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Editor's Thoughts: Nature and Its Discontents

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By: Daniel Shlian

The word "nature" is rich with differing meanings. When a chemist describes something as "natural," a purveyor of organic food products might disagree[i]. One person's proclivity in any number of realms might be described as unnatural by those who do not share them, but is perfectly natural to those who do. Absent a rigorous definition, then, the word loses much of its usefulness. Despite the word's vagueness, for many, "natural" implies something desirable and positive, perhaps idyllic, or "the way things were meant to be." But should it imply desirability?

The twentieth-century English philosopher G. E. Moore described the naturalistic fallacy: it is invalid to conclude that something is good from any of its natural properties.[ii] If something has the quality of being pleasant, that does not make it good. In Moore's view, good is an irreducible property, not derivable from any other properties, just as the concept of "yellow" does not depend on any other concept, neither does the idea of "good."[iii] Later philosophers have disputed Moore's contentions, but as a purely logical tool; relating the good and the natural is not useful.

I am neither an ethicist nor a philosopher, but I will phrase the question in slightly different terms: in a religious worldview wherein creation is a Divine process and nature is put in place by God, is "natural" better? Should we attempt to leave things in the universe the way they are, or are we meant to use the World for our own ends?

Not at all surprisingly, Judaism's sources are not quiet on the topic, but neither do they speak in a unified voice. One reasonable location for proliferation of opinions on the matter is the prohibition forbidding certain hybridizing: crossbreeding animals and plants, and interweaving wool and linen.[iv] The Talmud[v] contends that the latter of these is fundamentally inexplicable by anything other than Divine fiat; Rashi in Leviticus extends this notion to all of the hybrids. Yet Nahmanides,[vi] in a well-known comment, insists there is another reason at hand: "One who combines two species thereby changes and denies Creation, as if he thinks God did not complete His world as necessary, and desires to aid in the creation of the world by adding species."[vii] Nahmanides posits that the unsullied natural order created by God needs no assistance, and further, that any attempt to further the program of Creation is an affront to its Creator.

Other sources, though, view nature as awaiting human completion. An oft-cited midrash[viii] cites a discussion between Quintus Tineius Rufus and Rabbi Akiva in which the Roman provincial governor asks the Mishnaic rabbi whether God's acts are greater than man's. When Rabbi Akiva responds that man's achievements are superior to the Almighty's, he qualifies his assertion by exclaiming that the heavens and earth are external to the question, since they are outside the scope of man's creative abilities. Yet when confronted with the question of circumcision—why would God have male babies born with foreskins, if He desires that the Jews remove them?—Rabbi Akiva eventually offers two solutions. First, at least some natural phenomena are also ideally altered, as demonstrated by the necessary severing of the umbilical cord. Second, the commandments, circumcision included, are given to perfect the Jews.[ix]

Unpacking this dispute sheds some more light on the question than is gained by a cursory reading. The heavens and earth, claims Rabbi Akiva, are not subject to man's dominion. The question of nature versus innovation is only interesting in cases where man's achievements can affect Creation. Anything outside man's reach may be subject to study, but such study only serves as a reminder of man's non-Divine position. That which man cannot even fully investigate is even more subject to this principle.[x]

With the awesome essence of nature reaffirmed, let us analyze the two answers offered by Rabbi Akiva. In the first, he claims that without altering natural phenomena, human life would be impossible. Certain elements of nature pose a threat to humanity's well-being, be they predatory animals, disease, or even a physical connection between child and mother which endures too long. Medicines, vaccines, protection from the elements—in the midrash's presentation, these are unquestioningly accepted as good things, though they violate the "natural order."[xi] But all of these merely prevent harm. The second answer, then—and here I acknowledge I may be reading more into the text than is licensed[xii]—defends improving upon the natural condition as a Divine ideal. Circumcision is not motivated by any specific physical need other than fulfilling the word of God. This positive attitude toward the alteration of nature might not be limited to specific fulfillment of commandments, but could argue for a range of human activity achieving great accomplishments with natural tools.

That the two sources disagree with one another is hardly surprising; the dilemma of whether to leave nature alone or to use it to achieve other ends is not one that is easily resolved. Certainly, God's Creation is to be admired and respected, not destroyed without meaningful purpose. And certainly, *halakhah* occasionally calls upon humanity to transcend nature, both physical and behavioral. But the middle ground is frequently blurry and unclear, subject to any number of value judgments.

With the idea of nature called into some question, please take the time to interact with our writers' strong work on this theme. Matt Lubin's article on Abarbanel pushes the dialectic of this article to a much greater extent than I do here. Mindy Schwartz describes how Hanukkah comprises both historical and agricultural aspects. Ari Adler explains the contours of the Jewish intellectual responses to the theory of evolution. Judy Leserman explores the challenges of *halakhah* after man breaches the atmospheric barrier. And David Selis converses with Rabbi Ozer Glickman on art and aesthetics. Naturally, we believe you will enjoy reading, discussing, and responding.

