

TO BEHOLD THE STARS AND THE HEAVENLY BODIES

by SHLOMO PINES and WARREN ZEV HARVEY

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In the *Midrash on Psalms* 8:6, the verse “When I behold Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained” (Ps. 8:4) is interpreted as follows:

R. Aibu taught: There are three kinds of men. The first kind says: “Had I been created to do no more than behold the stars and the heavenly bodies, it would have been enough for me,” as it is said: “When I behold thy heavens... the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained.” The second kind says: “All that Thou hast to give me, give it to me in the world-to-come.” The third kind, the slothful laborers, says: “Give us now what is ours and also what was our fathers’,” as is said, “the work of Thy fingers.”¹

We are already familiar with the second and third groups from a passage in *Avot* 2:15-16:

R. Tarfon says: “The day is short, and the work is prodigious, and the laborers are slothful, and the reward is great, and the Master of the house presses.”²

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ש' פִּינֶס וְז' הַרְוֵי, "לִרְאוֹת הַכּוֹכָבִים וְהַמְזֻלוֹת", מַחְקְרֵי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם בַּמַּחֲשֶׁבֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, כֶּרֶךְ ג' (תִּשְׁמ"ד).
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1. *The Midrash on Psalms*, translated by William G. Braude (New Haven, 1959), vol. I, p. 127.

2. On this saying by Rabbi Tarfon see D. Flusser, *Die rabbinischen Gleichnisse und der Gleichniserzähler Jesus* (Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Las Vegas, 1981), p. 144ff.

He used to say: “You are not bound to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it. If you have learned much Torah, you will be given a great reward, and the Master for Whom you work is faithful to reward you for your labors. And know that the giving of the reward of the righteous is in the future to come.”

In this passage, R. Tarfon speaks of learning Torah in terms of the work ethic. The term “work” appears three times, and “reward” (or “pay” or “wage”) four. R. Aibu’s latter two groups may be seen as an elaboration of the “righteous” and the “slothful workers” of R. Tarfon. It is the righteous who say “give me in the World-to-come” (the “giving of the reward... is in the World-to-come”); the slothful laborers, on the other hand, say “give us now.” Both groups expect a reward, but the members of the second group ask to receive it in the future, while those of the third group demand their rewards – and that of their forefathers as well! – right now.

Now, if R. Aibu’s definitions of the second and third groups correspond to the words of R. Tarfon, to whose words is he referring in his definition of the first group? With regard to this question, it may be noted that a view identical to that espoused by R. Aibu’s first group is found in two Aristotelian passages: one found in the *Protrepticus* and the other in the *Eudemean Ethics*. These are the passages in question:

Protrepticus:

For the sake of what thing has nature or God brought us into being (ἐγέννησε)? Pythagoras, when asked about this, said “to observe the heavens” (τὸν θεία σασθαι τὸν οὐρανόν), and he used to say that he was an observer (θεωρῶν) of nature, and it was for this that he had come into being.

And they say that Anaxagoras, when asked for what end one would choose to come into being (γενέσθαι) and to live, replied: “to observe the heavens (τοῦ θεία σασθαι τοῦ οὐρανόν) and the stars, the moon and sun in them, everything else being nothing worth.”³

Eudemean Ethics:

Now it is said that when somebody persisted in putting various difficulties of this sort to Anaxagoras and went on asking for what object one should choose to come into being (γενέσθαι) rather than not, he replied by saying: “for the sake of observing the heavens (τοῦ θεωρῆσαι τὸν οὐρανόν) and the whole order of the universe.”⁴

3. Aristotle, *Select Fragments*, ed. D. Ross [Works. 12. (Oxford, 1952)], p. 45 (fragment Walzer and Ross 11/During B18-B19 6-15; taken from Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 9 [p. 51, 1. 6-15]). The attribution of this passage from Iamblichus to the lost *Protrepticus* of Aristotle is accepted by most scholars. See: Iamblichus, *Protrepticus*, ed. H. Pistelli, (Teubner, 1888); R. Walzer, *Aristotelis Dialogorum Fragmenta Selecta* (Firenze, 1934), p. 49; W.D. Ross, *Aristoteles Fragmenta Selecta* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 44-45; I. Düring, *Aristotle’s Protrepticus* (Goteborg, 1961), p. 54. Compare also Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of the Philosophers* ii, 11; according to the version given there, Anaxagoras, asked for what sake he was born, responded: “in order to contemplate (εἰς θεωρίαν) the sun, the moon and the stars.”

