

## ***HE THAT FORMED THE EYE SHALL HE NOT SEE?***

**SHUBERT SPERO**

For the authors of Psalms, God is a living active Presence to be alternatively praised for His salvations in the past, beseeched for deliverance from present dangers and implored to destroy one's enemies. As such, one does not expect to find in this biblical book rational arguments concerning the nature of God. However, many of the Psalms bear the name of David, first king of the united tribes of Israel who was beset by many enemies from within and without who sought his destruction. These enemies whom David refers to as the "wicked ones" are also the enemies of God and deserve to be thwarted. We are told much about their perseverance (64:6,7; 56:7), their methods (17:12; 28:3) and their thoughts about God. They proclaim *the Lord will not see, neither will the God of Jacob give heed* (yavin) (94:7). They taunt David by saying "*Where is your God?*" (42:11). There is even a "fool" who says "in his heart, there is no God!" (14:1).<sup>1</sup> In Psalm 94, the Psalmist attempts to answer their assertions about God. After describing the evil that these "wicked ones" continue to do to the innocent with impunity, saying that God is not aware or interested in what transpires in the affairs of men (94:17), the Psalmist replies:

(94:09) *He that planted (noteh) the ear, shall He not hear (yishma)?*

*He that formed (yotzair) the eye, shall He not see (yabit)?*

(94:10) *He that instructs (yosair) nations, shall He not correct (yokheah)?*

*Even He that teaches man knowledge (da'at)?*

In what follows, I shall examine the above verses in order to ascertain the nature, structure and validity of these arguments.<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, we seem to have here four separate arguments, two in each verse, of the familiar "if p then q" type. That is, in each case a certain premise is given, namely that God is the Creator of a particular human faculty and what follows necessarily is that God Himself possesses "hearing" (*yishma*), "vision" (*yabit*), punishes (*yokheah*) and has knowledge (*da'at*). Although, the

*Shubert Spero was ordained at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. He has a B.S. from CCNY, and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University. He is the Irving Stone Professor of Jewish Thought at Bar Ilan University. He is the author of God in All Seasons (1967), Morality, Halakha and the Jewish Tradition (1983), and Holocaust and Return to Zion: A Study in Jewish Philosophy of History (2000).*

essential claim of these “wicked ones” is that God is not aware of their deeds, they start by saying, “God does not hear.” The Psalmist, therefore, also begins his rebuttal with reference to a particular organ, “the ear.”

*He that planted the ear shall He not hear* (yishma)? This is not a mere literary flourish but rather adds to the main argument. Let us examine the text. Note that instead of saying “He who *created* the ear, as he seems to do in connection with the “eye,” he uses the word *noteh*, “to plant.” Perhaps this is because, unlike the eyes which are set into the skull, close to each other, the ears noticeably protrude and are placed on either side of the head. Once we understand the function of the ear to catch the sound waves coming from different directions, we can appreciate the wisdom of He who *planted* them in their requisite positions. If so then this argument is claiming more than that the Creator of the ear must be able to hear, namely that He must understand the entire complex auditory process. Indeed, the Hebrew word *yishma* also denotes “to heed” and “to understand.”<sup>3</sup>

In his second argument, the Psalmist goes on to the “eye,” but the logic remains the same.

*He that formed the eye* (yotzair) *shall He not see* (yabit)? While *yabit* involves seeing, it primarily means “to look,” to direct one’s gaze which implies intentionality. Here the emphasis is on the organ itself, the eye, which even in a pre-scientific age must have been appreciated for its ability to open and close, its self-cleansing apparatus (lashes to filter, tears to lubricate) as well as its ability to provide a steady picture in spite of constant head movements. Again, He who formed the eye had to possess more than sight. In going from the ear to the eye, the Psalmist is clearly following a graduated process, from the simple to the more complex. While the auditory experience in the individual is completely passive, in the sense that the organ is constantly open and ready to receive sounds, regarding the eye, the individual must open them, turn his head so that he faces the objects and then select from his field of vision the particular items he finds of interest. Thus we see the human vision is not merely the mechanical ability to receive colored pictures but a process in which the eye in tandem with the rest of the body is carrying out a directed purposeful project, implying intelligence. On the assumption that the four arguments in Psalms 94:9,10 constitute a graduated series, let us, for the moment, skip argument #3 and proceed to the last phrase: “Even He that

teaches man knowledge (*da'at*).” This is an abbreviation of the regular form found in the previous arguments which we can reconstruct as follows: “He that *teaches* man knowledge, shall He not know?”

Since, as we have pointed out, “knowledge” or “understanding” was the essential attribute that “the wicked” denied to God, it is appropriate that the Psalmist concludes the series with this clinching argument.<sup>4</sup> But once again our attention is drawn to an unusual expression: He that *teaches* man knowledge, rather than “gives” or “endows.” To “endow” or “bestow” (*honen*) something on somebody is to suggest that that “something” is a “good” being given out of kindness or esteem. However, to “teach” can mean imparting a *skill* enabling the individual to develop it in unforeseen ways. This might be a reference to the astonishing ability of the anatomical activity of the brain to produce the conscious experiences of perception, language, memory and reason. The Hebrew word *da'at* includes all mental experience such as consciousness, self-awareness and intentionality (will), each of whose uniqueness becomes apparent only after much introspection. The use of the locution “*teach* man *da'at*” may suggest that the very experience of “self-hood” may be a reflection of the “image of God” in man.<sup>5</sup>

However even if one has proven that God has “knowledge” and is aware of what transpires in the mundane world, it does not necessarily mean that He is morally sensitive and is prepared to act so that justice prevails. This then is the function of argument #3.