Daniel Shlian is neither an ethicist nor a philosopher, but he does intend to be a chemist at some point. He is in his third year in Yeshiva College, majoring in chemistry and Jewish studies, and is an Editor-in-Chief of Kol Hamevaser.

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[i] For a helpful understanding of these issues, see http://www.smbc-comics.com/?id=3324

[ii] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: University Press, 1903).

[iii] Interestingly, this extends to Divine commands: to say that God's command makes something good is also a violation of the naturalistic fallacy, as it is not restricted to natural properties. It seems that the intuitive form of the fallacy need not yield this conclusion.

[iv] Leviticus 19, 9

[v] BT Yoma 67b

[vi] Ad loc. Others, including (but not limited to) Rashbam and Abraham Ibn Ezra, agree, though Nahmanides' formulation is most striking.

[vii] Translation my own. Nahmanides also notes that this reason is a mystical one, not a purely logical one.

[viii] Tanhuma (Buber edition), Tazria 7

[ix] Though, of course, Moore would disagree with the assertion that Divine commands are automatically good. I believe we need not seriously set the two in dialogue.

[x] The nature of experience may be one of these epistemologically uninvestigable phenomena. For more on that issue, see David Chalmers, "Facing up to the Hard Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2:3 (1995): 200-219.

[xi] See Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah* Pesahim 4:9 for an excoriation of opinions privileging reliance on Divine assistance over available medication.

[xii] However, it should be noted that the section of the midrash I omitted, on the comparison between unprocessed wheat and bread, may support this point further.

The Natural and Spiritual Light: The Duality of Hanukkah

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January 29, 2019

By: Mindy Schwartz

Idolatry, the single greatest temptation of the ancient Jew, holds the attention of the biblical narrative with a choking grip until the destruction of the first Temple. Rambam explains this obsession as a gradual evolution.[i] When man first bowed to the luminary bodies he did so as an expression of service to God, whom he knew to be the creator of those physical objects. But as time went on, man began to forget that a Creator stood behind the sun and moon, and that to bow to them was to kneel before a Master of a much greater scale. Thus man bowed to the luminaries as his ancestors did before him, and mistook this action as a sign that the luminaries themselves were masters worthy of worship. The slippery slope Rambam sketches helps one understand Judaism's hesitation when it comes to celebrations of nature. However, the Bible does give us a model for these types of celebrations, in the three major festivals that require pilgrimage to the Temple Mount. Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot all take place during a key point in the harvest cycle as outlined in *Sefer Shemot*.[ii] Yet in *Sefer Vayikra*, the Bible also takes care to focus these natural celebrations through the lens of key events in the religious history of the Jewish people.[iii] To those not dependent on an agricultural economy, the importance of the harvest cycle pales when placed beside the glorious miracles of the religious-historical narrative. But, for much of Jewish history, the harvest served as critical feature of daily life, an event of a very different but still almost equal level of importance as the ten plagues, the giving of the Torah, or the booths built in the desert. By instilling the everyday physical reality within the celebration of the sublime, laypeople could connect to these holidays on a personal level. Still, as Rambam points out, the natural and religious-historical perspectives are a delicate pair, one that future generations might have felt wary to replicate. However, the Rabbis recognized the depth that the two outlooks can provide one another, and took pains to emulate this duality when they established the celebration of Hanukkah.[iv]

The Talmud Bavli in tractate *Avodah Zarah* relays a fascinating vignette in the life of Adam, the first man.[v] Adam noticed that days were getting shorter. Dismayed, he began an eight-day fast, sure that the dearth in sunlight was a sign of his impending death sentence from Heaven. Three days after the winter solstice he noticed the day was getting longer, and realized that, rather than observing his own consignment to chaos, he was simply noticing "the course of the world."[vi] He celebrated this realization with an eight-day festival. The rabbis use this story to explain the ancient pagan holidays of Saturnalia and Kalenda, observed eight days preceding and following the winter solstice respectively. Adam established these holidays "for the sake of Heaven," while the heathens repurposed them as

worship of the luminaires themselves.[vii] The Rabbis do not specify when Adam's holidays were corrupted; their main goal was to explain these holidays to Jews who witnessed their observance while living in the Roman Empire. This origin story, focused on the holy intentions of the first man, asks these Jews to reexamine Saturnalia and Kalenda, and, perhaps, with this new nuanced understanding, appreciate them for their holy beginnings and mourn them for their current corruption. These two festivals have been recorded in ancient Roman calendars and are known to have included lighting ceremonies and candles as ritual gifts.[viii] The devolution of Adam's original festivals clearly demonstrates the danger of man celebrating natural elements in praise of God. The Sages might have been tempted to bury these festivals since they signify the slippery slope to which appreciation of nature can lead. Yet it is clear they did not step away from the challenge presented here, choosing to deal in nuance rather than imprecise generalizations.

