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The Lunar Perspective

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THE recent historic telecast of the moon's surface by the three American astronauts who orbited it, the telecast which concluded with the recitation of the first words of Genesis, no doubt brought great satisfaction to religious earth-dwellers. In their address to Congress, the space-explorers commented upon the "ecumenical nature" of their recitation: it was a Catholic who read from the King James Version. What they omitted to mention was that the words came from the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, religious Jews were especially delighted that the first verses of the Chumash were chosen for this memorable message transmitted across one quarter of a million miles of the great void.

More important, it brought home to us that this latest technological triumph somehow has religious implications that we intuit only vaguely and that ought to be spelled out more

clearly.

For those sensitive to history, this was more than just an occasion for understandable pride by religious folk. The Jewish tradition teaches that Abraham emerged from a family and society which were *ovdey kochavim u-mazaloth*, pagans and heathen who worshiped the stars and the planets. Modern archaeology has not only corroborated this tradition, but has pinpointed more accurately the exact idols worshiped by the pagans of that time and place. We know today that the great metropolitan centers of Ur and Haran, cities well known to us from the biblical narratives about Abraham, were centers of moon worship, a religion which left its imprints even on the names of early biblical personalities. Thus, the similarity of the name of Abraham's father *Terach* to *yerach* (month) and *yareiach* (moon), and that of Laban, *Lavan*,

which is the masculine form of *levanah* (moon). Bible scholars have pointed to similar influences in the names of Sarah and Milcah. It is from this background of moon-cult that Abraham emerged to proclaim to the world the message of one G-d.

It is, therefore, a divine irony that, 3,500 years later, the first men to approach the vicinity of that celestial body once worshipped as a deity should call out the words "In the beginning . . ." — one G-d, as Abraham taught, created both heaven and earth and all their hosts. Girdling that lifeless, forlorn heavenly body, like some ancient gladiator with his foot on the neck of his enemy, mankind has thus proclaimed through those three American astronauts the final triumph of Jewish monotheism over paganism, the victory of the religion of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob over that of Terach and Laban.

BUT the relevance of this latest feat of technology to religious thinking is more than that of historical vindication. Even more significant for the religious contemplation of this technological triumph is what might be called the "Lunar Perspective" of life on earth.

One writer for a large metropolitan daily offered a psychological insight that appears to have been shared by many people: the orbiting of the moon impressed earth-dwellers with the uneasy awareness that our celebrated planet is just another globe, and that the astronauts viewing the earth from the moon might have had occasion to ask themselves, as if they were voyagers from outer space: "is it

inhabited?" In other words, seen from another heavenly body, the earth precipitously reduces in significance and appears as just another small ball whirling about aimlessly in space. From this perspective, man's ambitions suddenly appear puny, his loves and his hates picayune, his triumphs and his failures petty, his endeavors and his aspirations frightfully trivial. All that engages our attention on earth — the clash of world blocs, the problems of nations, the conflicts between communities and families, individual difficulties and dreams and disappointments — all this becomes meaningless when viewed from the Lunar Perspective.

This Lunar Perspective is therefore a good antidote for human superciliousness, when men take themselves altogether too seriously. Man's herculean scientific achievement, the fruit of his genius, paradoxically robs him of a sense of worth and significance. He conquers space technologically, and this puts him in his place psychologically. This is not an unwelcome side-effect of his historic accomplishment, and tends to confirm the mood — even more than the philosophic view — of Maimonides in his Guide: Man is king over all the earth, but earth is so trivial in the scheme of Creation that he has little to boast about.

HOWEVER, this Lunar Perspective can prove very dangerous indeed. When man views himself and his society against the larger cosmic backdrop, he tends to be overwhelmed into ignoring the infinite preciousness of every human being, the

infinite sanctity of the individual personality — which is not only a cardinal teaching of Judaism, but a precondition of man's psychological health and social integrity. When dealing with the vastness of inter-stellar space, man reduces to insignificance as the earth itself is considered but a speck whirling aimlessly in the endless, empty oceans of the cosmic abyss, and all of life appears meaningless and pointless.

