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PSALM NINETEEN ITS COHERENCE AND MESSAGE

The Interrelation of Nature and Torah
in Jewish Liturgy and Thought

by Rabbi Dr. Zvi A. Yehuda

The Hebrew Text תהלים מזמור יט

191 למנצח, מזמור לדרך.

ובו השמים מספרים כבוד-אל, ומעשה ידיו מגיד הרקיע.
 וג' יום ליום יביע אמר, ולילה ללילה יחזה-דעת.
 וד' אין אמר ואין דברים, בלי נשמע קולם.
 וה' בכל-הארץ יצא קום, ובקצה תבל מליהם;
 לשמש, שם אהל בהם.
 וז' והוא - כחתן יצא מחפתו, ויש כגבור לרוח ארח.
 וז' מקצה השמים, מוצא, ותקופתו, על-קצותם,
 ואין נסתר מחמתו.

ח' תורת יי תמימה משיבת נפש;
 עדות יי נאמנה מחכימת פתי.
 ט' פקודי יי ישרים משמחי-לב;
 מצות יי ברה מאירת עינים.
 י' יראת יי טהורה עומדת לעד;
 משפטי-יי אמת צדקו יחדו.
 יא' הנחמדים מזהב ומפז רב;
 ומתוקים מדבש ונפת צופים.
 יב' גם-עבדך נזהר בהם, בשמךם עקב רב.
 יג' שגיאות מי-יבין, מנסתרות נקני.
 יד' גם מזדים חשך עבדך, אל-ימשלו-בי;
 אז איתם ונקיתי מפשע רב.
 טו' יהיו לרצון אמרי-פי, והגיון לבי לפניך;
 יי צורי וגאלי.

Translation of the Divine Name אל, El, is rendered God and מעשה ידיו God's handiwork (19 2). The Tetragrammaton [YHWH], the Ineffable Name, is respectfully inscribed in Hebrew, " or 'ה' or השם. In reading, it is ordinarily replaced by השם Hashem ["The Name"], while in sacred occasions it is rendered and pronounced אדוני Adonai [v. 15].

PSALM NINETEEN

Translated by Rabbi Dr. Zvi A. Yehuda

(1) To the Conductor: A Psalm of David.

(2) The skies tell
God's glory;
[The glory of] God's handiwork —
The firmament acclaim.

(3) Day after day —
[The skies] utter thought;
Night after night —
[They] intimate wisdom.

(4) No phrase,
No words,
Inaudible —
Their voice;

(5) [Yet] throughout the earth,
Goes forth their cord,
To the edge of the planet —
Their messages.
To the sun,
[God] has set a tent of light
Within [the skies]

(6) Thus [the sun] appears as a groom,
Emerging from its nuptial chamber;
Joyous as a mighty one,
To run swiftly on its way.

(7) From the skies' edge,
Is [the sun's] rising;
Its circuit —
To [the skies'] very edges.
Nothing is hidden
From [the sun's] heat.

(15) May the words of my mouth be pleasing [before You],
[May] the meditations of my heart before You [be pleasing],
Adonai, my rock and my redeemer.

(8) Hashem's Torah is complete,
Gratifying one's desire.
Hashem's Testimony is trustworthy,
Enlightening one's mind.

(9) Hashem's Precepts are righteous,
Delighting one's heart.
Hashem's Legacy is brilliant,
Brightening one's vision.

(10) Hashem's Authority is spotless,
Enduring forever.
Hashem's Decrees are the truth
Just in their wholeness.

(11) Desirable more than gold,
The finest gold,
Sweeter than honey,
The tastiest honey.

(12) [Addressing God]
Your worshipper, too,
Lives by the light [of God's precepts],
Heeding them
With great persistence.

(13) [Yet] errors —
Who can discern [them]?
From covert faults,
Purge me;

(14) From overt wrongs, too,
Spare your worshipper,
Let them not overrule me.
Then, I shall be faultless,
Clean from grave transgressions.