Using the framework set out by three pilgrimage festivals mentioned in the Bible, the Rabbis attached a religious-historical significance to Kalenda and Saturnalia in order to safely secure God in the natural celebration. The sages determined that the date of Hanukkah, the 25th of Kislev, would serve also as the outlet for the natural celebration of the solstice, as the two calendar dates were so close to one and other. The religious-historical aspect of this holiday, the celebration of the resilient and independent Jewish spirit through the Hasmonean defeat over the oppressive Greek rule, has held such a firm grip on the nation's imagination that the natural celebration with which it was paired has fallen into the background. However unrecognized it is in its own right, the celebration of the light and the winter solstice adds much depth to the themes and character of Hanukkah.

References to Hanukkah are scarce in Tannaitic and Amoraic literature; it is one of the only major holidays that does not have its own tractate of Mishnah devoted to its observance. One of the few references to Hanukkah can be found in *Megillat Ta'anit*, the earliest known Tannaitic document. Rabbi Dr. Binyamin Lau explains *Megillat Ta'anit* as a written record of festive days, established primarily during the Hasmonean dynasty, on which fasting was prohibited. Through these days we see the glorious achievements of the Hasmoneans, yet only the 25th of Kislev, the dedication of temple, known as Hanukkah, has survived.[ix] By placing this religious-historical victory together with the natural phenomenon of the solstice, the Rabbis gave Hanukkah the boost it needed to become a major Jewish holiday that survived through the generations. Similar to the three major pilgrimage holidays, which strike a chord with lay people because of their relation to crucial events in everyday life, Hanukkah's association with a celebration of natural light has given it renewed power for generations after the religious-historical event occurred. While Hanukkah represents the shift from dark to light, the holiday itself takes place on the darkest days of the year. The winter solstice always falls out in late Kislev or early Tevet, meaning that at this time the daylight hours are at their shortest and because of the phases of the moon the last week in the month barely has moonlight at night. The religious-historical lights of Hanukkah give

hope to the Jewish people during these depressing nights of deep darkness, assuaging the same fears and melancholy felt by Adam when he first witnessed this natural phenomenon.[x]

The connection of the religious-historical to the natural deepens the significance of both celebrations. Thematically, the two go hand in hand—the shift from shorter to longer days symbolizes the fight between the Maccabees and the Greeks. As light overcomes darkness, the dedicated and courageous Maccabees overcome the evil and pagan Greeks. Despite all the miracles and military victories that occurred during the Hanukkah story, the rededication of the Temple itself serves the force behind the historical component of the holiday because of its eternal religious significance. The main service of Hanukkah, lighting the *hanukiyah*, reflects the central role of the rededication in the holiday. But the candle lighting cannot be divorced from the natural celebration of God's celestial beings. Both forms of celebration, that of the natural and that of the religious-historical combine during the climax of the holiday—the moment the candles are lit and we celebrate both physical and spiritual lights of God.

The Saturnalia and Kalenda festivals celebrated by the Romans have long ago fallen into the realm of historical relics. Similar to the way the harvest cycle aspect of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot has lost its meaning to the majority of Jews who are no longer involved in agricultural business, the significance of the luminary festivals of Saturnalia and Kalenda has faded. Until the invention of artificial light, man maintained a deep veneration for the luminary bodies. But today, when the daylight hours can be effortlessly extended long after the sun has set with simple flick of a switch, modern man might find it difficult to understand the need for eight day festivals dedicated to the celebration of the sun and moon, and the interactions between the day and night. Hanukkah provides the Jewish people with a lasting celebration of this natural occurrence, and of God who stands behind it. Even now that man's appreciation of the sublime "course of the world," as the Talmud put it,[xi] has fallen out of fashion, the themes of the natural celebration live on in the Festival of Lights.[xii] On each night of Hanukkah, the flames of the *hanukiyot* glow in the windows of Jewish homes and light up the dark nights. They commemorate religious-historical narrative—the righteous Maccabees who defeat the evil Greeks and the lights of the Menorah that spread hope to the once oppressed Jewish people. But they also mirror a more ancient celebration of nature—the triumph of sunlight over darkness that was first noticed and exalted by Adam, the first man.

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[i] Rambam, *Hilchot Avodah Zarah*, 1:1-2

[ii] *Shemot*: 23:14-17

[iii] *Vayikra*: 23:4-36

[iv] I thank my teacher Rav Tani Freintuch for introducing me to this theory.

[v] *Avodah Zarah* 8a

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Ibid.

