

# The Delicate Balance in Creation

Rabbi Edward Davis

RIETS Class of 1970

Rabbi, Young Israel of Hollywood

Today is the anniversary of the creation of man. As we advance intellectually and learn more about nature and the facets of God's creation, we, in turn, learn more about Hashem. The Rambam, in *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 2:2, states that the way to know God is by researching the nature around us and learning more about biology and science. This will help us know God, come to love him greater, and is a fulfillment of a mitzvah.

In our pursuit of knowledge, we have ascertained that planet Earth is located approximately 93 million miles from the sun. Here too, the phenomenon of creation is astounding. If the earth were 91 million miles from the sun, we would all burn up. If the earth were 95 million miles from the sun we would all freeze to death. So the mere calculation of the distance from the sun brings us to a further awareness of the beauty and accuracy of God's creation. Consider where we reside. If we ascend 15,000 feet, we will find a lack of oxygen, and we would require assistance to sustain life. 15,000 feet is not a long distance. That's less than 3 miles. Even I can walk 3 miles, although walking them uphill, to ascend, would test my endurance. But the 3 miles is a short distance to realize that beyond that distance would threaten my ability to breathe and hence my ability to live. Again, we find that what God created here on this planet to sustain life was created with restrictions and limitations in order that life be preserved.

This is what I call the *daled amot* - the four cubits of life. In halachah, the rabbis often refer to the dimension of the human being as being four cubits. That's how much space we occupy. Traveling beyond our *daled amot* is beyond our safety zone. I attempt now to analyze the *daled amot* – the four cubits of a Jew.

We spend a great deal of time exploring. Mankind has explored outer and inner space. Both forms of exploration have brought us knowledge and have discovered for us vital information. In conquering inner space, we explore the planet upon which we live. For the Jew, the exploration of inner space is the domain in which he could sustain Jewish life.

Consider for a moment the land mass of Eretz Yisrael. When the first Jewish settlements in the modern period were developed, they were faced with the harsh reality that the land had not been occupied. There were physical concerns such as swamp lands that produced malaria. These lands needed to be developed and cleared, so that civilized life could be nurtured. With great

success, the coastal plain between Tel Aviv and Haifa became inhabited with Jewish communities. The next area which was developed and will see now a radical, vigorous approach is the Negev. The Negev offers tremendous challenge as we turn arid land into fertile productive land. The use of greenhouses and hydroponics is successful and at the same time emphasize the extreme problems of fresh water for the region.

By accepting a Palestinian state within the biblical land of Israel, our *daled amot* got smaller. Unlike any other country of the world, Arab countries, and especially the Palestinian area, will prefer to be *Judenrein* – without Jewish settlements. Hence, the question of Eretz Yisrael also fits into the scope of the discussion of the delicate nature of creation, in this case the creation of Eretz Yisrael.

A Jew also has another dimension, a non-physical one – a spiritual *daled amot*, where he finds also that his area of sustenance is limited. If a Jew bends too far and reaches beyond his *daled amot*, he will lose his Jewish identity. This has happened over and over again and it has happened in different areas here in the United States of America. I remember years ago, living in Richmond, Virginia, which is one of the oldest Jewish communities of America. It was one of six Jewish communities that sent a congratulatory letter to the first president, George Washington. That original colonial Jewish community was primarily Sephardic and by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those original Jews were no longer Jewish. All descendants of the colonial Jewish Virginia community had converted to Christianity some time leading up the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That's what I mean that the Jew can bend, but unless he secures the position and understands and recognizes the limitation of his own *daled amot*, he jeopardizes his Jewish identity.

Think of a rubber band. I can stretch it only so far before it breaks. I can stretch it on two sides. On one side I reach into the area away from the religious into the secular subject. But I have to understand that if I sacrifice ritual and halachah and stretch out in that direction, I need to know the limitation that can sustain this stretch.

I also contend that there is a limitation to how far one stretches it on the other side as well. Because I believe that it can break on the other side too.

I want to expand my rubber band safely in both directions. I do not believe that a Jew should be isolated in the Beit Midrash. I believe he should carry his Torah and expand the Beit Midrash. His Torah has to be portable.

I remember as a child growing up in Washington, DC, when we would get on the public bus to go to school, in the back of the bus was an Orthodox observant Jew who sat there with his briefcase and was learning Gemara as he traveled all the way down from our neighborhood to the Navy Department where he worked. This was Alvin Radkowsky, who died in 2002 after living the last 30 years of his life in Eretz Yisrael. Dr. Radkowsky, along with Admiral Hyman Rickover, were truly the fathers of the nuclear navy. Dr. Radkowsky was the chief scientist of the Bureau of Ships Nuclear Propulsion Division and conducted key work on the world's first nuclear submarine, the Nautilus which was launched in 1954. And there he was on our bus every day, in the back, wearing his yarmulke. It was only around the age of bar mitzvah that I found out who this was. One day I went over to speak to him, and he showed me what was in his

briefcase. In his briefcase he had a Chumash, a Siddur, a bottle of wine, and a box of matzah. This was his emergency Shabbos kit just in case the Navy needed to send him on a scientific mission some place else in the world. He was always prepared and no matter how deeply invested he was in the field of nuclear science, he never stretched the rubber band too far. He understood and recognized that his *daled amot* can be expanded on both sides, but it was he who would balance both ends. For him, there was never a problem of polarization because he was the Jewish mind and heart of the synthesis of a Beit Midrash and a nuclear submarine.

It is amazing to me, decades later, how the image of this man sitting on the back of the bus would still be meaningful to me at a time when I have grandchildren. Look what he teaches us. He taught us that when a person is active in the pursuit of knowledge, he recognizes with a deep appreciation the gift that God has given us – the gift of creation. The world is in our hands and we develop it. We develop it and at no time do we lose sight of who we are and why we are placed on this earth. Kudos to Dr. Alvin Rodkowsky for the lessons he taught many of us and not with what he said but rather how he lived his life. He made a great contribution, not just to this country, but to the world. But it is an understanding of what can be accomplished when we as Jews apply ourselves into understanding creation.

We live in a tumultuous time and a rubber band can break at any time. As we seek the appreciation of God's gift, we need to understand it in a way that *Ahavat Hashem*, the love of God, will be deeply rooted within us and in following generations so that our *daled amot* and our rubber band become larger, stronger, and the area within becomes safe and secure. May this year be a year of shalom and *brachah* for all of Israel. May it be a year where more Jews recognize the need to understand Jewish identity and nurture it in a way that we will serve Hashem and earn His blessing.