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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

IF THE HEAVENS PROCLAIM HIS GLORY, MAY ONE USE A TELESCOPE FROM A BATHROOM?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Rambam (Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah 4:12) wrote the classic Jewish paean to the religious impact of scientific understanding. Does his argument still work?

Here is the first part of Rambam in the Touger translation on Sefaria:

When a person meditates on these matters and recognizes all the creations,
the angels, the spheres, man, and the like,
and appreciates the wisdom of the Holy One, blessed be He,
in all these creations,
he will add to his love for God.

It's important to understand that Sefaria does not correlate texts and translations. Thus "the angels, the spheres, man, **and** the like" is the translation presented for the standard printed Hebrew edition **וְאֵלֹהִים וְכִיּוֹצֵא בּוֹ** but is actually a translation of the variant reading **וְאֵלֹהִים וְכִיּוֹצֵא בּוֹ**. There is no "**and**" in the standard text.

Moreover, the translation has no basis for leaving the **מִן** of **מִמְלָאךְ** untranslated. This must be corrected to "from the angels, the spheres, man . . .", But every "from" must have a "to" – where is the "to" here?¹

Finally, the Hebrew translated as "all **the** creations" in the first phrase is *kol haberuim*; the Hebrew translated as "all **these** creations" in the second phrase is *kol hayetzurim vekol haberuim*. Ignoring the *yetzurim* enables the claim that both phrases refer to the same thing – "**these** creations"². But what justifies ignoring them?

While the Frankel Mishneh Torah edition adopts the variant "and" on the basis of manuscripts, I suggest keeping the standard text, and strictly translating, as follows:

When a person meditates on these matters and recognizes/*makir*
all the creations
from the angels, the spheres, and men like himself,
and sees/*yir'eh* the wisdom of the Holy One, blessed be He, in
all the *yetzurim* and creations,
he adds to his love for the Omnipresent . . .

I suggest tentatively that Rambam changes verbs from *makir* to *yir'eh* because "recognition" does not apply to creatures below the level of humans, because they have no consciousness and/or insufficient intellect. They are only canvases for displaying G-d's wisdom.

This reading is supported by the continuation of 4:12:

. . . and his soul will thirst and his flesh will yearn to love the Omnipresent, blessed be He,
and He will be in awe and fear because of his lowliness, poverty, and triviality
when he evaluates himself relative to one of the great holy bodies,
all the more so to one of the pure forms that are incorporeal, that have never been corporeal,
and he will discover himself to be a vessel full of shame and humiliation, empty and lacking.

Human bodies are not "shameful vessels" relative to lobsters or llamas. What is shameful for Rambam is having any body! We can see and appreciate the wisdom with which G-d designs the physical world, but precisely because we have that capacity, we are ashamed of being part of it rather than having purely metaphysical being.

The problem is that Rambam's masterworks of Divine creation seem imaginary to many of us. There are no intelligent or conscious spheres holding the astronomical bodies. We don't believe in the this-worldly being divorced from physicality. This seems to radically undermine Rambam's religious argument for science.

I think two elements remain, if my translation of Rambam is correct. We can still derive humility and inspiration, awe and fear, from humans **like ourselves** who seem to have gotten so much closer to fulfilling His goals. (My primary example in that regard was Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l, whose yahrtzeit was this week.) And we can still see G-d's wisdom in any aspect of creation when we understand it deeply.

This experience of science may have halakhic or quasi-halakhic implications. For example, in discussion after my shiur at Columbia Hillel earlier this semester (pre-encampment), an SBM alum asked me how a person who experienced this sort of religious inspiration should prioritize science vs. gemara in their schedule. And this week, SBM alum Rabbi Jonathan Ziring sent me sources ([olamot.net](http://www.olanet.net)) relating to a conversation we had years ago about whether one may learn science in a bathroom.

Both issues seem to be addressed by Devarim Rabbah 8:6:

What is the meaning of "it is not in the Heavens?"
Shmuel said:

The Torah is not found in astrologim, whose craft is in the Heavens.

¹ The Hyamson translation has "from the angels and spheres **down to** human beings and so on". "And so on" reflects its adoption of the variant text, but "down to" has no textual basis.

² Hyamson similarly has "in them all".

They said to Shmuel:
But you are an astrologer, and a great Torah scholar!

