

*Intelligent Design vs Evolution*  
*Bereshit 2005*

Just the other day I met with a young woman in my office who is currently involved in the process of studying with me to convert to Judaism. She told me about an interesting experience she had on Yom Kippur in an out of town synagogue. A woman led the martyrology part of the liturgy, using contemporary readings, including stories from the Holocaust she had compiled and composed.

No sooner did she sit down and finish leading this series of very moving selections, than another individual rose to the bema and addressed the congregation. From the very same podium he condemned the whole notion of a martyrology and morbid readings about the Holocaust and Jewish suffering playing such a central role in the service, blaming it for being the reason why there are no young people in the synagogue.

The young woman was somewhat surprised and taken aback by the two conflicting orientations being presented consecutively and wasn't sure what to make of it.

I looked at her, and said, "Welcome to being Jewish."

Part of our strength and source of our vitality is our passion for debating ideas. We are not a people who takes things lightly. Nor are we a monolithic people with one approach to anything. Everything is subject to debate and interpretation.

More often than not there is more than one way to interpret an issue. Although we have a Talmud, characteristically, it records debates and discussions, often leaving out the conclusions or consensus. While we do have a code of law, which attempts to regulate Jewish practice, the Shulhan Aruch, we do not have an authoritative encyclopedia to turn to when it comes to our opinion on various issues. Finally, there is no central rabbinic authority designated and accepted and recognized as being able to speak on behalf of the Jewish people. (I tried applying for the job, but there was no place to send my resume.)

As you might imagine, all of this makes it rather difficult when someone asks a question which begins with the words, "Rabbi, What does Judaism say about....."

What better time than this week, when we read about the creation of the world, therefore, to discuss the question a number of people have recently posed to me, "What does Judaism say about evolution and intelligent design?" The question they really are asking is -- Are they mutually exclusive?

As recently as yesterday, an article in the paper mentioned a battle in Kansas where controversy reigns over the effort to question the theory of evolution and to introduce the teaching of what is now referred to as intelligent design into the school system.

So people who have recently asked me these questions are asking about much more than just my or Judaism's position on the issue. Inherent in the query is a desire to understand how we should feel about the debate raging in the public sector about the attempts to ban the teaching of evolution. Since fundamentalist Christians support the idea, some people wonder -- are we automatically opposed to it, since our theology usually differs from theirs? But on the other hand, after all, it is our Biblical account of creation they are trying to get into the schools, so maybe we should not be against it. These are some of the dimensions to the problem facing our society.

We must start with the premise that absent a recognized authoritative governing body, it is difficult to answer with one voice what Judaism says about the matter. Nevertheless, not to worry -- that will not prevent me from expressing an opinion.

In fact, since we follow the triennial cycle for reading the Torah, our attention is drawn to the creation story which appears to be a bit different from the first one, in the opening verses of the book of Genesis. An often overlooked fact is that the Bible actually presents several different descriptions and options in regard to the creation of the world. The first one, with which we are familiar is the one that describes the world as having been created in six days. The second story, which we just read describes it very differently.

Here we have woman being created out of Adam's rib. So which is it? Which is the correct story?

Our Bible and our sages in the time of the Talmud and the midrash has a pluralistic approach in which both stories are viewed as compatible, presented side by side. We are not overly concerned with choosing one or the other, or in determining which is correct, or their veracity. They both contain truths and can be seen as complementing each other.

More importantly, our midrash, the compilations of the comments of the rabbis comments on the Bible teach us that woman was created out of Adam's rib so that he would recognize her as equal to him. Elsewhere our midrash teaches that one person was created at the beginning of time and at the beginning of creation in order to teach several lessons. One is the value of a single human life, which is the equivalent of an entire world. The other message is that all mankind stems from a single, common individual, in order to emphasize our commonality and to inspire us to recognize that we are one; that we have much in common and that no one individual or race is superior to another. Another story in the midrash says that God showed Adam all that He had created and said that no being would be created after him because it was now his responsibility to care for the earth and all its creatures. In other words, the rabbis taught that we are stewards of the earth, and God's partner in creation. The world is not yet complete, it is our obligation to do so. We learn from the story of creation the important message that we are all created b'tzelem elohim, in the image of God, and that consequently we should treat each and every human being accordingly, as a creature imbued with the spark of the Divine.