Psalm 19: A Composite of Two Themes, Nature and Torah

Psalm 19 is a majestic hymn of adoration to God, the One Source of the natural order and of the Torah. The Psalm comprises two clearly distinguishable parts, different in theme and style. The first part (2-7) sings of the glory of God — and the glory of God's handiwork — as reflected in the constant natural order. In particular, in the regular cycle of the sun, its rising and hiding, "day after day", "night after night", in the skies above, and thereby affecting the entire earth. In picturesque and lively style, this part depicts the vigorous circuit of the sun, figuratively fixing day and night, as routinely narrating and communicating Divine glory. The poetic description is flowing and vigorous. The second part (7-15) sings of Torah, detailing its enlightening and delighting qualities, sweetening and enriching one's life experience — especially of one individual, the Psalmist himself, God's *eved* ["servant," worshipper, devotee], who fervently desires to do God's will. In its ardent, superlative phrases, this poetic part is enthusiastic, declarative and personal.

The sudden, transparent shift, in focus and form, between the two parts is striking. The first part radiates descriptive verses in blazing imagery. The second part begins with a repetitive recital of superlative praise (8-11), and ends with devotional supplication (12-15). In the first part, the Psalmist lyrically depicts the "silent" narration of the glory of God and God's handiwork, as emanating from the "voiceless" splendor of the material, mundane horizons. In the second, the Psalmist himself "voices" his own human emotions, with lucidity and passion, on a spiritual "handiwork" of God — Torah. In craftily sculpted lines, using a rather formulaic, recitative mode, the Psalmist first enumerates Torah's merits, exhibited in six manifold synonyms (8-11). He then concludes with a confessional plea to God, his "rock and redeemer" (12-15).

These two poetic parts of Psalm 19 also differ remarkably in their invocation of the Divine Name. In the first part, the Psalmist mentions God only once, in the first line. There, he mentions the Divine Name in subtle circumvention, using the shorter-generic Name *El* and a construct idiom, speaking not to or of God, but of God's glory (*kevod-El*). It seems as if the poet wants to avoid a direct and frontal talk with or about the Divine, The "glory" of God and God's handiwork, God's "weighty" impact, God's indwelling and immanence — not God in the absolute — is syntactically the direct object of the verbal phrase. Nonetheless, God's presence does dominate all verses. God is the implicit Actor in the elliptical verbal-phrase, depicting the setting of the sun's abode and luster (5). Without mentioning any Divine name, the verse clearly implies that God has set a tent for the sun within the skies. It is a tent of light. The Hebrew word for "tent" ["*ohel*"] conveys a double sense of dwelling and radiance.

In the second part, however, in dramatic contrast to the first, the Psalmist employs the ineffable Name, the *Tetragrammaton* [YHWH], repeating it, seemingly by design, seven times [6+1]. In the first six mentions, the Name appears in the construct form ["of YHWH," "YHWH's"] — God as the Source, the Possessor or

Originator, of the Divine Torah, called in this tri-linear segment by all its poetic six synonymous designations. Finally, in the seventh mention, at the concluding verse of personal supplication, the Name appears purely in its [grammatically] absolute form. There, the Psalmist addresses YHWH personally as "his own" ["My rock and my redeemer"], and turns to God as "You" in one idiom, "before You" (*le-fanekha*, governing both nouns of the line). The Psalmist appeals to God that both, "the words of my mouth" and "the meditations of my heart" — my verbal expressions and inward speculations — shall "be pleasing before You". This final verse (15) may befittingly serve as a solemn finale ("seal") to the entire Psalm.

In the Masoretic text, Psalm 19 appears as one integrated unit. Accordingly, we may inquire, is it one harmonious poem or a composite of two distinctly unrelated poems, (or only loosely related)? At first glance, we tend to maintain, as many biblical scholars claim, that these two parts are inherently two independent poems, far apart from each other in their content, outlook and message. As we already noticed, the two segments are demonstratively dissimilar in form, genre and mood. It is thus tempting to assume that these two finely delineated poetic units do not belong to one another, or to the same author or period.

Indeed, modern scholars generally propose that the first section, bearing some external resemblance to ancient Near Eastern poetry, stems from an earlier period, possibly that of David around 1000 B.C.E., and the second section, from the days of Ezra around 428 B.C.E. Moreover, while the first one (2-7) appears to be purely a so-called "nature poem", like Psalm 104, the second one (8-15) sounds as a hymn of praise to the Torah, like Psalm 119. Thus, most dominant schools of biblical criticism insist that the two parts of Psalm 19 are two unrelated poetic fragments, artificially stitched together. These two poetic segments, presumed to be completely disconnected from one another, ought to be read and studied each as separate piece — the first as an earlier, pre-exilic, pagan-like ode to Nature, and the second as a later, post-exilic, Ezra-inspired, hymn to Torah. Simply put, according to mainstream biblical scholarship, the Masoretic Psalm Nineteen, as one literary unit, virtually does not exist.

