The Mystery of Memorization

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During a recent phone call, my mother, who in June celebrated her 87th birthday, recited for me an entire poem she had memorized in elementary school.

Abou Ben Adhem

By Leigh Hunt

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
An angel writing in a book of gold: —
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the presence in the room he said,
"What writest thou?" — The vision raised its head,
And with a look made of all sweet accord,
Answered, "The names of those who love the Lord."
"And is mine one?" said Abou. "Nay, not so,"
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
But cheerily still; and said, "I pray thee, then,
Write me as one that loves his fellow men."

> The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night
> It came again with a great wakening light,
> And showed the names whom love of God had blest,
> And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.
> https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/leigh-hunt

Did anyone else memorize this poem as well? I am not sure they are still teaching it. It was written by Leigh Hunt, a 19th century British poet, about Ibrahim Ibn Adhem, a Sufi mystic who had been born into a wealthy family in Persia in the 8th century but who had gave up a life of luxury for a simple life of service.

When I was in middle school, 7th and 8th grade, we also memorized poems, the longer the better. I vaguely remember "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," but there were others as well. We were pretty competitive, each one of us looking for a poem that was longer than our friends' poems. My memory of memorizing poems served me well in finally solving a puzzle that has bothered me for years.

In Pirke Avot we are taught:

> Rabbi Jacob said: If one is studying while walking on the road and interrupts his study and says, "How fine is this tree!" [or] "How fine is this newly ploughed field!" scripture accounts it to him as if he was mortally guilty.

It's not just me who has puzzled over this seeming contradiction—the commentaries also have a great deal of difficulty with this statement, as the

Talmud teaches that when one sees a leafy tree one is required to recite a blessing. It is found explicitly in the Talmud, *Kiddushin* 58b:

תנו רבנן הרואה פיל קוף וקפוף אומר ברוך משנה את הבריות ראה בריות טובות ואילנות טובות אומר ברוך שככה לו בעולמו:

The Sages taught: One who sees an elephant, a monkey, or a vulture (Rashi) recites: "Blessed . . . who makes creatures different." One who sees beautiful or otherwise outstanding creatures or beautiful trees recites: "Blessed . . . Who has such things in his world."

The commentators attempt various solutions to this puzzle. The first solution references their fear of travel. There were dangers on the road, and Torah study is protective. Therefore, one should not endanger one's life by stopping one's studying, thus putting down one's shield, as it were.

Additional explanations about the Torah being at a higher level than the natural world or about the dangers of focusing on one small aspect of the world, such as the Italian commentator Bartinoro does when he notes the plowed field, the work of human hands, complicate matters. Such explanations see the act of praising man-made work instead of studying God's words as being a sinful act.

Even the contemporary rabbi and "JewBu" Rami Shapiro offers his opinion about the seeming conflict and explains, "It as an interruption of our rapt attention." He writes, "The intrusion of self and the imposing of judgment separates you from

reality and snares you in a net of words. Be still and know. Embrace it all in silence."

But this is not the *pshat*, the direct meaning of the text. So, what to do?

Maimonides says that it is in contemplation of nature that a person is pointed to God's wisdom and great works. In general, trees are a metaphor for Torah and not its enemy. And there is that duty to say a blessing.

I found hints to a solution in two other commentaries. The first, the Sephardi commentary *Me'am Lo'ez* that we studied two years ago for our weekly Torah portion group, says that the concern here is in forgetting one's learning. But why would interrupting study to notice a tree be tied to forgetting?

Then there is the Ashkenazi insistence that Rabbi Yaakov, who noted this concern, was the father of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, who was the teacher of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, author of the Mishnah.

Aha! I recall the image of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi who had those who memorized chains of Jewish law, the *tanna*, recite for him as he edited the Mishnah. Until that time, it was *Torah She Baal Peh*, the Oral Torah or, more literally, the Torah that we had memorized because that was how it was preserved.

And that brings me back to my mother and the practice of memorizing poems. When you know something by heart, what do you absolutely not want to do? You do not want to stop your recitation, as that will cause you to mess up.

And so our mystery is solved. In the time when Torah was studied by reviewing long lines of memorized *halachot*, interrupting for any purpose could lead to forgetting. That was the world of Rabbi Jacob.

But for us today, it's better to lean on Maimonides, who reminds us that the natural world and its complexity points us toward a deeper appreciation, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, who focuses on wonder as the formative religious outlook.

Thus, the psalmist reflected:

> When I gaze to the skies and meditate on Your creation—
> on the moon, stars, and all You have made,
> I can't help but wonder why You care about mortals—
> human sons and daughters—
> specks of dust floating about the cosmos.

Perhaps if we see ourselves thus in the universe as specks of dust floating about the cosmos, we can adopt a more spiritual outlook and take our appropriate place in the world of creation.