

## Are Curiosity and Religiosity Compatible?

*Parshat Bereishit*

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**Curiosity**—the subject of the *dvar torah* that Daniel Epstein, who is celebrating becoming a bar mitzvah this morning, just shared with us—is a great topic to reflect on during this week in which we are once again studying the first *parashah* of Genesis.

This is so, not only because curiosity figures in the text itself, but also because, stepping back, we can say that this *parashah* seeks to address among the most basic of philosophical questions, namely, “Where did we come from?” Not just “Where did *I* come from?” but, “Where did *we* come from?” When and how did human life arise on this planet? When and how did life in general—not necessarily *human* life—arise?

The Torah, it seems, is seeking to address this question. Note that I say that the Torah is seeking to “*address*” these questions, not to “*answer*” them. I say that because, if the Torah were seeking to *answer* them, we’d expect it to be clear and unambiguous. But it’s not. It’s not clear at all.

I will say more about that, but for now let me focus on the fact that the Bible addresses these questions. And that might lead us to wonder whether there’s anything wrong with pursuing other approaches to these questions.

I have a friend named Michael Zimmerman. Actually, I can’t really call him a friend because I’ve never met him, but I have long respected and admired him and I support his work.<sup>1</sup>

For the last ten years, Michael Zimmerman has been single-mindedly devoted to one thing: organizing, every year, a weekend on which ministers talk about evolution.<sup>2</sup>

That’s it. Now you might not think that that’s a lot. But it is.



Because the ministers in a wide range of denominations are reluctant to speak about evolution; they're afraid that others will think of them as heretics, or will actually excommunicate them.

That's not a trivial concern, and it's well-grounded. In many denominations, the Bible is seen as a source of not just *religious* doctrine but *scientific* knowledge. And if a scientist comes up with an answer that doesn't agree with the Bible's truths, the science must be wrong, and to teach it as though it is true is sinful.

And so there are many jurisdictions in our country where the teaching of science is threatened because people believe that it is contrary to their religious faith to teach it. I consider this anti-intellectualism a serious threat to our freedom.

And so every year when Professor Zimmerman sends out his request to me and to other faith leaders, I send in my response, and I devote one weekly sermon to talking about evolution, and about how studying evolution can be seen as entirely consistent with religious faith.

I remember how grateful I was to learn that the religion that I grew up with—the religion that we try to teach here, namely, Conservative Judaism—respects curiosity and encourages it, rather than seeking to suppress it.

Sure, in Judaism, there have always been contrary voices. That's not surprising. Judaism is a three-thousand-year-old tradition. And it's known for sustaining, and even regarding highly, contrary opinions. And so it isn't surprising that, along with Judaism's generally tolerant and even encouraging approach to following one's curiosity, there are voices counseling caution.

Perhaps the most famous and the most apt is the midrash in Bereishit Rabbah that asks why the Torah begins with the letter *bet* (ב). Indeed, the first letter of the Torah is not just any *bet*; it's a *big bet*.

ב

One answer goes right to the point: The letter bet is shaped so that it is closed on three sides, and open only in the direction of the text itself (that is, toward the left). In the same way, the midrash argues, we should restrain ourselves from asking questions about what lies above, what lies below and what came before the Torah; we should only ask about the Torah itself.

I never liked that midrash—or, rather, I never liked its message. I liked the beautiful way it captured one particular perspective toward inquiry, but I never did, and still don't, agree with that perspective.

There are other voices that agree with this skepticism toward skepticism.

For example, one shouldn't study Jewish mysticism until one is 40 years old. And certain Biblical passages – including this one – shouldn't be taught in public, where they might be misunderstood or they might lead one astray; they should be taught in small groups, which allow for questions and answers and a full exploration.

But for the most part, Judaism has encouraged free inquiry. It's encouraged pursuing one's curiosity.

The best evidence for that is the great reverence toward truth in our culture.

Truth (in Hebrew, אמת, pronounced, *emmet*) isn't just the Hebrew word that appears on the seal of a prominent Jewish school in our area (namely, Brandeis University).



Truth is “the seal of God.”<sup>3</sup>

One beautiful Talmudic teaching on that theme makes it clear that we should never say in prayer what we don't believe.<sup>4</sup>

But then the question could and should be asked, What then about the Bible? What about the story we read today? Who's to say that we shouldn't take that story literally, and thus consider any other explanation for how we came to be on this earth to be contrary to our faith?

The answer is simple: The Bible is not a science textbook. The Bible is seeking to teach us important moral and religious truths, not scientific truths.

The Bible begins not with one but with *two* stories of how we came to be on this planet. And they're not entirely consistent with one another.

The first chapter of the Bible (through Genesis 2:3 or 2:4a), presents one version. The part we read today (beginning with Genesis 2:4) presents another. In the first one, God does all the speaking; the human being (created, incidentally, in the image of God), is silent. In the second one, the human being (created not in the image of God but out of the soil of the earth) is far from silent.

In the first story, there's lots of water around from the very beginning. Trees and shrubs are created on the third day. In the second story, it seems that the shrubs and trees haven't yet appeared because there's no rain.

Now, I'm not, of course, saying that you can't reconcile or harmonize these two accounts (after all, two thousand years of rabbinic commentary did a nice job of doing that), but they certainly come from two different perspectives.

I would argue, from this and other similar texts, that the Torah is not seeking to suppress our curiosity. Indeed, I'd argue that it is actually encouraging it.

For the Torah is a literary work. The Torah communicates in parables and poetry. And from parables and poetry you don't learn how old the earth is, or how and when and why human beings arose on it.

And so, it's OK to go to a cosmology textbook; it's OK to go to a paleontologist. Indeed, that is a good thing to do.

We believe in a Judaism that is both open-minded, and also loyal to the best that our tradition has to offer. Some would say that it's too open-minded; others would say that it's too loyal to tradition. That's inevitable.

But I believe it is entirely well-grounded to maintain that Judaism in which I believe holds curiosity and the pursuit of truth in the highest esteem.

**Pursuing one's curiosity is essential to acquiring a mature faith.**

Let me conclude by flipping that midrash from Bereshit Rabbah on its head. We shouldn't just be curious about what's above and below and beyond the Torah; we should also be curious about our Torah.

Just like the rabbis said about the Torah: *hafoch bo* (“turn it, and turn it again.”)

Like we say about the earth: Turn it and turn it again, and don't stop seeking to learn about it. Because that's why you were created.

Shabbat Shalom!

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Zimmerman, PhD, is a professor at Evergreen State College in Olympia, WA. (See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Zimmerman\\_\(biologist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Zimmerman_(biologist)) .) He is the founder of the Clergy Letter Project. (See: [http://www.theclergyletterproject.org/Backgd\\_info.htm](http://www.theclergyletterproject.org/Backgd_info.htm) .)

Note: In my oral presentation of this sermon, I incorrectly identified him as a minister. To the best of my knowledge, Professor Zimmerman is not a minister.

<sup>2</sup> Originally, the annual event was known as Evolution Sunday. More recently, in order to be more inclusive, its name was changed to Evolution Weekend. There are rabbis who participate, but most of the participants are ministers.

<sup>3</sup> B. Shabbat 55a. It is also the “seal” of the creation story. The three letters, aleph, mem and tav appear together at both the beginning and the end of the creation story. See Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei Luchot Ha-Brit, Parashat Breishit Torah Or*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> B. Yoma 69b.