

# Documents

## A Jewish Believer

*Professor German Branover, a physicist of world repute, describes his discovery of the Jewish faith as a "miracle". Dissatisfied with Dialectical Materialism – an imprisoning system which stunts man's growth, in his view – he began reading the works of Aristotle, Plato, modern existentialists and various idealist philosophers until, through a study of Jewish history and experience, he found "the key to the puzzle of mankind" (see interview in The Jewish Observer, February, 1973, p. 3). In 1971 he applied for a visa to emigrate to Israel and, as a result, lost his post at the Riga Academy of Sciences. Eventually, after taking part in a 3-day protest fast, after many threats from the authorities and a number of days spent in prison, he emigrated to Israel in December 1972. The following extracts have been translated from his book Iz Glubin ("De Profundis"), published in New York.*

(pp. 44-45)

We do not know and shall never find out the origin of the world, nor why it exists and what it is – just as we shall not find out where we ourselves come from, nor what and why we are. But we do know that the world or Nature exists beyond us, inside and over us in its own grandeur, diversity, complexity, harmony, regularity and infinity. We do know that Nature is unified, omnipresent, infinite – and only in it and thanks to it we ourselves exist and taste the joy of being. This knowledge, when it has reached the utmost clarity and tangibility, is the greatest blessing that has been bestowed upon us. In understanding one's own place there is true greatness, in the differentiation between the accessible and the inaccessible there is real power, in an awareness of the highest reasoning on earth there is true pride, and in an intelligent perception of the world there is true knowledge, which gives rise to happiness.

Now let us open the Book of Books, let us delve into the texts of the prayers for the Sabbath and festivals. We very soon realize that previously we were forcing an open door, and that the fruits of our reasoning were long ago anticipated – moreover in such depth, in such a form and in such language, which we could not have thought of. Only, instead of the word Nature, which we used in our discussions, here is written – GOD. Here we read that God is one, omnipresent, incorporeal and infinite. We read that in God is the essence of all things, in Him is the beginning and end of all that is on earth, in God are the causes of all causes and the laws for all laws. We read about the grandeur and wisdom in the world's structure, about the endless joy in contemplating it, the infinite delight in enjoying it physically and the even greater delight of enjoying it spiritually. We read about tremendous gratitude towards God and awe before Him.

(pp. 51-52)

The spirit of man in ancient times was simple, spontaneous and responsive. He perceived nature, felt it and tried to grasp it.

As thousands of years passed, people became more subtle. But all the animation of the soul was suppressed. The soul was clothed in the motley rags of countless categories and concepts which people themselves created – and it stopped feeling. People sank under ranks, jobs, titles, duties, rights, rules, forms, merits, penalties, permits, fashions, authorities, profits, losses, power, weakness, respect, contempt, and thousands of other absurd things which they thought up.

From childhood they are taught to gain an understanding of all these things, to get upset over them, to derive inspiration from them, to be grieved – and the ancient feeling for Nature falls into decay, disappears, and becomes an atavism, just as a sharp sense of smell and hearing have become an atavism. If a beast from the forest nowadays catches smells and sounds a thousand times better than man, this is no misfortune, for the appropriate apparatus can supplement the gift of these sensations; but nothing can supplement the loss of the ability to perceive nature. And here we must confess that man has hopelessly yielded his supremacy to animals, which, even in our time, undoubtedly inherently possess, in their own distinctive way, a “feeling for Nature”. In man only the most primitive remnants of this feeling have been preserved: this is shown in the influence of weather over mood and in the fact that some poets and artists derive inspiration from landscapes etc. Man has lost the ability to fall into meditation and contemplation after one glance at the wonder of an emerald blade of grass, after physical contact with a warm, fragrant breeze; he has lost the ability to timidly touch with a thought the beginnings, depths and utmost heights of the world and to experience a sweet and rather frightening trembling in his whole being, because for a moment he understood, experienced and grasped the world and himself in it. Man’s soul with its animation, man’s free and pure mind, undefiled by the poison of vulgar materialism, have been deadened.

(pp. 80-81)

The world into which we have all come is magnificent. It is filled with delicate and thrilling colours, with alluring smells and caressing sounds. Fragrant, sweet fruits in the forests and gardens, berries ripe with the juice of wine, a smooth and virgin carpet of grass and flowers.

The sun, which supports all life, is caring and untiring. It is golden and oppressive at midday, playing with the dew in the morning, pensive and almost melancholy in the evening as it glides over the green face of the earth, drawing forth nectar from the flowers and an emerald reflection from the leaves.

Fresh, gay and sweet-smelling breezes move to and fro. Sparkling streams of water are clean and inviting.

Love and birth in a sunny world.

Bathed in moisture, impregnated by the generous sun, exhausted by its abundant caresses, the earth gives birth to ripe cornfields. From flower to flower the bee carries the wonder of new life, concealed in the yellow pollen. The air is filled with the sound of the love of birds. A fearless mother keeps her young ones in their forest lair. It is a wonderful world, and you gasp in amazement at it. God is infinitely wise. Sweet tears come into your eyes. Gratitude for the

perfection of the world, for the joy of being, of knowing, fills the soul to the full and overflows in inspired prayer.

Spring thunders with a young recklessness and with the joy of life; then comes the fruitful summer; then the autumn, filled with quiet, leisurely meditations. The grass and trees have done all that they must do in a year and they have time to simply take their ease undisturbed in the caressing sun before the sleep of winter. Man is happy too when he experiences his own autumn, as these trees and grass. Sad is the man who completes his course without even having noticed the true ecstasy of living, without having sensed Nature and come to know God.

Of all the pleasures given to man, the most powerful, the most steadfast and the highest is inspiration. Created by thought, it gives birth to thought and action. Animals are blissfully happy, enjoying the gifts of Nature, they shudder from sweetness, feeling themselves to be part of it. This bliss and this trembling are also accessible to man, but he is given even more. He is given the ability to perceive the grandeur and wisdom in the world's structure, of filling his entire soul with gratitude for this possibility, of wishing for himself and his offspring a still deeper and more complete knowledge, of striving to dedicate his life to the realization of this desire. Prayer is born in his soul. This realization, this gratitude, this desire, this striving and this prayer together create inspiration. Worldly affairs and relations with other people become meaningful and noble if a man is moved by inspiration. In it is the taste of all tastes, the sweetness of all sweetnesses, the ecstasy of all ecstasies.

#### *Fragments.*

(p. 83)

It is strange that after all the cries of "science disproves religion", all the sciences now could not lead more directly to the basic truths of a religious worldview.

(p. 91)

To understand and feel the impotence of science in the field of knowledge and to break with materialism – this is the first step towards religion, but it is perhaps also the easiest step. Subsequent moves can appear more difficult. For example, great efforts are called for in the transition from the sceptical and haughty attitudes, instilled by all one's education and upbringing, towards ancient sacrifices to a realization of the true meaning and lofty nature of this act. A man needs to work hard before harmony reigns in his soul.

(p. 97)

One might imagine the following scheme for the enlightenment of a man from faith in science, of a man with a contemporary worldview:

- (1) A realization of the truth that science only gives the correlation of phenomena, but is helpless before their essence.
- (2) An understanding of the grandeur and wisdom of the Creator, who has established a world in harmony and continuously upholds its existence.
- (3) Worship before the Creator.
- (4) An understanding that the aim, the justification and the essence of the world is in the Torah.
- (5) The deepest and most joyful knowledge is simple faith.