4. *Eudemean Ethics*, I, v, 9 (1216a, 1. 11-14), Loeb Library edition, tr., H. Rackham [Aristotle. 20. (Cambridge, Mass., London, 1935)], pp. 212-213.

The parallel between the declaration of R. Aibu's first group and those of Pythagoras and Anaxagoras is clear enough. According to R. Aibu's first group, "Had I been created only in order to behold the stars and the constellations (or in the words of the verse, "Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars"), it would suffice me!" According to Pythagoras, it was indeed for this purpose that God brought man into the world, while Anaxagoras holds that this same purpose is the reason for man to choose being over non-being. There is no doubt, then, that Pythagoras and Anaxagoras belong to the first group of R. Aibu. In other words, the first group of R. Aibu is that of the philosophers.

Against R. Tarfon's work ethic, R. Aibu poses the ethic of the philosophers. Instead of reward ("now" or "in the world to come"), there is contemplation for its own sake. Indeed, Aristotle too (or Iamblichus), in the continuation of the passage from *Protrepticus*, sets the ethic of the philosophers against the ethic of reward-seeking. Gazing at the cosmos (τὴν θεωρίαν τῶν παντῶν) he writes, is desirable not because it is a means for achieving some other end, but because it is a good thing in and of itself. If we are willing to gaze upon the sporting spectacles at Olympia or the theatrical spectacles at the Dionysia without receiving any payment, he continues, how much more so ought we to gaze upon nature without thought of reward (Θεωρεῖν ἀμισθί).⁵

Moreover, it seems to us that R. Aibu recommends the way of the first group, and that his list of the three groups is in order of preference: the first group is the highest on the scale, and the last is lowest.⁶

We may note, too, that, just as R. Aibu speaks of three groups, so Aristotle, in the *Eudemian Ethics* (i:1, 1214a; i:4, 1215a-b and elsewhere), speaks of three ways of life: the philosophical (exemplified by the story about Anaxagoras), the political, and the hedonistic. However, this numerical parallel is insufficient to establish any literary influence.⁷

5. Iamblichus, *ibid.*, p. 53, l. 15 – p. 54, l. 5; Walzer and Ross 12/During B44 (Walzer, pp. 51-52; Ross, p. 47; During, p. 66).

6. This is also Braude's opinion: "The three groups are: the perfectly righteous, who find sufficient reward in merely beholding God's handiwork; the middling people, who are willing to wait for their reward so that they may enjoy it in Paradise; and the 'slothful laborers,' who demand here and now not only their own deserts, but those of their fathers." *Midrash on Psalms*, vol. II, p. 423, no. 17.

7. There is, however, at least a small degree of resemblance between R. Aibu's second group (the "righteous" of R. Tarfon) and Aristotle's political people, who engage in worthy deeds originating in the good disposition (ἀρετή) and between the third group (the "slothful laborers" who demand their reward now, in this world) and Aristotle's hedonists, who concern themselves with the pleasures of the body. See *Eudemian Ethics*, i:4, 1215b. On Aristotle's three groups, cf. also *Nicomachean Ethics*, I:5, 1095b.

Was R. Aibu familiar with the above passages from Aristotle? There is no reason to reject this possibility out of hand. He lived in the Land of Israel during the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth centuries, a period during which the influence of Hellenistic culture in the country was considerable. It is also possible that he had seen the anecdotes about Pythagoras and Anaxagoras in some other text, or heard them related orally.