[viii] "Saturnalia," available at: Penelope.UChicago.edu

[ix] Binyamin Lau. *The Sages: Character, Context and Creativity*, transl. by Michael Prawer. Vol. I. (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2010), 255-261.

[x] Menachem Leibtag, "Hanukkah- Its Biblical Roots Part Two," *The Tanach Study Center*. available at: tanach.org

[xi] *Avodah Zarah* 8a

[xii] Ibid.

For it is not in Heaven…or is it?: On the Halakhot and Hashkafot of Space Travel

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By: Judy Leserman
Edited By: Chaya Apfel

On the twentieth of July 1969, after four days of travel, two men set foot on the moon for the first time in history. Hundreds of millions heard Commander Neil Armstrong's famous words "…one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind" as he traversed the final frontier.[i] The Apollo 11 landing inspired wonder and awe; it represented a landmark in the advancement of science and the development of human ingenuity. However, there was a minority for which the lunar landing instilled doubt and confusion.[ii] What did this advancement mean for God-fearing Jews? The new terrain that became available to man came along with a new set of questions in Jewish observance; with so many commandments associated with time and how the Earth revolves around the sun, how can Torah be kept in such an environment? If not living on the surface of the earth, is a Jew even obligated in Torah and mitsvot? What is the nature of time and of the practice of Torah and mitsvot? The advent of the lunar landing brought challenging questions like these to the fore, and over the years, several scholars have provided insights into this perplexing situation.

The first time space travel for a Jew became a practical issue in halakhah was in 2003, when the Jewish Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon asked Rabbi Tzvi Konikov of Chabad of Cape Canaveral how he should keep Shabbat on his space mission.[iii] The main concerns in question were whether one must be on earth in order to be obligated in mitsvot and if not, when should one keep the mitsvot associated with the measurement of time?

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kasher, in his book that addresses the theological and legal implications involved when the moon was first being explored, *Man on the Moon,*[iv] asserts that the obligation in Torah and mitsvot in general is considered a *hovat gavra*; it is an obligation that rests on every Jew, despite his or her location, be it the moon, the polar regions, or the depths of the ocean. Rabbi Kasher continues that so long as a person is alive, there is no time in which a person is absolved from Torah and mitsvot or in which he may transgress a prohibition.[v]

There are several opinions regarding the issue of how to approach mitsvot associated with time, including Shabbat, festivals, regular times of prayer, and so forth. Rav Levi Yitzchak Halperin, in response to Rabbi Konikov's question on Ramon's behalf, discusses three options as how to measure time in a space vessel. The first is that one day is counted each

time the shuttle orbits the globe. This is explained by the verse in Genesis 1:5, "It was evening and it was morning, one day," meaning that one full day is counted by a period of nighttime and then a period of daytime. This, however, is impractical, because if a shuttle orbits the Earth once every ninety-minute period, one twenty-four-hour period would include sixteen "days," an obligation of thirty-two recitations of *Shema*, forty-eight prayers, and two Shabbatot, observed for an hour and a half each.[vi] Rav Halperin then offers a second proposal: a space traveler should act in accordance with the time zone over which he is traveling. This also includes several impracticalities, for in one moment, the traveler could be observing Shabbat, but moments later, Shabbat would be over in a different region; or one moment he could be reciting Shema, but within a few moments, the individual may find himself in a time-zone in which there is no longer such an obligation. Rav Halperin considers a final, third proposal in that the space traveler would establish his own measurement of days, based on the twenty-four-hour period that the individual experiences on the space shuttle, regardless of the events happening on planet Earth. The first twelve hours that the astronaut experiences would be night, then the next twelve would be day, and the rules and prohibitions regarding time would be observed accordingly. This approach is flawed in that it does not follow all the biblical requisites of the measurement of time. The concept of time in relation to mitsvot is first mentioned in Genesis 1:14-19, in which God creates the luminaries to generate light and to distinguish between day and night, seasons, and years. Rashi explains that the mention of seasons indicates that the phases of the moon, as viewed from Earth, will allow the Jewish people to distinguish when to celebrate festivals. The mention of days describes the need for the moon in one half of the day and the sun in the other, and that years refers to 365 days each marked by the rising and setting of the sun and moon. Rav Halperin concludes that mitsvot that are related to time must be done according to halakhic counting which is measured based on the paths of the earth, sun, and moon and the relationship between them. A human being on a space shuttle operates on a time that is independent of this system of rules built on nature or the order of creation. Therefore, one travelling in space would not be obligated in the mitsvot that are dependent upon time, because these mitsvot only apply to those living in a place that follows the natural laws of creation, not a completely different time system.[vii]

To understand this topic more in depth, the situation of a Jew travelling in space can be likened to that of a Jew residing in a polar region, where the sun may not rise or set for several months at a time. This situation is similar to space travel because of the question of how to measure time. Both Rav Yaakov Emden and Tiferet Yisrael compare such a situation to the one in the Gemara in Shabbat 69b in which a person is lost in the desert without any knowledge of which day of the week it is. There the Gemara discusses when the lost individual should keep Shabbat. The Gemara deliberates whether one would start counting six days from when the individual was lost and rest on the seventh, like the way Hashem created the universe and then rested; keep Shabbat on the first day and then count six days

until the next, like the first man, Adam, who was created shortly before the first Shabbat; or treat every day as if it was Shabbat, except for the allowance of the usually-prohibited activities one needs to do in order to preserve life.