Notwithstanding, the Masoretic tradition has cherished and preserved Psalm 19 as one poetic composition, its second part as a continuation and conclusion of the first. Adopting the implicit Masoretic vantage point, we shall treat Psalm 19 as one coherent literary unit with two complementary parts sustaining each other. Moreover, we contend that the fragmentary, "scholarly" (non-Masoretic) approach may becloud the inherent meaning of this distinctively Hebraic Psalm. Only by approaching this Psalm as it is, holistically, in both context and form, we can better appreciate its profound rhetoric and world-view. Reversely, by treating each part of the whole as a detached, independent, "self-sufficient" fragment — and ignoring altogether the existence and charm of this magnificent poem as a whole — we miss the essential message of each part in itself.

To clarify this point we shall first examine the idea of nature in biblical thought.

The Biblical Idea of Nature

The first part of our Psalm is not a "nature poem" in the common western sense. To label it as such is anachronistic and misleading. The Psalmist sings God's glory, not nature's beauty. The very term "nature" for the cosmic order — for the totality and complexity of the physical world with all its phenomena — is alien to the Hebraic mind. The term does not exist in biblical Hebrew or in the domain of Hebraic thought and expression. Espousing neither the idea of nature nor the consequent notion of its conceivable violation, Hebrew Scriptures have no term for the corollary idea of miracle.

Scriptures speak of wonders (*pele, ot, mofet*) in the sense of impressive, purposeful, consequential and redemptive events, but not of any "miracle" in the common sense of violating, transcending or suppressing nature. Only later, in post-Biblical sources, did the biblical term *nes* — that truly means sign, banner, mast — assume the connotative sense of "miracle", as a presumed "meta-physical" or "supernatural" phenomenon. From the Rabbinic perspective, "Miracle" [or, in Hebrew, "*nes*"], in the latter common sense, is not always an admirable term. Rabbinic sources largely disparage and discourage any reliance on miracles, whether in human life or as a divine proof.

The comprehensive term nature (or Nature), for the physical world, or the forces collectively controlling the phenomena of the physical world (sometimes personified as a woman called "Mother Nature") is Western, not Hebraic. The Hebrew word for Nature, *teva* — related to coin minting and used in post-biblical Hebrew in the sense of "the makeup or character of" — emerged in its western cosmic sense only during the medieval ages. The term emerged because of the need to translate, from the Arabic into Hebrew, classic works of Greek philosophy.

The Hebraic mind views existential reality, as a whole (the so-called "natural order"), as a reflection of God. It is neither a "veil" concealing the Divine, nor a barrier obstructing God's glory. Hence, there is no need for exceptional "miracles" — supposedly surpassing or suspending nature — to facilitate or enhance the revelation of God. The entirety of nature, in its mundane flow, divinely ordained and permanently inviolate, serves as an open and constant window for the power and presence of God. The natural world as it is, is a living "declaration" of God's glory. God is revealed in the "natural" no less than in the "miraculous" phenomena. The ongoing renewal of creation — in its very constancy and lawfulness — is the greatest wonder and the most persuasive testimony to God.

The Hebrew Term "*Olam*"

The current word עולם *olam*, now employed to denote "world", has never had any purely spatial meaning in the Hebrew Bible. There, as well as in early rabbinic liturgy, *olam* denotes duration in time, not substantiality in space. The well-known, recurrent, Hebrew benedictory phrase, *melekh ha-olam* for God, surely

means neither "King of the universe" nor "Ruler of all reality" (all common translations to the contrary notwithstanding) but simply "The Eternal King" as in its biblical source (Jeremiah 10:10). The term *olam*, however, gained an added spatial connotation later, in rabbinic literature, to convey somehow the import of the Greek cosmos.

This Greek term perceives the universe as a beautiful, orderly and harmonious whole, as distinct from *chaos*. Now, while the Greek *cosmos* points to a universe of matter and design, the Hebrew *olam*, even in its post-biblical, corporeal sense, depicts all reality not as a statically stationary substance, but rather as a dynamic, ongoing existence, occurring in both space and time. It is characteristic of the Jewish genius that the people erected their monuments not in static forms, sculptures or temples, by means of the plastic arts, but in enduring conceptual ideas. Unlike the classical "universe" the Hebrew *olam* blends the physical with the metaphysical, the material with the eternal.

