

## Why Evolution and Judaism are Compatible

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Evolution Weekend - [http://theclergyletterproject.org/rel\\_evolution\\_weekend\\_2013.html](http://theclergyletterproject.org/rel_evolution_weekend_2013.html)

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One day the zoo-keeper noticed that the orangutan was reading two books - the Torah and Darwin's The Origin of Species. In surprise he asked the ape, "Why are you reading both those books"?

"Well," said the orangutan, "I just wanted to know if I was my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."

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Let me end any suspense. Is there an issue with evolution in Judaism? No.

Why not? Because the Torah does not teach us literally how the human was formed; rather about the nature of *being* human. Evolution is an answer to the scientific question: **how** did we come to be? God creating human in God's image is an answer to the religious question: **why** did we come to be? Religion and science are not answers; they are methodologies; they are paths for understanding our world in fundamentally different ways. Science asks: how? And religion asks: why?

Faith and science; doubt and belief all serve the search for truth.

You can study and believe in science and still study and believe in religion. Both use metaphors to reflect an aspect of reality, of truth. For instance, "God is my Shepherd, I shall not want" does not mean we are literally sheep. It expresses a way to imagine the Infiniteness of God in a protective, compassionate image that suggests comfort. It does not need to be proven. It helps us give an answer 'yes' to the question 'why go on?' In this way, religion can be good.<sup>1</sup>

A scientific example: By describing a group of stars in the sky as the Big Dipper does not mean there is really a kitchen utensil in the sky; it gives a helpful way of talking about the relationship of stars in the sky so that when a person is lost, wandering beneath the wide expanse of the stars at night, they can more easily orient themselves by looking in the sky. In this way, science can be good.

Next Tuesday, February 12, is the 204<sup>th</sup> birthday of Charles Darwin. In honor of this occasion, we have joined tonight with over 500 churches and synagogues around the world as part of an effort called "Evolution Weekend."

As described on their website:

*Evolution Weekend is an opportunity for serious discussion and reflection on the relationship between religion and science. An ongoing goal has been to elevate the quality of the discussion on this critical topic, and to show that religion and science are not adversaries. Rather, they look at the natural world from quite different perspectives and ask, and answer, different questions.*

*Religious people from many diverse faith traditions and locations around the world understand that evolution is quite simply sound science; and for them, it does not in any way threaten, demean, or*

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<sup>1</sup> This comparison of the metaphors, and the specific use of Psalm 23 and the Big Dipper come from Judaism, Physics and God: Searching for Sacred Metaphors in a Post-Einstein World, by Rabbi David W. Nelson (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005).

*diminish their faith in God. In fact, for many, the wonders of science often enhance and deepen their awe and gratitude towards God.*

*Along these lines, I have signed onto a rabbinic letter that states the action step:*

*We the undersigned, urge public school boards to affirm their commitment to the teaching of the science of evolution. Fundamentalists of various traditions, who perceive the science of evolution to be in conflict with their personal religious beliefs, are seeking to influence public school boards to authorize the teaching of creationism. We see this as a breach in the separation of church and state. Those who believe in a literal interpretation of the Biblical account of creation are free to teach their perspective in their homes, religious institutions and parochial schools. To teach it in the public schools would be to assert a particular religious perspective in an environment which is supposed to be free of such indoctrination.*

Let's back up. Evolution and Torah are apparently incompatible because one says we were created from apes and one says from nothing, from God's command. If you believe this literally, then evolution is an affront, a blasphemous attack on faith. If you say that the Torah's version is inconceivable, untrue, then it seems the only choice is the rejection of religion in favor of science. I'm suggesting, as many have before me, that evolution and Torah are compatible because they answer different questions. Evolution teaches *how* humans came to be; Torah *why*. How did we evolve over the millennia from apes? Fascinating. Now what? What is our purpose? Why are we here? Ah, we were created in the image of God, thus let us make our life a creative work of art, lifting up the image of God in each person, bringing caring, compassion, equality, justice into this world.