In regard to residing in polar regions, Rav Yaakov Emden follows the first sequence listed in the aforementioned Gemara in which, upon arrival, one would count six days and then keep Shabbat. Tiferet Yisrael is of the opinion that one would continue counting the days of the week as he or she did when in a more conventional area and observe Shabbat times in accordance to where he or she originated. If doubt regarding the specific beginning and ending times of Shabbat causes transgression, such transgressions would be rabbinic, because the situation is similar to that of one lost in the desert. Tiferet Yisrael continues—even though in polar regions there is no clear sunrise and sunset, unlike one travelling in space, one is still able to observe the rotation of the sky and mark a clear difference between two days.[viii]

Despite the amount of research that was involved in the details of how a Jew *can* travel in space and the polar regions, the question remains as to whether a Jew *should* travel in such places. Zekher Simcha expounds on that topic based on a comment of the Gemara, Berakhot 31a:

What is meant by the verse 'Through a land that no man had passed through and where no man dwelt' (Jeremiah 2:6)? Since no one passed through, how could anyone dwell? It is to teach you that any land which Adam decreed should be inhabited is inhabited and any land which Adam decreed should not be inhabited is not inhabited.

Zekher Simcha considers this a statement that carries halakhic ramifications: "Adam decreed that only areas in which mitsvot might be observed should be inhabited; he decreed that areas in which mitsvot are not fully binding should remain desolate and uninhabited."[ix] This highlights an important *hashkafic* point: A Jew should actively seek opportunities to fulfill mitsvot, but that is simply not possible in outer space, where time-bound mitsvot are irrelevant. Though it may not be an actual transgression to remove oneself from the ability to perform mitsvot, doing so is not within the spirit of the Jewish practice. Furthermore, Deuteronomy 11:21 reads that God commanded mitsvot "so that your days will be prolonged upon the land which the Lord your God gave you." This does not mean long life, but long "days." It is possible for a man to live a prolonged life even if his "days" are not; though one may conceivably live on the moon to an advanced age, for a Jew, that is not an ideal existence, nor is it the blessing that God seeks to give. God's blessing is "that your days be prolonged"; to be enjoyed and filled with time-bound mitsvot, for which the concept of a regular halakhic day is a prerequisite.[x]

Ilan Ramon embodied what it meant to express the spirit of Jewish practice. Though he indicated to one reporter that he did not regularly observe Shabbat and, in the end, he was not able to fully observe Shabbat once he was aboard the shuttle, he still recognized that by

being involved in such a monumental space program, he was representing all Jews in the public eye and was motivated to act accordingly. Though space travel invariably made it more difficult to observe mitsvot, he nevertheless publicized the importance of observing Shabbat by consulting rabbinic authority on the matter and by going out of his way to include Jewish practice as much as possible. A Jew may not necessarily be well versed and consistent in the practice of Judaism, but can still have an innate aversion to unnecessary public desecration. With the eyes of the world on him, Ramon was immortalized as a *Kiddush Hashem*, one who publicly glorifies God, not because he shirked off the time related responsibilities that that are incumbent upon the Jewish nation, but because of his attachment to them.[xi] Though the new avenue of exploration that is outer space is available to humanity and the future holds unlimited possibilities within it, the Jewish nation must tread this area with caution. Jews may be an astronauts and explorers, but we are first and foremost Jews, and we are meant to actively seek out opportunities to do what is right, from the depths of the ocean to the heights of the heavens.

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[i] Dunbar, Brian. "July 20, 1969: One Giant Leap For Mankind," NASA, 14 July 2014 available at www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/apollo/apollo11.html.

[ii] Kasher, Menachem Mendel. "Introduction to Man on the Moon" (Hebrew), available at www.kby.org/english/kiddush-hachodesh/?id=325.

[iii] "Shabbat in Outer Space Astronaut Ilan Ramon's Question: 'When Should I Observe Shabbat on the Columbia?'", available at http://nleresources.com/kiruv-and-chinuch/nle-gemara/shabbat-in-outer-space/.

[iv] "Menachem Mendel Kasher" *Wikipedia*, available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menachem_Mendel_Kasher.