However, in addition to such general comments, it is possible to offer a plausible hypothesis as to the direct source from which R. Aibu drew the opinion he attributes to his first group. The hypothesis is as follows. The first passage, attributed by most scholars to Aristotle's lost *Protrepticus*, was preserved in another work, also called *Protrepticus*, by the Neoplatonist Iamblichus. Several aspects of this latter philosopher's life are of interest to us here.⁸ He was the scion of a Syrian family, and was himself born in Syria. Scholars disagree as to the date of his birth, with the tendency lately being to locate it earlier than had previously been thought. According to several estimates, he was born during the 240's, though an earlier theory had set the date several decades later. He was living abroad, perhaps in Rome, when he studied with Prophyry, and some believe he may earlier have studied with his teacher Anatoly in Palestine, in Caesaria. He seems to have returned to Syria in the nineties of the third century or the first years of the fourth, and he founded there a school of philosophy of which he was the head. It is considered likely that he composed his *Protrepticus* between the years 280 and 305, and it may thus have been written after his return to Syria.

In the context of our discussion, two facts in particular demand our attention:

1) that R. Aibu and Iamblichus were contemporaries; 2) that not only did Iamblichus come from Syria, but his activity as head of a school took place there — that is, amongst a partially Aramaic-speaking population and in geographical proximity to Palestine.

In light of these facts, there is a certain plausibility to the supposition that something of the contents of Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*, which may have been written in Syria and would most likely have been studied in its author's school, came to the attention of R. Aibu, either by his reading a text or through conversation with people interested in new and current philosophical works.

8. On Iamblichus, see John M. Dillon, *Iamblichi Chalcedensis in Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta* (Leiden, 1973), pp. 3-25.

In both Aristotelian sources cited above, the *Protrepticus* and the *Eudemian Ethics*, Anaxagoras' statement is made in response to the question of why one should choose to come into being rather than not to come into being. The Rabbis, too, were familiar with this question:

The Rabbis taught: The School of Shammai and the School of Hillel debated with one another for two and a half years, the one side saying: "It would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created," and the other saying: "It is better for man to have been created than not to have been created." They finally concluded: "It would have been better for man not to have been created than to have been created – but now that he has been created, let him examine his past deeds." Another version: "Let him examine his present conduct." (Eruvin 13b)⁹

It is not impossible that the discussion of this issue in Greek philosophy (including the story about Anaxagoras) influenced its choice as a topic of discussion in the Schools of Shammai and Hillel. We do not know whether Anaxagoras' argument was raised during the two and a half years of debate. In any case, it was indeed raised by R. Aibu, who phrased it in terms reminiscent of that debate: Is it better for man to have been created? "Had I been created only in order to behold the stars and the constellations, it would suffice me!"

It is worthy of note that Maimonides cites the verse "When I behold Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers" in *Hilkhot Yesodey Ha-Torah* 2:2, precisely in connection with the religious obligation to contemplate the natural world.¹⁰ Perhaps he was influenced here by R. Aibu's homily. Whether this is so or not, however, it fits in well with his religious and scientific outlook, which requires the contemplation of nature (*Hilkhot Yesodey Ha-Torah* 1-4) and criticizes that brand of religiosity which looks to a reward in this world or the next (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:1-2, 4-5).

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9. Cf. E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 252, 799; and E.E. Ha-Levi, *'Olamah shel ha-Aggada* (Tel Aviv, 1972), pp. 247-249; in addition to the Greek parallels to the position attributed to the School of Shammai noted by Urbach and Ha-Levi, compare also the view expressed, according to a passage from Aristotle's *Eudemus*, in the answer of the mythical creature Silenus to a question put by King Midas: "The best thing of all cannot possibly happen to men, and they can have no part in that which is best in nature; for the best thing for every man and woman is not to have been born (*γενέσθαι*) and after that (the second best thing) – and this is the foremost thing that men can achieve once they have been born – is to die as soon as possible." This passage from Aristotle is transmitted by Plutarch in his *Consolatio ad Appollonium* 115b-e; Walzer and Ross, fragment 6 (Walzer, pp. 12-14; Ross, pp. 18-19). The *Eudemus*, like the *Protrepticus*, belongs to those works by Aristotle which were not preserved and are known to us only from citation. Cf. also Ecclesiastes 4:2-3: "Wherefore I praise the dead that are already dead more than the living that are yet alive; but better than they both is he that hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun."

10. Cf. also Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Hovot ha-Levavot* II:2.