashi points out that God preformed two miracles in order to bring about this plague. The first is that the fire shot downward, the second is that the water and fire functioned in unison. In order to serve God, fire and water made peace.

The ninth plague of darkness is meant to mock Pharaoh. By this point in Egyptian history the Pharaoh had come to be seen as the human embodiment of the solar deity who was the head of the Egyptian pantheon. This is a direct attack on Pharaoh's divine status and supremacy over nature.

Point 4

Scientific explanations have been proposed for all the plagues and it has been asserted that they were not supernatural in nature. While some find this threatening it does not need to be. The plagues are referred to as **אוֹתוֹת וּמִפְתִּיִם** (signs and wonder) and their purpose is to demonstrate God can impose his will on the world. To argue as to whether these signs and wonders violated scientific law misses the point.

The Torah itself even provides a scientific explanation for the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. We are told that "God moved the sea with a strong east wind all night." It has been observed in Egypt as well as elsewhere that strong wind can change water levels to the point where bodies of water which were no longer crossable become temporarily crossable. The "miracle" of the splitting of the sea is in its timing.

According to Shemot Rabbah 21:6 the sea was created on the condition that it would split for the Israelites at the proper time. This is based on the the phrase from Shemot 14:27:

וַיָּשָׁב הַיָּם לְפָנוֹת בְּקֶרֶךְ לְאִיָּתוֹ

and the sea went back to its power.

The word לְאִיָּתוֹ means "it power" but can be understood to mean

לְתִנּוּאוֹ הַרְשָׁאוֹן

"it's original stipulation."

Point 5

God's actual name is

אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה

God declares to Moses at the Burning Bush that his true name is *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, which is often mistranslated as "I am what I am." The correct translation is "I will be what I will be." The difference between the two translations is enormous. "I am what I am" is the answer we would expect from a God who views himself as the deistic deity. Deists believe that God created the world and then stepped back and let nature take its course. Before the arrival of ancient Israel the ancients viewed history in cyclical terms. Seasons would come and seasons would go. People would be born and die. The strong would oppress the weak and such a God or Gods would reason, if people want to treat each other with cruelty, so be it. However, the name "I will be what I will be" denotes that God has not yet completed his creating of this world and is still active in it. In other words, God has unfinished business to do ,but, needs a nation to help him perfect the world. Therefore he stepped into history to liberate a people who

understood the danger of tyranny all too well and gave them his Torah (which literally means teachings). The Torah teaches us how to improve the world.

Question 2: Are humans a part of nature or apart from nature?

Point 1:

The relationship between man and nature is a curious one. The other creatures are created by God without much fanfare. However, when humans are created God declares:

Gen. 1:26

בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרְהוּ בְדִלְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה
וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם
וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ

“Let us make man in our image and likeness. They shall rule over the fish...birds...animals... and whole earth.”

Point 2

We have already established that God is outside of nature and now see that humanity is created in his image. Does that mean that humans too are outside of nature?

Point 3

Rabbi Chanina (Bereshit Rabbah 8:12) notes that if humans are worthy

they shall **יָרְדוּ** (dominate) the earth but if they are not they shall be **יִרְדּוּ** (dominated).

Rabbi Yaakov (Bereshit Rabbah 8:12) said: "One who *is in our image*, like our form' [is told] *to dominate*. One who is not 'in our image, like our form [is] to be dominated."

Point 4

Custodial responsibility

of the earth includes both the obligation to **וְלִשְׁמֹרָהּ** וְלִנְבְּרָהּ (work and guard it) as described in Gen. 2:16.

We see a tension develop. Working implies human intervention in the natural order. As we have already seen God's desires human intervention to help perfect his world. God taught humanity creative skills (such as making fire as detailed in Bereshit Rabbah 11:2) so they could use these creative skills to perfect the world. Guarding implies a preservation of nature. The commandment to preserve nature is illustrated by the commandment of **בְּלֹ תַשְׁחִית** (Don't Destroy). This is the biblical commandment to refrain from wasting any resource which has legitimate human value. This principle is based on the passage in Deuteronomy 20:19-20 which prohibits the needless destruction of trees during wartime, but was extended in the Talmud to include all forms of wastefulness (see Kiddushin 32a)..

Furthermore, while the Torah does allow for animals to be used as a food source (which seems natural as many animals are predatory themselves)

Jews were commanded to eat only animals which have undergone שחיטה (ritual slaughter) and all are commanded to refrain from eating אבר מן החי

(a limb torn from a living animal). We should also note that there is the prohibition of צער בעלי חיים (causing suffering to an animal) which is mentioned in Bava Metzia 32b. Rabbi Yochanan (Midrash HaGadol 22:32) teaches us based on the verse, "For why did you strike your donkey." (Num. 22:32).

Conclusion

It is clear that God above is nature but works through nature. The human relationship to nature is not as clear. On one hand, like animals we are created by God and placed in this world. On the other hand, unlike animals, we are created "in the image of God" who is outside of nature and we are given custodial obligation over the world.