[v] "Shabbat in Outer Space Astronaut Ilan Ramon's Question: 'When Should I Observe Shabbat on the Columbia?'"

[vi] ibid.

[vii] ibid.

[viii] ibid.

[ix] Bleich, J. David, "Mitsvot in the Polar Regions and in Earth Orbit," in Bleich J. David, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*. Vol. 5 (Southfield: Targum, 2005), 75-128.

[x] ibid.

[xi] ibid.

The Jewish Response to the Theory of Evolution

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By: Ari Adler

The question of how to proceed when science and Torah seem to be in conflict is not new among rabbinic figures. Over the centuries, various strategies have been used to provide what is, in the views of each individual rabbinic authority, the proper approach when this occurs, whether it be reconciliation, dismissal of one or the other, or "multiple truths." Generally, the trend has been to accept the new science and an explanation to uphold the Torah. Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution and its modern variants, however, provide a particularly troubling confrontation with Torah. Rabbinic figures are oftentimes more reluctant to accept this theory than, for example, the law of biogenesis or a heliocentric universe.

The theory can be divided into two parts: the theory of descent, also called the fact of evolution, and the theory of natural selection. The theory of descent is usually considered the bigger "problem" in terms of its relationship with Torah. The theory of descent is that all organisms evolved from a single organism. The process of variation that results in divergence of species is the theory of natural selection: that an organism with mutations beneficial for its environment has an advantage in reproduction, and those with harmful mutations will eventually die out. This has also been referred to as "survival of the fittest."[i] Over time, this theory has been reformulated to what is referred to as "Neo-Darwinism," namely, that the mutations were sudden, large mutations, and that the species changed over a shorter period.[ii] Most often, issues raised against the theory of evolution specifically address the fact of evolution, i.e. the theory of descent. These issues can be termed the theological conflict, the exegetical conflict, and the ethical conflict.[iii]

The Conflicts Explained

The first issue to which attention has been called is the theological conflict: the lack of an Intelligent Designer suggested by the theory. According to the theory of evolution, biodiversity can be explained by mutations and survival of the fittest, i.e. random chance. The world seems to no longer require a Creator, and God becomes irrelevant to the origin of life. This issue is handled by virtually every Jewish thinker who has grappled with evolution. It is also believed by many scientists that it is possible to explain the world without God using the theory of evolution.[iv] Darwin himself has written that if the theory

would not be able to satisfactorily explain the universe without believing in God, he would reject it (though he later accepted the existence of God within the framework of evolution.[v]).[vi]

The second conflict is the difficulty in explaining the beginning of Genesis according to the theory of descent. This is the exegetical conflict. The Torah appears to be very clear that all life came into being on the third, fifth, and sixth days of creation, and that man was created, not from primeval primates, but from the dust of the earth. Where does that leave room for a slow, gradual process of evolution from a single ancestral species? This objection assumes that the Torah, whether by default or in its intent, is giving a physical description of creation. If this is the case, scientific findings by man cannot be truer than a description given by God.[vii]

A very specific element of this concern is the fact that the Torah states that each species was created *lemino*—according to its kind. The simple understanding of this indicates that each species was created distinctly, and did not emerge from a common ancestor.[viii]

Finally, a concern that some have brought forth is the morality conflict: a world where all life can be traced to a common ancestor and where humans and animals are regarded by nature as the same can become a world in which humans are on the level of animals. They are therefore no longer subject to moral laws over and above the animals. This was recognized by Charles Darwin himself,[ix] as well as by other scientists.[x] Understandably, this is troubling to followers of the Torah, who place a high focus on human moral responsibility. Opponents of evolution such as Yoram Bogacz have therefore described the theory of evolution in such terms as a "morally bankrupt, corrosive spiritual poison that undermines the foundations of human society."[xi] This idea may also be construed as a slippery slope argument—namely, one who grasps the theory of evolution will no longer see a reason for morality.

Rejection of the Theory

One of the ways to solve the conflict is to reject the idea that science requires a belief in random evolution. There were many attempts by Orthodox scientists and rabbis to point out the holes in evolutionary theory and to dismiss it, either wholly or partially, on a scientific basis. The criticism often launched against the theory is that it is not scientifically provable and the evidence makes it unlikely that mutations caused evolution of organisms. Binyamin Fain, through this method, declared the theory evolution a non-scientific theory, but a "metaphysical theory."[xii] Avraham Hasofer also uses this approach, and explains why the theory is popular despite the "evidence against it," pointing to the comfort the theory provides for atheists and the peer pressure in the scientific community to accept the theory.