The only way to this understanding is by rejecting a literal reading of Torah. Maimonides said it best, at least most acerbically over 800 years ago in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, a quotation that you can see on the cover of your Shabbat card.

Not everything mentioned in the Torah concerning the *Account of the Beginning* is to be taken in its external sense as the vulgar [common people] imagine. For if the matter were such, the men of knowledge would not have been chary [cautious] of divulging knowledge with regard to it, and the Sages would not have expatiated [written at length] on its being kept secret and on preventing the talk about it in the presence of the vulgar....The correct thing to do is to refrain, if one lacks all knowledge of the sciences, from considering these texts merely with the imagination. One should not act like the wretched preachers and commentators who think that a knowledge of the interpretation of words is science and in whose opinion wordiness and length of speech add to perfection. On the other hand it is obligatory to consider them with what is truly the intellect after one has acquired perfection in the demonstrative sciences and knowledge of the secrets of the prophets.

Rabbi Moses Maimonides (Rambam) – 12<sup>th</sup> century, Spain  
*The Guide of the Perplexed II, chapter 29*  
(p. 346-7 in Shlomo Pines' translation).

Maimonides is clear. You can best understand the world as it is with a PhD. If you don't have one, then don't let your imagination lead you astray; go ask a scientist to help you interpret the origins of the world.

With a little less condescension and owing to my own lack of knowledge in the sciences – despite starting college as a physics major – let me suggest that the answers of Torah and Evolution actually can align remarkably well. Both suggest we have a common ancestor and yet each person is genetically

distinct. Or as we teach metaphorically in the Mishnah<sup>2</sup>, God has made only one mold for humankind, creating each one of us *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image, yet each person is unique. Even though both evolution and Judaism can see each person as unique, the ethical implications may diverge. The concept of "survival of the species" needs the countering *truth* of religion to keep the *truth* of scientific evolution in check.

We are not the first Jews to reconcile science and Torah. We are not the first to wonder about creation in six days and humankind created *ex nihilo*, from nothing.

As early as the book of Psalms, it says that 1000 years are like a day in Your sight, suggesting that we should not think of six days as literally six days. Hundreds of years later after the Roman destruction of the ancient Temple, our rabbis say in the Talmud that there were over 900 generations before Adam was created. Our ancestors wrestled with *how* the world really came to be as much as we do. Their scientific understanding was not as advanced; that is the nature of scientific progress. But their questions were the same which they didn't feel belief in Torah hampered.

Maimonides taught that every description of God in the Torah "speak[s] in the language of man. All these phrases are metaphorical." Even God's name given in Exodus, which means "I was, I am, I will be" – in other words, God exists – is our human approximation of what is ultimately ineffable.

Another way of putting it is that the Torah itself is midrash as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, human striving for answering God's search for us. Torah is not to be taken literally. It is midrash, or in different word, myth. Myth not in the sense of being false, but in the sense that its truth is not in accurately teaching *how* things happened. Rather it teaches the truth of *why*.

Nobel prize winning physicist Murray Gell-Man suggests that we have a choice when thinking about myth.<sup>3</sup> We can look at myth as:

1. Attractive but unscientific theor[y], comforting but false regularities imposed on nature
2. as cultural schemata that help to give identity to societies for better or for worse and
3. as part of the grand search for pattern, for creative association, that includes artistic work and that enriches human life.

By choosing the latter, "the grand search for pattern...that enriches life", is a way of saying why we need religion as much as science.

When our metaphors affirm mystery, lift our spirits and touch our souls, then religion serves as an antidote to fundamentalism and a companion to science. Then Torah gives our lives an answer to why we are here, whether in the laboratory learning new truths to the *mysteries of the universe* or in the sanctuary affirming the wonder of the *universe full of mysteries* on Shabbat.

Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

<sup>3</sup> Judaism, Physics and God, p. xxiv.