In this light, we may better understand the term *olam* even in its post-biblical sense. *Olam* always refers not to a static, material, concrete entity (earth, world; in Latin, *mundus*), in its solidity and stability, but rather to social-historical continuity. In this compound meaning, the term *olam* appears in post-talmudic liturgy, as in the Morning Prayer, *Barukh she'amar ve-hayya ha-olam*: "Blessed is the One Who decreed and the 'world' came to be!" Meaning: By the power of the Divine Word/Idea [*logos*], this spatial/temporal "world" emerged — it came into existence and continues to exist. The Tannaitic phrases "*berit ha-olam*" (creation of the world), "*ha-olam omed/qayyam*" (the world exists/endures), "*ha-olam hazze/habba*" (this world/the world to come), or the Amoraitic phrase "*kulei alma*" (in Aramaic, the entire world) all refer to progressive Space/Time confluence. Even the medieval hymn "*Adon Olam*" refers to God not just as the Master and Leader [*Adon*] "of the world" [*olam*], but rather as the everlasting *Adon*, whose reign antedates the world's creation, "*olam*" conveying a more temporal than spatial sense.

The Talmudic and Liturgical Phrase "*ma'aseh bereshit*"

Another term used in post-biblical literature for "cosmos" is מעשה בראשית *ma'aseh bereshit* (referring to Genesis account), meaning creation in its perpetual process of constant self-renewal. When the Psalmist wants to express in words the notion of "world" as he declares that all that exists belongs to and stems from the Almighty God, he uses an extended phrase, "the earth [*erez*] and all its fullness; the temporal world [*tevel*] and all its inhabitants" (Psalms 24:1). We ask, Why so many words? We answer, because no single Hebrew word can convey the full complexity and multiplicity of existence. The Hebrew terms *erez* and *tevel*, appearing in this verse in poetic parallelism, both refer to the very same idea, namely, the world around us, our existential reality.

While we routinely render *erez* as "earth" (an alliterative or perhaps also a derivative of the Hebrew), we yet wonder over the meaning of *tevel*. This intriguing idiom, seemingly referring to "temporal" world, suggests a feeble, infirm and

ephemeral reality that wears out, decays and deteriorates [from the root-word *b-l-h*]. This term projects a characteristically Hebraic view of reality, by pointing to all matter (the so-called "world") as temporal and transitory, existing and enduring only by Divine Will. Thus, the very presence of the world, *tevel*, innately frail, yet astonishingly enduring, testifies to the eternal power of God's Will and Might.

Torah's Genesis narratives employ a joining of two terms — השמים והארץ [*ha-shamayim ve-ha-aretz*], "the skies and the earth" — to convey the classic notion of the created universe, the world. The current term "Creation of the World" — בריאת העולם [*beriat ha-olam*] — is post biblical. There is no one word for world in biblical Hebrew. That Scriptures had to employ numerous terms to present the idea of the totality of the universe is of great theological significance. The very idea of a "universe" (from the Latin *universum*), depicting the whole of reality as "one unified venture" is doubtless an anathema to the Hebraic biblical mind. In Creation, whatever is created represents plurality. Only God, the Creator, is One.

Three Approaches to Nature: Hebraic, Hellenic, Pagan

What is unique about the Hebrew biblical outlook on the universe and its natural order? Let us compare the monotheistic, Hebraic-biblical view to the two other major contemporaneous approaches, the pagan-mythological (the Eastern), and the Greek-philosophical (the Western).

Classical paganism and idolatry conceived the world as consisting of various violent forces, which while destined by fate and regulated by divergent gods, were yet subject to blind and capricious misfortune. Ancient pagan literature depicted natural phenomena with a profound sense of dread and resignation.

Greek philosophy, on the other hand, viewed the world as signifying unity and system, expressed by the term *cosmos*, implying beauty, harmony and order. The *cosmos* is a concrete, autonomous entity that exhibits intelligence, as if possessing a mind and soul of its own. It is a physical reality in space, a total structure in form. The Greek would marvel at the splendor and symmetry of the physical environment. Besides awe and admiration, Pagans would generally confront nature with a sense of exasperation and submission. In contrast, the Greek tended more to welcome nature with a sense of appreciation and investigation.