The strategy of scientifically dispelling the theory seems to be the one most often used and given the most publicity in the Orthodox world.[xiii] It is also the position of Rabbi Avi Shafran, the Director of Public Affairs for Agudath Israel of America, who called belief in evolution "the religion of Randomness and Meaninglessness."[xiv]

Many Jewish thinkers object to dismissing the theory, however. If a theory accepted by the consensus of biologists could be rejected by the non-scientific community, scientific discovery in general would lose legitimacy. Rabbi Joel Wolowelsky advises Jewish educators to "put to rest the idea that evolutionary biology is any less a science than chemistry or physics."[xv] Baruch Sterman goes at length to point out the problems of theologians with little scientific background trying to dismantle a mainstream scientific theory under scientific terms.[xvi] Sterman believes that the reason that scientific laypeople feel adequately equipped to argue with scientists is because evolution is a theory that is easily explained: "an amateur would be more willing to attack a theory like evolution, whose basic jargon he can comprehend, than one like quantum chromodynamics, of which he probably has never heard."[xvii]

Efforts at Reconciliation: The Theological Conflict

Despite the definiteness with which opposition to the theory is expressed, especially by more recent rabbinic authorities, it is not a universal sentiment of Orthodox Judaism that the theory is inadmissible by Torah standards. In fact, Raphael Shuchat claims that the mainstream Orthodox approach until the second half of the twentieth century was to accept the theory as long as it is accepted by science.[xviii] Two wide-known examples of defenders of the theory among rabbinic figures are Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook.[xix]

Rabbi Hirsch held the view that although the theory was (at the time) not acceptable on a scientific basis, it would be acceptable from the Torah viewpoint.[xx] In discussing the question of Torah and science, he points out a number of purely scientific objections to the theory, but then states:

This will never change, not even if the latest scientific notion that the genesis of all the multitude of organic forms on earth can be traced back to one single, most primitive, primeval form of life should ever appear to be anything more than what it is today, a vague hypothesis still unsupported by fact. Even if this notion were ever to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world, Jewish thought, unlike the reasoning of the high priest of that notion, would nonetheless never summon us to revere a still extant representative of this primal form as the supposed ancestor of us all.[xxi]

In the paragraph he offers a viable approach to accepting the theory in its entirety while recognizing an Intelligent Designer. We see clearly that although Rabbi Hirsch did not accept the theory, his objection was purely scientific in nature, and not dogmatic. Had

evidence existed during his lifetime similar to what we have today, he might have accepted the theory even on scientific grounds.[xxii] Nevertheless, arguments have arisen as to the proper understanding of Rabbi Hirsch's words. There are those who claim that Rabbi Hirsch does support the dismissal of evolutionary theory on religious grounds. Rabbi Chaim Dov Keller, in a discussion on evolution, quotes Rabbi Hirsch's advice not to adopt a new science too hastily. Rabbi Keller does not make any reference to the above-quoted passage.[xxiii] Rabbi Shelomo Danziger relates how, claiming to be acting in the spirit of Rabbi Hirsch's ideology of Torah having priority over science, he removed his children from biology class for the time that they were to be taught evolution by an irreligious teacher, so that Rabbi Danziger could teach it to them himself and explain how it is a false and impossible theory.[xxiv] Rabbi Hirsch's words do not seem to mandate this.[xxv]

The most debated conservative formulation of Rabbi Hirsch's opinion is that of Rabbi Joseph Elias, in an article in *The Jewish Observer* entitled "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Evolution—The View from His Commentary: Setting the Record Straight on a Widely Publicized Interpretation." According to Rabbi Elias, Rabbi Hirsch only allowed for the acceptance of the theory of evolution on religious grounds if it can be proven incontrovertibly to be true, and that the theory provides room for a Creator. As others have pointed out, Rabbi Hirsch states clearly that the existence of the Creator is not dependent on scientific allowance, and scientific fact is not tied to the allowance of a "god of the gaps". Rather, a world fully explained by known scientific principles still would leave room for an acknowledgment of the Divine.[xxvi]

Rabbi Kook indicates his tolerance for and even support of the theory of evolution (albeit not Darwin's formulation[xxvii]) in a number of places. In two of his letters he emphasizes that the theory does not pose a threat to our understanding of Genesis because the Torah's message is not history, but the secrets contained within.[xxviii] In *Igrot HaKodesh*, he embraces the theory enthusiastically, pointing to Kabbalistic sources that may refer to a sort of advancement in creation from simple to complex. He also points to moral benefits of the theory, that the world can be seen as one whose natural tendency is to become more advanced.[xxix]

