

Are Judaism and Evolution Compatible?

Parashat B'reishit 5779

October 6, 2018

Rabbi Carl M. Perkins

Temple Aliyah, Needham

I'm sure many of us have heard about the child who comes home from Hebrew School, and his father asks him, "What did you learn today?" So the kid tells him: "A long time ago, a group of Israelis was held captive in Egypt. They broke out of jail in the middle of the night, commandeered some Egyptian jeeps and headed for the Red Sea. There, they were surrounded. But they set off some smoke grenades so the Egyptians couldn't see where they were, and an Israeli army commando team put down a pontoon bridge so they could scurry across it to safety. They raced across with the Egyptians close on their heels. Once the Israelis made it across, they blew up the bridge, and they were able to escape into the Sinai desert."

"What?" the father replied. "What is going on in that school?! Did they *really* tell you that that's what happened?!" The child looks at his father and said "No, not really. But if I told you what they said *really* happened, you'd never believe it!" (With thanks to Rabbi Foster Kawaler)

Just this past week, the Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded to three scientists. One of them is Dr. Frances Arnold of Caltech, only the fifth woman to be awarded a chemistry Nobel Prize.

Now, even if you once studied chemistry in high school or college as I did, you might be wondering: What's new in chemistry? After all, we have the periodic table, which has been around for a while, we have the various substances on the planet that have long been known and well-understood. What possible new research could be worthy of a Nobel Prize?



Well, Dr. Arnold won her award this year for her research using evolution to design and create molecules. It's called, "**Directed Evolution.**"

Dr. Arnold found a way to harness the natural evolutionary process of mutation, that goes on all the time on the molecular level, to push molecules to evolve in the way she wanted them to, at a faster pace than they would otherwise. She took certain molecules that catalyzed certain reactions imperfectly, and nudged them along a particular pathway so that they would work more efficiently--speeding up the process that, were it to occur naturally, would have taken a long, long time. And the result of such directed evolution is the creation of molecules that can enhance human life tremendously.

Today we read Parashat Bereshit, the portion of the Torah that purports to tell us how the world was created, and how the various species came to be. Is there anything in the Biblical account about evolution, about one species evolving into another species? Is there anything there about molecules naturally becoming different molecules? Not that I can see. Yes, simpler creatures are created first; then more complex ones; and finally, human beings. But there's nothing about one species turning into another. There's nothing about genetic mutations or natural selection. And I don't, of course, see anything about molecules at all.

No, instead, we see creation by divine fiat. God says, "Let the seas swarm with fish." (Genesis 1: 20-21) And so they did. "Let us make human beings in our image." And it was so. This is a portion, remember, that includes the world being created in seven days, God forming the first woman out of the first man's rib, and a talking snake. How can we even talk about Dr. Arnold directing evolution and the Bible's creation stories in the same breath?

There are a number of ways that typically people have reacted to the inconsistencies between classical religious approaches to the world, on the one hand, and contemporary scientific ones, on the other. One way is to dismiss or to mock one or the other.

I hope that at least some of us have read or seen the movie of that great play, "*Inherit the Wind*," which dramatizes the so-called Scopes Monkey trial in the

early 1920s.¹ A science teacher has lost his job because he taught evolution. In the streets of the town, the religious establishment condemns, disdains and mocks those who accept the theory of evolution, while in the courtroom, the defense attorney conducts a withering, devastating cross-examination of Matthew Harrison Brady (the character who represents William Jennings Bryan, the opponent of evolutionary theory and the champion of what we would today call “creationism”) exposing his inability to reconcile contradictions in the Biblical text and revealing for all to see his close-minded religious perspective.

By the way, lest any of us believe that those battles are behind us, guess again. There are plenty of jurisdictions in the United States in which educators continue to have to fight to include evolution in the curriculum. I am part of an inter-denominational group of clergy committed to supporting the teaching of science -- *real* science, not pseudoscience -- in our schools. Called “The Clergy Letter; Evolution Weekend”, it’s an effort to fight the anti-scientific views of creationists. This remains a major issue within some branches of Protestantism, even to this very day.