In contrast to these two dominant approaches, the Hebrew Bible describes the totality of existence as a perfect manifestation of God's will. How did the people of antiquity view the natural world? What was the world's quintessence in their mind? Positing a sweeping simplification, we may say that while for the pagans the world's essence was largely power, and for the Greek, order, for the Hebrews it was Divine Law. For the Hebrew poets, all reality seems to appear as a splendid manifestation and a consummate fulfillment of God's legislation, representing God's will and wisdom. In the Hebraic mind, the powers of "nature" largely represent dependency on Divine authority rather than self-sufficiency, and loyal obedience to the Creator rather than wild rebellion. In the mind and heart of the biblical worshippers, the natural world exhibits moral purpose rather than formal design,

divine meaning rather than crafty artistry, just law rather than brute force. Thus, the Hebrews learned to admire ethics more than esthetics, right rather than might, and morality above ritual.

The story of creation starts with the Divine Word, "God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light". The Hebrew text uses the verb וַיֹּאמֶר [*va-yomer*] for the act, commonly rendered "said". Contextually, however, the verb does not connote speech but resolve and decree. According to Rabbinic commentary (Sa'adia, Maimonides, Nahmanides and others), in this context of creation, וַיֹּאמֶר [*va-yomer*] means that God willed or decided.

So too in Psalm 33:9, the term אָמַר [*amar*] denotes volition and decision: "[God] decreed and it was, [God] ordained and it stood" — "it" referring to everything existential. The Hebrew Monotheist sees the world as a manifestation of Divine *omer*, God's *davar*, God's decree and law. Psalm 119, supposedly wholly dedicated to the praise of the Divine Torah, speaks of God's דָּבָר [*davar*], Word, as well as Divine אֱמוּנָה [*emuna*], faithfulness, as intrinsic in the very feat of creation and the enduring existence of the mundane world, skies and earth (Psalms 119:89-90):

Forever, *Adonai*, Your Word [*stands*] upright in the skies;
For generation to generation, Your faithfulness;
You have established the earth so that it shall [*firmly*] stand!

The twain nouns, דְּבָרְךָ "Your word" (*devarekha*, decree) and אֱמוּנָתְךָ "Your faithfulness" (*emunatekha*, fidelity), form poetic parallelism. Taken as a hendiadys, they mean, Your Faithful Word, Your enduring, reliable, unailing decree. The twain objects, skies and earth (the former indirect and the latter direct), refer to the composite, created world in its complex totality.

The parallel adverbs, *le-olam* (forever) for "Your word" and *le-dor va-dor* (for generation to generation) for "Your faithfulness" correspond to the parallel verbs *nitzav* (standing erect) and *va-ta'amod* (so that it shall persist), both indicating firmness and endurance. Paraphrased in simple prose, the verses state that the Divine dependable decree inheres and empowers the skies and the earth (the world), to exist and persist. The very same trustworthy decree (*davar/emuna*), embodied in the Divine Torah, eternally sustains and enlivens the worshipper.

Nature and Torah as Dual Expressions of the Divine Law

For the Psalmist, "nature" and Torah both represent virtually one essence. Both express God's Law. The Psalmist therefore can sing of both while poetically experiencing and expressing the same religious inspiration. The fusion of both themes nature and Torah, into one Psalm is congruent and expectable. While

contemplating the two as distinguished entities, the Psalmist ultimately sings only of the One.

Psalm 19 sings essentially on one theme, the Divine Law. It starts with the description of God's creation. God's artistry bespeaks His mastery. Each moment of enduring existence, day to day and night to night, manifests God's wisdom. For the skies tell God's glory constantly, day after day and night after night. The Psalmist sees in nature complete adherence to God's decrees and rulings. Unlike the mythological world, the biblical universe is not rebellious. Metaphorically, all natural forces worship God, and sing His praises. The natural phenomena are virtually God's messengers, "angels" (*mal'akhim*; 104:4), which fulfill God's will with contentment, gratification, and joy, as poetically portrayed in verse 6.

The shared imagery of light is the poetic link, externally and internally, between the sun שֶׁמֶשׁ [*shemesh*] and the Torah. The light of the sun suffuses the whole earth; the light of Torah permeates the receptive human mind. In addition, the imagery of consummate obedience and total dominance links the two hymnal parts, on nature and Torah; for both embody the Divine Law and no one on earth can ignore either of these two. None can hide from both, the sun's heat and Torah's compelling brilliance and sweetness.