He replied:
I would look at/in astrology only in a time when I was free
from Torah.

When was that?
When I entered the lavatory.

Taken straightforwardly, this passage suggests that of course one must prioritize gemara, and that of course it is permitted to study science in the bathroom.

But I have a hard time taking it straightforwardly. Yeshiva students of my youth made a similar claim about the Vilna Gaon, that he learned mathematics only in the bathroom, but most of us took it as funny – we all understood that anyway bathroom breaks are extended when you have serious reading material.

Also - my father a”h toward the end of his life often discussed the religious inspiration he drew from scientific understanding. His favorite verse was Tehillim 19:2, “The Heavens tell the Glory of G-d”. (My appreciation of this owes much to a comment that Larry Yudelson once made to me about physics – thank you!) So the Torah must be in the Heavens.

One might argue that the verse refers to poetic appreciation rather than to scientific understanding, in the manner of Walt Whitman:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before
me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with
much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

My father contended that Whitman was being shallow. So one can revise the argument to say that Shmuel refers to professionals for whom scientific learning is not a religious experience.

But then how could Shmuel learn science in the bathroom at all?

Among the sources Rabbi Ziring referred me to is a characteristically brilliant and maddening passage from Rabbi Shlomo Kluger (Chokhmot Shlomo OC 85:2), commenting on Shulchan Arukh's ruling that one may not even cogitate about words of Torah in bathrooms and the like.

Rabbi Kluger writes:

I was in doubt as to whether it is permitted to cogitate/להרהר
about Him (in such places) or not.
Prima facie one should derive *kal vachomer* (from the ban re
Torah)

that it is forbidden to cogitate about His existence and Ability.

But according to what the kabbalists wrote,
that one may speak of mundane things while wearing the
tefillin-of-Rabbeinu-Tam
(as opposed to the standard tefillin-of-Rashi)
because they are exceptionally holy and nothing *tamei* can
adhere to them,

we can make a *kal vachomer* argument that the same is true of
(cogitating on His existence).

Rabbi Kluger then makes an extended Talmudic argument. Talmud Yoma 7b rejects the possibility that Shemot 28:38 “*it must be on his forehead tamid*” literally means that the Kohen Gadol can never remove the *tzitzit*, because “doesn't a person need to sleep a bit? To go to the bathroom?”. Rather, *tamid* must refer to the effect of the *tzitzit*. But, Rabbi Kluger asks, what about Tehillim 16:8, “I have placed G-d before me *tamid*”, where there is (he claims) no such way out? It must in fact be permitted to place G-d before oneself even in the bathroom (and even while sleeping; his understanding of dreams requires separate analysis.)

Following Rabbi Kluger, perhaps one may study science in the bathroom even if doing so is a religious experience. However, if that is so, why is it forbidden to study Torah in the bathroom?

Rav Asher Weiss cites Rabbi Kluger to distinguish between religious experience and creative intellectual endeavor. Only the latter is forbidden. This perhaps follows precedents that allow issuing rulings in the bathroom but not providing rationales.

However, what about a religious experience that emerges from creative scientific thought?

My wife Deborah and I have long argued about whether studying the obsolete science found in many Torah books counts as Talmud Torah; I contend it does, so that one can, for instance, say birkat hatorah over pondering the nature of the spheres referred to in Hilkhot Yesodei haTorah 4:12, even though one could not make that blessing over pondering the possibly identical nature of spheres referred to by Aristotle.

I further contend that Torah has a formal halakhic definition that is not related to its objective truth. Perhaps the prohibition against studying Torah in the bathroom relates only to that formal definition (and, as Rav Lichtenstein suggested, perhaps women are exempt only from the obligation of studying formal Torah). Everything one would make a Birkat haTorah over cannot be studied in the bathroom, but anything else can be. Because even though a person sometimes has to sleep, or to excrete, it is unimaginable that halakhah would obligate us to ever pause deepening our understanding of G-d³.

Shabbat shalom!

³ Although Rav Chaim Volozhin says that one may not think of G-d in ways that distract from the actual legal meaning of a halakhic text. This may be a critique of the Chassidic tale in which the rebbe Rev Zusya never gets past the first word of Mishnah, מאימתי = when, because he is seized by trembling when he reaches מאימת = out of terror of.