These are but a few of the hundreds upon hundreds of interpretations and comments on the biblical story of creation.

In other words, our rabbis read the Book of Genesis and derived from it a number of important messages about what it is that God wants and expects of us in terms of our interactions with each other. They did not read the text literally, as a scientific text. Rather, they saw it as a means of understanding the ethics of human life and used it as a means of spreading the word about the morals we should strive to live by and to incorporate into our daily lives.

As a result, I have difficulty believing that the Bible was meant to be studied as a scientific text. It should be studied as a great work of literature. It should be studied by those who follow it, in the proper place and setting, as containing many messages that can help us learn how to be better people.

Part of the crux of the whole issue is that the scientist seeks to answer the question, “how.” The Torah, however, while giving a response to this question, is really more concerned with “why”, why we are here, and then with what do we do now that we are here.

Anyone who reads the creation story in the Bible cannot help but be impressed by the orderly, purposeful nature of creation. It was not a chance thing, not a random development of molecules. The opening words shout out, “In the beginning God...”

So as a believing Jew, I do not have any problem with saying that it is possible to believe in the scientific approach, as well as the Torah. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive or contradictory. The biblical story, when read in broad terms reveals an unfolding of the world in a way which progresses from inanimate objects to life, and from the simplest forms of life to the most complex forms. Plant life precedes animal life. Fish and birds predate animals. Interestingly, all of this follows the pattern of development advocated by the evolutionists. Part of what I derive from the biblical account is that creation was not random. But the fact that I believe that does not mean I need to choose between it and the views of modern science.

Each, science and religion, gives us different information and each helps us understand something different about human existence.

I feel I am in good company with this attitude, for no less a sage than Moses Maimonides, the greatest philosopher of all time, expressed the notion that we should always accept the scientific truth of our age. He maintained that since the laws of nature are the will of God, study of the natural sciences can bring us closer to understanding God. He specifically taught that if our knowledge of Torah is contradicted by the scientific teaching of its age, then we must go back and reinterpret the Torah. Since both science and torah are true, inasmuch as both emanate from God, he says when there is a contradiction, the fault must be in how we understand and interpret the Torah.

Israel's first chief rabbi Avraham Kook wrote at the beginning of the 20th century that there is no contradiction between the Torah and the theory of evolution. In his words, "When we penetrate into the essence of this evolutionary elevation we find in it the Godly principles shining with absolute clarity." In the century before that, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote that if the theory of evolution proved to be correct, it would be a testimonial to the wisdom of the Creator.

In other words, it is possible to believe that God created the world in an orderly fashion, and still believe in scientific theory. It is as if evolution supplies details and information not found in the Bible, and the Torah helps to provide answers not offered by the evolutionists. The catch though is that we should become more familiar with the Jewish reading of this week's Torah portion. We need not fear the teaching of scientific thought in science classes. It will not shatter our belief system, nor will it destroy our faith, nor will it undermine our religion.

There may be some who differ with this approach. The current issue of Moment Magazine tells of an Orthodox rabbi whose works are being banned in some quarters because of his advocacy of evolution. Yet he has many supporters in the Orthodox community as well, who would agree with most of what I have articulated this morning and who are upset with the trend to censor such ideas.

I think the real issue is the fear that we not live in a God-less world. What happens when secularism runs amok? As Jews, we have a great deal to offer in this whole discussion and share this concern. Yet it should not require that we compromise truth. Although creationism should not be taught in the public schools or presented as science, that does not mean that there are not important, crucial lessons for us in the Biblical account.

True to our responsibility to be a light unto the nations, it is incumbent upon us to pore over the text in order to learn and discern its teachings about morality and ethics. Once we hear God's intent and discern and appreciate his design, we need to act accordingly. And somehow, we must find a way to incorporate those ethics and teachings into our everyday lives. In so doing, we fulfill the will of our Creator, and bring holiness and light to the world.

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