

**“The Woods Are Lovely, Dark and Deep”:  
Reading a Poem by Robert Frost**

**Based on a *sicha* by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein**

What is the proper way to relate to an artistic creation? This question is frequently raised by students of literature, and it concerns yeshiva students as well. Some hold that as readers, we should treat a poem as a self-contained entity. Of course, we know that the poem has a historical background: it stems from the poet’s personality and experience, from the cultural and societal context in which it was written – but all that doesn’t interest us. We focus completely on the poem, the literary creation, as an isolated entity. Conversely, many notable academics have argued that we cannot hope to understand an artistic creation without first becoming familiar with the artist’s biography, psychology, and native culture. There are strong arguments in both directions – and, of course, the correct path is to find a balance between the two extremes. Time constraints dictate that we cannot fully analyze Frost’s poem using the latter method; nevertheless, I shall offer a few words to provide a rough idea of the man, the period and the place that brought about this poem.

Robert Frost lived from 1874 to 1963. I met him in his old age in 1956. He resided in Vermont, New England – a rustic, quiet, peaceful place, far removed from the noise, pollution, stress and excitement produced by the Industrial Revolution. Frost’s poetry reflects this: the distance from the city provides an opportunity to re-examine man’s relation to his original, natural environment. Let us now turn our attention to one of his most celebrated poems.

**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (1923)**

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound’s the sweep  
Of easy winds and downy flake.

The woods are lovely dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

The poem is short, its subject unexceptional. However, Frost blatantly holds back significant information – which has an unsettling effect. The title “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” presents the scene. The narrator stops near a forest, on a snowy evening, to watch the “woods fill up with snow.” He seems suspended in the present. From where has he come? Where is he going? The Talmud (*Shabbat* 5b) distinguishes between two different types of “stops.” Some stop “to shoulder their burden” before continuing on their way; others stop “in order to rest.” The former stop is merely a means to an end; the Talmud doesn’t consider it a real standstill, unlike the latter stop.<sup>1</sup> The same physical pause may take on an entirely different meaning, depending on the intention behind it. Why has this man stopped?

The scene is one of absolute human loneliness. It is bleak; as far as the eye can see, there is but a white expanse of fallen snow. It is “the darkest evening of the year,” midwinter. It is silent; the only sound is the “the sweep / Of easy winds and downy flake.” There are no people, no lights, no sounds, no comfort – just the narrator, alone. Presumably, the place from which he departed was less lonely. Somewhere in the distance lie farmhouses; a village is mentioned. These are not metropolises; they are not exactly crammed with bustling activity. Nevertheless, they have a certain human quality, which further emphasizes his present absolute solitude.

Yet this isolation from human society is immediately violated. “Whose woods these are I think I know.” What does nature know of ownership? The primordial forest is ownerless, free to all! The concept of ownership, with the conflicts and disputes that inevitably follow in its wake, is a product of human society. The poem is an internal monologue, a stream of consciousness. Is the question of ownership the first item that pops into the narrator’s head? Frost indicates that even amidst these lonely surroundings, the narrator isn’t completely removed from human culture and history. He has not whole-heartedly abandoned himself to the magical vision before him. No, he comes from society, and will return to it. Yet “the woods are lovely, dark and deep”; he *is* enchanted.

Accordingly, Frost’s use of the word “woods” is understandable. The semantics of “the woods” are far removed from those of “the forest.” A forest is a wild place, ancient and endless. Man cannot impose his will on it. Woods are tamer, more manageable.

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This *sicha* was delivered on *Tu Bi-Shvat* 5768 (2008). It was translated and adapted by Netanel Hacoheh.

<sup>1</sup> For the practical ramifications of this distinction, see there.

Likewise, the village represents an outpost between the city and the wilderness. The woods and village limn the seam between nature and civilization, where the border between them blurs. The poem's narrator is truly suspended between the draw of nature, on the one hand, and his connection to the human society in which he was raised, on the other.

The description of the falling snow is vivid. This is Vermont, famous for its ski slopes. The falling snow, the "downy flake," is dynamic, in perpetual motion. As it falls, it creates a still carpet of immaculate white. The "frozen lake" is its direct opposite, immovable, passive. This duality brings the scene to life. Accordingly, we understand the narrator's reluctance to leave. He doesn't want this magical sight to disappear – yet he will aid in its destruction, trampling the beautiful, virgin snow on his way onwards. These are some of the thoughts that trouble him, as he stands there, alone.