It is for this reason that great thinkers throughout history were careful to go beyond the contemplation of nature as the source for religious inspiration. Thus, King David divided the nineteenth Psalm into two parts: The first half begins with: "the heavens declare the glory of G-d," the firmament and the revolutions of the cosmos are the testimony of G-d's greatness. The second half deals with *torath ha-Shem temimah*, "the law of the Lord is perfect," G-d's revelation and man's ability to obey the Will of G-d and the moral law. To leap over the centuries and from the world of the sacred to the world of the profane, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, in the conclusion of his "The Critique of Pure Reason," wrote: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." Nature alone is inadequate for the inculcation of religious feeling.

In fact, to return to the Bible, the one Psalm where one would most expect a religious celebration of the wonders of nature makes almost no mention of it. Psalm 92 is *Mizmor Shir Le'Yom ha'Shabbath*, "a song for the Sabbath day." The Sabbath commemorates the Divine creation of the

world, and one would ordinarily look to the Psalm for this day for the poetic elaboration of the mysteries and grandeur of nature as reflecting the awe and wisdom of the Creator. Yet this Psalm which, in the beginning, seems to go in just that direction — "how great are Thy works . . . how very deep are Thy thoughts" — suddenly reveals what its author means: the futility of wickedness and the ultimate prosperity of the righteous who "will grow like a cedar in Lebanon." It is G-d's moral reign, not His creation of nature, which reveals His wisdom and of which the Psalmist sings.

Both the sensitive souls of Judaism and the wise men of philosophy thus understood that while a contemplation of the heavens alone, of the glories of nature, can lead us to an appreciation of the awesomeness of the Creator, this phenomenon is often accompanied by an awareness of the nothingness of the creature, of man as *beriah ketanah shefelah-afelah*, "a small, dark and dismal creature," as Maimondes put it (*Hilchoth Yesodey Ha'Torah*, II). Looking at life from the point of view of the heavens alone can make the distance between G-d and man so great, so infinite, that man's worth vanishes. It is therefore important to add, and to emphasize even more, the moral law, the ability of man to abide by "the Law of the Lord" which is "perfect."

The Lunar Perspective is, hence, a healthy one — but only when taken in moderation.

INDEED, this Lunar Perspective is new only quantitatively, not qualitatively. It is novel only in de-

gree: never before have men been able to view their home planet from this distance and in this grand a manner. But it is not new in kind. Whenever men have dealt with large numbers, with great masses, they have tended to overlook and to derogate the individual. Single human beings are imperilled by statistics, by which they are often reduced to mere ciphers. Social thinkers from Marx to Fromm to Reisman have commented upon and analyzed the deep depersonalization and fragmentation of man in the mass-producing society. Not surprisingly, many talented individuals today often refuse to work for large corporations, because they do not want to end up as but a file in someone else's cabinet. Similarly, students in the mass universities, the "multiversities," frequently revolt, because they do not want to become depersonalized incarnations of an IBM card without ever relating to professor or administration.

Our ancient forbears, it is said, were frightened by the eclipse of the moon. If we are to remain moral and sensitive human beings, we must become frightened of the eclipse by the moon — the eclipse of all human interests and social concern by over-attention to the great problems of space. The United States is today suffering enough from the agonies of revolution because for three hundred years we were too busy building up our country and did not care about the plight of the black man or the poor man. It would be sheer lunacy for us to be-

come so obsessed with colonizing the moon and conquering the rest of space, that we continue to ignore the pressing social problems confronting us. Certainly Jews more than anyone else can appreciate the importance of care and concern for individuals in the face of "larger problems." During the last great war, the leaders of the "free world" were generally too busy and preoccupied with the gigantic problems of the war and diplomacy to pay attention to the fate and the destiny of a few million Jews.

The Lunar Perspective is all to the good if it brings man to his senses when he is over-obsessed with his own importance. But when it threatens to diminish his worth, to encourage him to indifference and apathy to his fellow men, it is good to recall that this Lunar Perspective was secured only because *human beings* conceived of this flight, because *they* paid for it, because *they* engineered it. It is good to remember that the Lunar Perspective was taken by — *human beings*, for it is they who first gazed at the earth from the moon. And it was a human reaction to this Lunar Perspective that prompted the American astronauts to recite to us, from literally another world, the Divine proclamation: *Bereshith barah . . .* "In the beginning G-d created the heaven and the earth" — a passage which ends, so appropriately, with the words: "And G-d saw *ki tov* that it was good" — and indeed, it can yet be good.