

Parsha Emor
D'Var Torah by Jonathan Glass

I know of many scientists who have no difficulty resolving their understanding of science with belief in the Creator, although some scientists think that this represents a problem.

In shul when we were reading Mishpatim I came across the verse familiar to many “and you shall not taunt nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”. Reading this line was inspirational. A halachic requirement to reject racism, a biblical instruction not to challenge others who may be different. Reading this line inspired me to read the text of the Chumash from start to finish.

In reading the text, I have come across some remarkable passages. In the Sidra of Emor, we are instructed not to be sacre religious, not to commit a “Chillul Hashem” – not to disgrace the Name of Hashem. When Abraham is trying to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, he pleads with Hashem to save the cities if he can find 50 righteous people. He argues that wiping out a city which contains righteous people would be sacre religious. Abraham accuses G-d of being sacre religious – a remarkable argument! Abraham argues that how can he try to persuade future generations to believe in a righteous G-d if G-d himself wipes out the righteous. And G-d agrees to negotiate.

Later in the text Abraham says, “I am a stranger and a resident amongst you”. Again, another remarkable line in which Abraham summarises the whole of the Jewish condition in four Hebrew words.

Just as Abraham summarises the whole of Jewish history in those four words, the Sidra of Emor summarises the whole of the Jewish year saying, “and these are the appointed festivals”. After briefly mentioning Shabbat, we are taken from Pesach through the period of the Omer, on to Shavuot and then into Rosh Hashannah, Yom Kippur and Succot.

The term the Torah uses to describe the festivals is “Mo’adim”, the plural of the word Mo’ed. Just as the place the Children of Israel gather is the Ohel Mo’ed – the tent of meeting, the place of congregation, so the festivals represent a time of gathering and a time of congregation.

(My brother was once asked to summarise the Jewish calendar to a friend and did so by saying “oh that’s easy – the Jewish calendar can be summarised as “someone tried to kill us so we eat a lot!”)

The Jewish year and science both fascinate me. It is fascinating that the Jewish year, a lunar year, keeps pace with the solar year. Indeed the Jewish calendar bases its events on the spin of the earth – a day, the rotation of the moon around the earth – a lunar month, and the rotation of the earth around the sun – a solar year.

The Sidra of Emor tells us that Pesach should fall on the fifteenth day of the first month. We are, however, instructed earlier that Pesach should be Ba'Chodesh Ha'aviv – in the month of Spring; the text also states “and you shall eat Matzot Ba'Chodesh Ha'aviv - in the month of the spring. The Rabbis would therefore wait to pronounce the first month – the month for Pesach - until the barley had ripened. If barley had not yet ripened, then an additional month was inserted, delaying Pesach for a month. This is why the additional month is an additional Adar – the month before Pesach. This process was formalised with the pattern of additional months being calculated. Seven years with additional months in a cycle of 19 years results in the lunar calendar keeping pace with the solar calendar, just losing one day every 300 years. We thus now have some standard years termed Shana P'shuta, and some “pregnant” years, termed Shana me'uberet.

The Rambam – Maimonides, who had a fascination with science argued that the additional periods had to be whole months because the Torah makes reference to offerings which must be “in the months of the year”. He therefore explained that the year must be made of and progress in complete months. The Rambam also felt the formalisation of the calendar made it very easy to comprehend, writing that “the method of the fixed calendar is one an average child could master in 3 to 4 days”.

The Rambam had many interests, including astronomy, which he distinguished from astrology. He said of the latter that people do follow astrology but that “all those assertions are far from being scientific; they are stupidity”.

Astronomy, the lunar and solar cycles, they all fascinated him. He also believed that studying science brought you closer to an understanding of the greatness of The Creator. Indeed, he wrote “and G-d can be known by means of his actions. Hence, it is necessary for anyone who wishes to attain human perfection to prepare himself first by means of the study of logic, afterwards by the study of natural science, and then by the study of Theology”.

The Rambam saw G-d in science. I am sure he saw G-d in every leaf, in every blade of grass. The calendar allows us to combine the study of logic, of natural science and of theology.