A similar link between the sun as deity and the law is curiously a part of the ancient Near Eastern tradition. According to Babylonian mythology, the sun god *Shamash* granted the code of laws to King Hammurabi; and the king duly acknowledged his debts to *Shamash* in his prologue to his classic Code.

This piece of information (unknown to all post-biblical generations hitherto), to which only we of this century are privy, remarkably puts the message of this Hebraic Psalm in sharper focus. The Hebraic *shemesh* (unlike the Babylonian *Shamash*) is neither a god nor a giver of law. The sun, like all other natural phenomena, serves God. The sun is thus, semantically and figuratively, God's *Shamash*, God's server.

God has set a tent [אֹהֶל *ohel*] for the sun in the skies (v. 5b). As mentioned above, the Hebrew may also yield an additional meaning, that God endowed the sun with its shining light (compare Job 29:2; 31:26). The sun, by God's will, provides natural light and heat, but not social morals or norms. For moral law and instruction, the Psalmist turns to God's Torah.

The juxtaposition of the Psalm's two poetic parts, in their varied content and form, is richly suggestive of literary associations. The dominant noun in the first part is הַשָּׁמַיִם, *ha-shamaim*, which we render "the skies". The common translation, the "heavens", though more fanciful, is less fitting. The poem's scope is wholly this worldly, not supernatural or metaphysical. This word הַשָּׁמַיִם, *ha-shamaim*, appears twice in this poetic unit. It is the starting word in its first verse (2) and it appears once again, in a constructive mode ["from *ha-shamaim's* edge"], at the start of its concluding verse (7). Its common biblical counterpart, *ha-aretz* (the earth) and its parallel *tevel* (which points to the earth's temporality) appears later (verse 5a).

This dominant noun, *the skies*, serves as the main subject of the poetic unit. Indeed all the following verbs (even in the singular) and the possessive suffixes of nouns (all in the plural; *their* voice, *their* cord, *their* messages, *therein*) in the ensuing verses (3-5) relate to "the skies" (only in 5b the implicit/hidden Actor of the verb "set" [שם *sam*] is God). While "the skies" dominate the first part, the Torah presides over the second. The second part starts with Torah [*Torat-Hashem*] and continues with a charming repetition of Torah's various epithets.

These two "first" words, one of the first part and the other of the second, taken together may subtly allude to the idea of Torah's heavenly substance and origin ("*Torah min ha-shamaim*"). Torah is *from* God, while no more *in* "Heaven", as Moses insists in Deuteronomy 30:12 (according to rabbinic view). The Torah of the Psalmist is also a part of the human experience on earth – sweet more than honey precious more than gold. Also, the "six and seventh" numerical mode of the second part (obvious though not explicit) deserves critical attention.

Regarding Torah, it contains six recitative lines of praise mentioning Torah, in its various honorific appellations (8-10), climaxing with the seventh superlative verse (11). Regarding the Tetragrammaton, it mentions the Ineffable Name six times in conjunction with Torah (8-10), concluding with the Psalmist's frontal appeal to God as "my rock and my redeemer" (15). This poetic mode of the second part of the Psalm may likely serve as a hint (and even a link) to the idea of creation (six workdays and the Seventh Shabbat), the implicit quintessence of the natural order, and the theme of the first part.

The Psalm's Poetic Transition from Nature to Torah

From the rejoicing, luminous sun, the Psalmist turns to describe God's Torah, its gratifying, enlightening and brightening qualities, in the second part.

In this part Torah appears adoringly in six of her lovely names: *Torah* (Teaching), *Edut* (Testimony), *Pikudim* (Precepts), *Mitzva* (Legacy, not "commandment"), *Yir'ah* (Authority, not "Fear"), and *Mishpatim* (Decrees). All these synonymous nouns refer essentially to the same living and enduring, conceptual entity: The Divine Law, representing the Legacy (*Mitzva*) to the people and the Authority (*Yir'ah*) of God. All these facets of Torah appear as precious, enjoyable and sweet.

There is, indeed, a clear distinction between the two parts of the Psalm. The first part describes a world of function, the second a world of values. The world of creation denotes determination and decisiveness, while the world of humankind implies free choice and fallibility. While the essence of creation is stability, the core of human society is liberty.

