

## TORAH VS. NATURE A Competition or a Partnership?

### **Introduction**

Jewish reverence for nature is not necessarily a given. Let's look at two positions, one held by Rabbi Yaakov of the Mishnah and the other by the Zionist poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik.

Rabbi Yaakov taught: One who reviews his studies while strolling and interrupts his studies to remark 'What a beautiful tree,' or 'What a lovely field,' is considered as having committed a capital offense.

*Pirkei Avot 3:9*

It is not without significance that the people of Israel, or at least the great majority of them, submitted to the iron yoke of halakhah, and not only that, but actually chose to carry with them into exile a heavy load of laws and ordinances....and here is what the halakhist himself says: "If a man studies as he walks, and breaks off his study to say 'How lovely is this tree! How lovely is the field!' Scripture regards him as guilty of deadly sin." Our aestheticists have spent all their ammunition on this unfortunate mishnah: but even here the sympathetic ear will detect, between the lines, the apprehension, the trembling anxiety for the future, of a wandering people which has nothing to call its own but a book, and for which any attachment of its soul to one of the lands of sojourn means mortal danger.

*Chaim Nachman Bialik (Zionist poet, 1873-1934) in his essay "Halakhah and Aggadah" cited in The Way Into Judaism and the Environment by Jeremy Bernstein (2006) page 210.*

### **Discussion Questions:**

**What is the implication of Rabbi Yaakov's statement [in the mishnah]?**

**Do you think this opinion is representative of the rabbis? On what do you base your opinion?**

**How does Bialik understand the role of Torah in Jewish history?**

- [the study of] Torah/halakhah was/is supreme
- Torah/halakhah was the central, unifying tradition that Jews took with them, and maintained in exile (the diaspora)

**How does Bialik relate to this idea of its the centrality?**

- “apprehension”, “trembling anxiety” for his people that have only a *portable homeland* – a book
- no homeland to promote national consciousness and connectedness
- danger in the future for a wandering people, dependent upon their acceptance on foreign soil
- continued exile and dependence on a portable homeland will eventually lead to spiritual suicide (c.f. Ahad HaAm)

**Does Bialik distinguish between diasporic nature and nature in general?**

- reconnection with the land of their origins will allow Jews to reestablish a harmony between Torah and nature
- Torah and homeland can provide equal sustenance for the Jewish people

**What might Bialik say about the term: “people of the book”?**

**What do you think about the term?**

**How does this discussion relate to the observance of Tu b'Shevat?**