Within Judaism, fortunately, for most of us, evolution no longer bears the frightening, anti-religious label it once had. Yes, there are still some Jews and Jewish leaders in insular, pre-modern Jewish communities who consider it totally scandalous, heretical and, obviously, therefore untrue. But most Jewish leaders, even many within the Orthodox world, understand that evolution need not pose a conflict with Judaism.

The reason is simple, but it’s extremely important to state, and to repeat, again and again and again: Although we Jews have long revered the Bible; we have chosen to read it **metaphorically**, not **literally**.

Long, long ago, Jewish readers recognized that there are many conflicts within the Biblical text, thereby calling its reliability as a historical record into question. And they recognized that the Biblical text doesn’t always seem to align with what human beings know to be true. And while the explanations that Jewish interpreters

¹See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scopes_Trial .

offered weren't quite those of modern critical historical thinkers, still, they recognized that one text can yield a variety of legitimate interpretations. They still read the text **seriously** and even **reverently**, but not necessarily **literally**.

But in the broader society, even ninety years after the Scopes trial, there are still plenty of people who view the Bible's creation stories as literally true, and therefore refuse to consider the theory of evolution, because it is inconsistent with that theory.

I encourage you to see the documentary film, "Religulous" starring Bill Maher. At one point, Bill Maher interviews Dr. Francis Collins, the scientist who headed the human genome project. Maher is a very funny man, and also a passionate atheist. Collins is a brilliant man, and also a deeply religious Christian. Maher says about Collins, "He is a man who actually believes in talking snakes."

Now, I must say, if being religious means that you have to believe in talking snakes, count me out. On the other hand, although I don't believe that snakes literally talk, I think that there's a lot to learn from a tale in which a snake talks.

That's why I don't like the Bill Maher film--because the way he views the world, you're either religious and moronic, or secular and supremely intelligent. Sometimes, it seems as though he goes out of his way to make religious people seem ridiculous (whence the title of the film). But, let's face it, almost any fervently held belief can be mocked. The fact is, there are many men and women of faith who also appreciate and promote science.

I must say: I can't think of many topics more important, more worth talking about in synagogue on this week, when we are once again beginning our reading of the Torah, than this. *So many people have the wrong idea about traditional religious faith!* So many people believe that all "religious" people believe to be true things that aren't. That, believe it or not, is false.

My perspective is this: We have brains. We are intelligent creatures. We have brains for a reason: to reason. We owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to our Creator to use those brains to figure out how the universe works. To determine the

laws of nature. To make use of the laws of nature to help humankind. One of those laws of nature is the natural process of natural selection, otherwise known as evolution. It's been observed in the world, and it shouldn't be disturbing to acknowledge that.

What that means is that when it comes to whether evolution should be taught in the schools, we Jews have more in common with atheists than we do with religious fundamentalists. We are in favor of "truth, even unto its innermost parts," as the Brandeis University seal puts it. We don't put our brains on hold when they lead us to question the Bible. Instead, we let them take us wherever we need to go.

As the Clergy Project puts it:

It is possible to be inspired by the religious teachings of the Bible while not taking a literalist approach and while accepting the validity of science including the foundational concept of evolution. It is not the role of public schools to indoctrinate students with specific religious beliefs but rather to educate them in the established principles of science and in other subjects of general knowledge.

What this teaches us is that the real divide in our society is not between those who call themselves religious and those who claim to be irreligious. The real divide is between those who accept, respect and value the results of scientific, empirical observation, and those who do not. There are "religious" folks on both sides of that divide.

Let me conclude by saying that just as Dr. Arnold was able to use directed evolution, so too should we direct the evolution of our own thinking on the nature of the Bible. We don't need to read the Bible literally. And I believe that we shouldn't. We don't need to read the Bible as a scientific or journalistic or historical account of how the world was created. And we shouldn't. Instead, we should read the Bible as a source of much wisdom, as the core text on which all subsequent Jewish texts are built.

As the Talmud puts it about the Torah, “Turn it again and again, for everything is in it.” Is that literally true? Hardly. No. Literally, it’s false. But religiously, it’s true. There is so much in the Torah that can enhance our lives and identities. We owe it to ourselves as Jews and as human beings to open our sacred books and to explore those connections for many years to come.

Shabbat shalom!