Thus, we come to the Psalm's turning point. Verse 12 is the turning point in the flow of the Psalm's ideas. In it, the personality of the Psalmist emerges for the first time. It says, "Your worshipper, too, lives by their [God's *precepts*] light, heeding them with great persistence. The Hebrew verb for "heedful" is *niz'har* in the common sense of being careful, cautious and attentive; but the root-word of this

passive verb (in *nif'al*) is *zohar* (exactly as the name of the Kabbalistic classic, the *Zohar*), meaning light and illumination. Hence, we may also render the verse this way: "Your worshipper too receives his light through them." Alternatively, "lives by their light". Namely, he derives his moral and spiritual illumination, insight, instruction, from the words of Torah.

The correlation between the enlightenment of Torah (part two of the Psalm) and the brightness and radiance of the sun (part one) becomes now transparent and crystal-clear. Here we have the Psalmist's emotional response to his objective observations of God's will, manifested in "nature" and Torah. He realizes, however, an essential distinction between the completeness and perfection revealed in creation and his own human situation. God's words reflected in nature are in a constant state of fulfillment. God ordained light and so it was and continues regularly to be. However, the laws of the Torah are for the people; they must fulfill them. In this mood, the Psalmist concludes with a sense of humility, pleading (13): "[*Yet of errors who can be aware? From covert faults purge me!*"]"

Encountering the world of God, the Psalmist feels a sense of inadequacy. He would very much like to emulate God's hosts of devoted, obedient servants in nature, rejoicing in fulfilling His will, but how can he? The confrontation with nature stirs in the Psalmist a desire for perfection, and he realizes that to gain it he needs not only God's laws, but also God's help to fulfill them. In this spirit, he ends, *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing before You!*

Psalm's Structure and Sentiment is Characteristically Hebraic

The peculiar structure of Psalm 19, not conforming though to the modes and norms of western poetry, is yet fully compatible with and paradigmatic of later Jewish liturgy.

The prevailing tendency to break our coherent Psalm into fragments is largely due to the impact of Christian theologians who see a dichotomy between the realms of mundane life and religious spirituality. To many of them it seems inconceivable that the same poem could simultaneously embrace appreciation of creation and devotion to the Creator. Motivated by Christological biases, many biblical critics (consciously or unconsciously) tend to isolate those passages in the Book of Psalms that adoringly glorify the Law (Torah), and then devalue their theological significance. Especially bewildering to some critics is the fact that the Psalmist appraises the Law lovingly rather than pragmatically; that this pious believer treats the Law not as a temporary necessity of transitional usefulness, but rather as a supreme value, as a precious treasure of enduring truth and spiritual appeal. To many Biblical scholars it is incomprehensible that the Psalmist sings of God's ordinances with such abiding passion and affection (v. 11):

Desirable more than gold, the purest Gold

Sweeter than honey, the most delicious honey.

This can be explained both semantically and theologically. Semantically, Torah is not Law (*nomos*) in the western sense, but rather teaching, guidance, enlightenment. Theologically, Judaism sees in Torah, even in its pronounced aspects of legislation ("Law") an expression of Divine love.

Facing their natural environment, the ancient Hebrews were impressed more by nature's internal lawfulness than external enchantment; its reassuring constancy than capricious fury; its promising benevolence than vicious violence. Therefore, they resisted the urge to placate and submit to the natural forces or to worship formal beauty, but instead learned to reject oppression and violence and admire justice and kindness. Above all, seeing in nature, metaphorically speaking, demonstrative obedience and loyalty to God's Laws, the people aspired to be devoted lovers of the Law.

Psalm 19 breathes pure Jewish monotheism, reflecting the Hebrew Bible's total rejection of Eastern paganism on the one hand, and Western materialism on the other. From the Jewish point of view, to worship any being other than God is to deny God; to see ultimate Oneness in creation is as idolatrous as to attribute plurality to the Creator. Thus, instead of submitting to the forces of nature, the biblical Jew adhered to the Laws of God; instead of aesthetics, he developed ethics. This Psalm as a whole -- in its dyadic design, literary balance, poetic imagery, architectonic structure and lucid religious tenor -- is a perfect gem, reflecting genuine Jewish genius.

The Role of Psalm Nineteen in Jewish Liturgy

Psalm Nineteen is in itself liturgy. It is pristine, universal, cosmic liturgy. Poetically, it is heavens' song to God. Midrashically, we on earth, by our mundane liturgy, emulate the superb liturgy of the heavens above [*bi-shemei marom*]. Curiously, Maimonides embraces the idea of the heavens praising God in concrete terms. Endorsing the ancient Greek philosophical-astronomical view (labeled "Aristotelian"), that the heavenly bodies – the spheres, sun, moon, stars – are living beings, endowed with reason, who are competent to worship the Creator, Maimonides states (Guide 2:5; compare Code, Fundamentals 3:9) that the spheres are animate and intellectual, and capable of comprehending ideas and acknowledging God.

