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EXISTENCE AND TORAH

A FAMOUS TEACHING DECLARES THAT “G-D LOOKED INTO THE TORAH AND CREATED the world”¹. This presents the Torah as something exalted which preceded the world, as a kind of superior form of Divine emanation. This functioned as a ‘blueprint’ for the work of Creation. First came the Torah, then came the world.

However, a comment on our Sedra² by a Talmudic Sage named Rabbi Simlai almost seems to suggest the opposite. Let us try to understand what he was saying, and how his teaching might apply to us in our daily lives.

First, let us consider our Sedra in context. Last week’s Sedra, Shemini, ended with a detailed list of the pure and impure animals, wild beasts and birds, teaching many of the laws of Kashrut. This week our double Sedra starts with an account of the laws which apply when a woman gives birth to a child, and continues with laws concerning a person who has been afflicted with a condition generally translated as ‘leprosy’. The second Sedra describes the purification of this individual when the condition is healed.

Rabbi Simlai said: just as human beings were created after the creation of the animals, beasts and birds, so too the laws concerning human beings are presented in the Torah after the laws concerning animals, beasts and birds³.

117 GEORGE STREET, LONDON W1H 7HF
www.chabadresearch.org - cru@lubavitchuk.com

In the stages of Creation we see first fish and birds on the fifth day, then on the sixth day the animals and finally human beings. Is Rabbi Simlai suggesting that since the order of Creation was first the animals, and then human beings, the laws of the Torah follow the same order? This could be understood as saying that first the world was created, and then the Torah was taught by G-d in corresponding order. Doesn't this seem to contradict the idea that the Torah preceded the world?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe suggests that there are two different stages in our perception of the relationship between Torah and existence.

At the first stage there seems to be a serious gap between them. The person is aware that Torah comes from G-d, and is holy. By contrast the world, ordinary existence, seems very mundane. Because of the gap in his perception, he has to keep insisting that the Torah comes first. For this person the ordinary practicalities of existence seem profane and even threatening. They are dark, while the Torah is bright.

Rabbi Simlai has reached the second stage. There is no gap. Torah is sacred, and the world too is sacred. Existence itself has a Divine illumination which helps us understand the sacred Torah. By considering the order of the creation of physical existence, we are better able to understand the order of the laws of the Torah.

Rabbi Simlai is well known for another similar teaching: that while still a foetus in the womb, each child is taught the entire Torah⁴. When he or she is born, they forget what they had learned. Yet throughout their lives, all the Torah they learn is simply reminding them of what they already knew. In other words, by virtue of existing, each person has all Torah knowledge within. There is no gap between existence and the teachings of Torah: all is one.

We may sometimes feel conflicts between our 'worldly' and 'spiritual' dimensions. In fact, however, ultimately both are one. All existence is there to reveal the Divine⁵.

1. Zohar II 161a. 2. The double Sedra is Leviticus chs. 12-13, 14-15. 3. Quoted in Rashi at the beginning of Tazria. 4. Nidah 30b. 5. See *Sefer HaSichot 5748* vol.2, 425-7.

Torah teachings are holy - please treat this page with care
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