The first three stanzas serve as an exposition to the last stanza, which presents a stark contrast to what has come before. Frost outlines two conflicting worlds, two existential systems. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard portrays the clashing views of "ethical man" and "aesthetic man." Frost expresses this conflict beautifully in his poem. "The woods are lovely, dark and deep" emphasizes the paradoxical beauty of the scene: it is "lovely," the light "L" sounds playing on our lips, but also "dark and deep," the alliterative "D" being stronger, dominant. We learn that the narrator's present situation is but one instant in a busy, bustling life. Yet here he pauses amidst the excitement of his life. His "stopping by woods" reflects the extraordinary magic this natural scene exerts upon his imagination. It is a moment of wonderment. There is something in the woods' beauty that draws him in, lures him, encouraging him to abandon his anxious self-consciousness. Something within him cries: "Are you insane? Where are you going in such a hurry? What's the rush? Stay here, marvel at the glowing darkness, at this simple beauty." Aesthetic man longs to dedicate himself to his senses – not his coarse senses, but rather the aesthetic sense: delicate, beautiful, drawn to all the splendor and majesty of the world.

However, "aesthetic man" represents only one side of Frost. At the conclusion of another poem ("The Lesson for Today," 1942), he provides his own epitaph:

I would have written of me on my stone:

I had a lover's quarrel with the world.

The resonant phrase, "a lover's quarrel with the world," contains several implications. First, Frost is enchanted, in love with the world. But, on the other hand, lovers quarrel when each pulls in a different direction, and then it is hard to find unity and peace. "A lover's quarrel"! This phrase reveals to us the variety and multifaceted nature of Frost's world. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" includes a sensitive description of man's wonderment when he confronts natural beauty. Yet beyond nature, there is another world – political, economic, social. Frost had strong opinions regarding the issues that occupied this "other world," despite having spent most of his years in Vermont's secluded countryside. When I visited him in 1956, he spouted harsh invective at President Eisenhower. This, too, was an inseparable part of his identity, which must not be overlooked.

This duality, the twin pulls of the aesthetic and the ethical, is reflected in our poem. "But I have promises to keep." What promises? To whom have they been given? There are two possible ways of understanding the significance of these promises. The very demand that a promise be fulfilled is an ethical assertion, and the narrator's sense of obligation is incongruent with his "aesthetic" bent. Alternatively, perhaps the promise has been made to "Ethics" or "Morality" itself. *Morality* demands that we act *morally*, that we further moral interests; this entails that we leave the woods, the snow, and the glowing darkness. Civilization and its governing morality have placed a yoke upon the narrator's neck. He must earn a livelihood, provide for others, and contribute to humanity's great onward march. He must build and create.<sup>2</sup>

Coupled with this moral obligation is a tangible sense of fatigue, expressed in the concluding lines and enhanced by their repetition: "And miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep." The narrator longs to resign himself, to surrender to nature. He wants to remain there, perhaps for an hour or a day, perhaps until the snow melts, perhaps forever. "The day is short and there is much work to be done" (*Avot* 2:15), or in Latin, "*Ars longa, vita brevis*." Creativity is endless, and life is short. Nevertheless, the narrator longs to remain in the snow, by the woods. But he has promises to keep, and miles to go before he sleeps – and this sleep is, of course, death.

I know of few poems that express so forcefully the moral idea that binds us to the *beit midrash*.<sup>3</sup> The narrator's life would have been far simpler had he dismissed the lure of nature: "What's all the fuss? Snow, ice, trees, woods – they are all worthless! We're here today, gone tomorrow. Let's get on with it!" Rubbish can be dismissed without a second thought. But in order to have a "lover's quarrel" with the world, you must first see its value. Frost appreciated the hues and colors of the world. Though the narrator is attracted by the aesthete's passive contemplation, morality's voice within him eventually wins.

So, too, is it with us. It is easy to devote yourself to Torah if you are convinced that everything else is nonsense. Nonsense is easy to give up. But one who sees the beauty in God's creation, who comes to love it, must be strong in order to devote himself to learning Torah. One must not divorce the world, but rather bear in mind one's "lover's quarrel with the world."

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<sup>2</sup> Frost's poetry often mentions apples – apple picking, sorting apples, etc. Christian tradition identifies the apple as the "fruit" eaten by Adam and Eve. That story represents the origin of all moral obligations, the "knowledge of good and evil"; the apple is a symbol laden with meaning.

<sup>3</sup> Although the poem contains no explicit religious references, it can be interpreted in a religious vein. Frost's religious convictions were ambiguous. He once said, "Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee, and I'll forgive Thy great big joke on me," referring in the last clause to the hardships and losses that plagued his life. Nevertheless, Frost had a certain religious bent, and it is therefore possible to explain this poem as a spiritual analogy. The wood's absent owner is God "hiding His face"; morality and aestheticism can be seen as two alternative spiritual paths. This explanation could be developed further, though it cannot be validated without a better understanding of Frost's beliefs.