The "spheres" in Maimonides' common English translations are certainly not the ספירות [*Sefirot*] of Jewish Mysticism, but the גלגלים [*galgalim*, "wheels"]. This term refers to the planetary celestial bodies that move in circles around earth, and is based on the Ptolemaic System of astronomy, according to which the earth is at the center with the sun, moon and planets revolving around it. Maimonides asserts: "The *galgalim* are not, as the ignorant folks think, dead masses, like fire and earth, but are, as the philosophers assert, endowed with life, and serve their Creator, whom they mightily praise and glorify; as stated (Psalms 19:1), 'The heavens declare the glory of God.'"

Since Rav Sa'adia Gaon (9th-10th centuries.), rabbinic commentators as a rule take this verse metaphorically, claiming that this poetic verse does not mean

that the heavens, dead and mute, actually "declare" and 'relate' the glory of God, but rather that they inspire people to do so, to praise God with their uniquely human gift of speech.

Maimonides differs. In confrontational disagreement with his predecessors, Maimonides reads this verse literally: "It is an error to think that this is a figure of speech. By 'declare' and 'relate' the verse describes what the heavens themselves do, not what they inspire people to do". Maimonides' view, however, is not within the scope of modern science. Whether metaphoric or literal, Psalm 19, the "liturgy of the heavens", is now embedded in Jewish liturgy.

In particular, this Psalm serves as a paradigm for the two Benedictions preceding the Shema -- *Yozer Or* and *Ahava Rabbah* – the first focusing on Divine Creation and its physical light, and the second on the Divine Torah and its spiritual light. The same scheme of Psalm 19 underlies the two *berakhot* (benedictions) before the recital of the *Shema*. There we praise God for creating the celestial luminaries, for ruling the sun, bringing forth the day and the night, the light and the darkness; then (in *ahava*) for granting us Torah as an expression of His eternal and abundant love for us. As in Psalm 19 so in our later liturgy, we acclaim God for His twofold manifestation, creation, in terms of light and time, and revelation expressive of His love and law.

This idea is mentioned for the first time by R. Asher ben Shaul, one of the "sages of Lunel" (late 12th and early 13th centuries), in his *Sefer ha-Minhagot* ("Book of Customs"). This Sage notes (page 5b) that the sun and the Torah appear as twins in Jewish liturgy for comparison and contrast. Both are formidable sources of light, but whereas the sun shines only during the day, the Torah projects its supernal light continuously.

The composers of our classical liturgy, according to R. Asher, modeled their Benedictions after Psalm 19, first praising God for creating the natural light (*Yozer Or*) and then for granting us the enlightening Torah in great and eternal love (*Ahava*). The Spanish R. David ben Joseph Abudarham (14th century), in his classic liturgical work *Sefer Abudarham* (1340), quotes this idea and probes it.

It is currently an established custom to insert Psalm 19 within *Pesukei De-Zimra* of Shabbat and Yom-Tov. The first to mention this custom are *Rashi* (1040-1104) in *Siddur Rashi* and *Rashi's* student, R. Simhah Vitry, in *Mahzor Vitry*. However, the author of *Sefer Abudarham* indicates that the ancient custom was to recite this Psalm daily. This is compatible with the idea that this Psalm is in the very core of the daily benedictions recited before the daily Shema. This ancient custom also conforms with the Psalm's own verse that the skies utter praise to God "day after day" (*yom le-yom*).

The prevailing custom, however, is to recite this Psalm not daily, but only on Shabbat [and, by extension, on festivals too]. This custom clearly emerged because of the two themes of the Psalm, creation and Torah, which adequately suit the day of Shabbat (*Rokeach's Commentary on the Siddur*, by R. Elazar of Worms, 12th century). Shabbat, like our Psalm, recalls Divine Creation [*ma'aseh Bereshit*], and points to the ultimate value of Torah by promoting its reading and study.

Furthermore, Shabbat marks the completion of Creation and in addition, Shabbat is the day of the giving of the Torah (*Bavli Shabbat 86/b*). On Shabbat, the wonders of nature and the words of Torah declare the glory of God, in the most magnificent way.

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