*He that instructs nations shall He not correct* (yokheah). In his premise, the Psalmist refers to the basic Biblical doctrine that God has made known to mankind (“nations”) the principles of morality and the behavior expected of human beings. He has done this by means of the intuitive moral sense implanted in man as well as by the repeated messages of the Hebrew prophets.<sup>6</sup> This argument introduces the element of value. The God of Israel is not only the Creator God, the source and ground of all being (ontological) but also the moral God, the source of all ethical values not only in the sense that it is He who commands man to be moral but that moral goodness as we experience it, is in some sense a resident aspect of God Himself. This then is the full answer to the Psalmist’s rhetorical question: Yes, he that has revealed moral value to man will most assuredly “correct.” Yes, the moral God *does* hear,

*does* see, *does* know and will ultimately bring about conditions in which the wicked will receive their just deserts.

In summary, then, we have shown that Psalm 94:9,10 in the context of a dialogue among those who acknowledge the existence of God but question His attributes can be read as a four-part serial argument designed to show God's omniscience and moral nature. The argument progresses from the necessary inference that God perceives to that of His having "knowledge": intelligence, rationality and finally a moral will.

Having refuted the wicked, the Psalmist goes on to proclaim his own credo:  
*For the right shall return unto justice (94:15)*  
*And the Lord God will cut them off in their evil (94:23)*  
*For the Lord will not cast off His people*  
*Neither will He forsake His inheritance (94:14).*

#### NOTES

1. A present-day reader might wonder what could have led the "wicked ones" of those days to think that God does not "see" or "hear"? One possibility offered is that since the God of Jacob is never pictured with a physical image and therefore never with eyes or ears, it was thought, naively, that He was unable to see or hear. A more sophisticated reason is that in accordance with certain philosophers it was believed that God's lofty universal intellect does not register the changing particularities of the mundane world. In short, that God was too detached to notice and too involved with the general welfare to care about the individual.

2. Philosophers over the ages have seen in this juxtaposition of the marvelous faculties in man to the Power that must be resident in creation a powerful argument for the very existence of an intelligent creator. This became known as the Argument from Design. Maimonides, for example, had this to say as part of the "true meaning" of these verses of Psalms 94:9, 10: "Considering the humours of the eye, its membranes and nerves with their well known functions and their adaptation to the purpose of sight, can any intelligent person imagine that all this is due to chance"? (Guide, Part III, Ch. 19)

John Stuart Mill wrote that Psalm 94:9 "contains the strongest argument for the existence of God" (*On Liberty*). The human organ of vision certainly seems to be a product of complex design suggesting intelligence, that is, one who was able in advance to figure out the intricate means necessary to bring about the desired end. Until the appearance of the Darwinian Theory of biological evolution which offered an alternative explanation, instances of design in nature were considered compelling evidence for the existence of God.

3. See comment of Seforno on Deuteronomy 6:4.

4. What does it mean to say that man has knowledge (*da'at*)? The Rabbis were fully aware of the breadth and complexity of the term *da'at* as can be seen in the text of the blessing for *da'at* in the daily *amidah* prayer. "You endow man with knowledge (*da'at*) and *teach* mortals understanding (*bina*). Favor us with knowledge (*da'at*), understanding (*bina*) and intelligence (*haskhel*). Blessed are You, O Lord, who bestows knowledge (*da'at*)."

The cognitive process (knowing) in man starts indeed with perception, that is, “seeing” and “hearing” with the raw sense-data somehow transposed into what we take to be a “true” picture of what is outside our consciousness. We perceive not only objects which we name and learn to recognize but spatial and temporal relations between objects and events which we are able to measure and manage. The word “understanding” comes into play when what we perceive takes on significance or meaning. Thus, if we see a man screaming and running after another man while brandishing a knife, we sense violence and fear danger. We *know* this only from experience, ours or others. This is the result of our ability to generalize from particular experiences and store that knowledge in our memory, which we are then able to retrieve and apply to new similar situations. The individual who has a large and diverse store of such generalizations is called *wise*. The term “intelligence” generally refers to the speed by which the individual forms and applies these generalizations. Then, as a sort of supervision over our thinking and speaking, is something we call *reason* (*sekhel*). In our practical lives this faculty enables us to recognize means-ends relationships, that is, to figure out what means may bring about certain goals. Man, however, is unique in that he is capable of choosing his own goals and calculating the steps sufficient to realize them. Indeed, acting purposively is the signature characteristic of human behavior and of rationality itself. In more conceptual terms, to be rational means to immediately recognize the invalidational power of self-contradiction. Such are the gifts of *da'at*. Therefore, to say that God has *knowledge* or that God *knows* is to say that God has, at least, all of the aforementioned faculties to an infinite degree.

5. While the philosopher David Hume was quite correct in pointing out that even the most concentrated introspection does not yield any sense of having experienced the “pure ego,” the self-itself; nevertheless the statement “The human being is the only creature that can use the personal pronoun ‘I’ meaningfully” has a ring of authenticity.

6. While a good portion of the message of the Hebrew Prophets is about and directed to the “nations” (see S. Spero, *Holocaust and Return to Zion* (Ktav: 2000) pp. 44-47), a basic intuitive moral sensitivity is constitutive of being human and is part of the meaning of man being created “in the image and likeness of God.” (See S. Spero, *Morality, Halaka and the Jewish Tradition* (N.Y.: Ktav, 1983) ch. 3).



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