Another popular approach is to simply consider evolution's seeming randomness to be an act of God as any other—"theistic evolution." As for the origin of life, perhaps God created the species with different DNA but all under the overarching rules of DNA, or perhaps the law of biogenesis is correct, and all species evolved, under the direction of God, from simpler organisms. In any event, the complexity of the universe and the unlikelihood of evolution would point to an Intelligent Designer in the process. The random element is not a denial of God, but a proof for His existence.[xxx] While this approach has been criticized by some as inauthentic,[xxxi] it remains a common method of reconciliation. Notable examples of this approach include those employed by Nathan Aviezer, Lee Spetner, and Rabbi Isidore Epstein.[xxxii]

Judah Landa is unsatisfied with this approach. While many Orthodox scientists have considered the historical evolution of species to be so unlikely that an Intelligent Designer is self-evident, Landa pulls apart these claims, which he calls the "'spill the ink, get a book' argument." In Landa's view, the fact that the world exists in all its complexity does not prove unequivocally the existence of an Intelligent Designer. He distinguishes between the analogy to spilling ink and getting a book, and spilling ink and getting a meaningful inkblot. The latter, he says, is unlikely but possible. It does not immediately point to an intelligent creator. He considers the world to be more analogous to an inkblot than a book because of gaps and imperfections in the universe.[xxxiii]

Efforts at Reconciliation: The Exegetical Conflict

Attempts have been made to interpret the beginning of Genesis in a way that accounts for the theory of evolution. Among these was Rabbi Meir Loeb Wisser (Malbim) in his commentary on Genesis where he interprets the acts of creation of living organisms as beginnings of ongoing processes that would continue naturally.[xxxiv] Rabbi J. H. Hertz, as well, sees no problem in reconciling the Biblical account with evolution.[xxxv] Some take issue with Rabbi Hertz's willingness to interpret the Torah in seemingly far-fetched ways in order to downplay the miraculous aspects of Creation.[xxxvi]

Professor Nathan Aviezer points out a textual hint to evolution in the Creation account. Whereas the creation of the land animals and birds are described with the word *vayya'as*, "and He made," the creation of the sea creatures uses the term *vayyivra*, "and He created." The latter implies a new creation[xxxvii] while the former may refer to a natural progression from one into the other. This may conform to the literal meaning of the text, as well.[xxxviii]

Similarly, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan pointed to a discrepancy between the accounts of the third, fifth, and sixth days of creation, on which the plants and animals were created, and the accounts of the other days. The expressions used by God to bring forth the plants and animals are not *yehi*, "let it be," but other expressions such as *totsei*, "let it bring out," or *yishretsu*, "may it [lit. them] swarm." This, too, suggests an instruction to begin a process, as opposed to a sudden creation.[xxxix]

The word *lemino* can also be explained according to the theory of evolution. Rabbi Hirsch, in the same article in which he discusses evolution, says that *lemino* simply means that organisms will pass traits onto their descendants, from one generation to the next. It has no bearing on whether species will change over the generations.[xl]

Rabbi Isidore Epstein, among others, points out that the Torah's description of the process of creation is a progression from simple to complex, similar to the progression described by the theory of descent. Furthermore, the general order of the progression of living organisms is the same as that described by the theory: vegetables first, then animals,

and then man as the climax. The only conflict that remains, claims Rabbi Epstein, is the difference in specific chronology, an issue that can be dealt with in similar ways as questions regarding the age of the universe. These have been dealt with over the centuries.[xli]

The opponents of evolution take issue with the interpretation of the Torah to account for evolution. It seems to fly in the face of the Torah, forcing the reader to ignore the simple understanding and "force" the truth of Torah by reinterpreting it rather than rejecting science. For this reason, they are unsatisfied with explanations that the "days" of creation were really much longer periods. Additionally, the order of creation in the Torah is not exactly the same as the order given by Darwin— for example, the Torah speaks of land reptiles being created after birds.[xlii]

Due to the multitude of opinions expressing support for accepting science, the Rabbinical Council of America released a statement in 2005, proclaiming that it is within Orthodox thought to allow for the scientific theory of evolution and that it poses no contradiction with the Torah.[xliii]

Efforts at Reconciliation: The Morality Conflict

Some have approached the moral question differently from Bogacz. The modern theory of evolution, with its genetic components, has enabled scientists to advance medicine and biology by understanding genetics and humans' similarity to the animal kingdom, and the difference that came about as a result of evolutionary process, and why.[xliv] Whereas many objectors were concerned that acceptance of the theory would necessarily lead to moral degeneration, but in reality, the opposite has taken place. From this perspective, the result of a mindset of evolution is not one of degeneration, "Descent of Man," as Darwin titled his work, but one of advancement.

Conclusion

Today, there continues to be a difference in opinion regarding the acceptability of the theory of evolution. The opponents feel very strongly about the issue, because it has more far-reaching consequences than other questions of science and Torah. This is not simply a question of rabbinic infallibility, but the possibility of casting doubt in the truth of the Torah. Its moral implications also frighten many. On the other hand, the implications of rejecting scientific theory in the face of dogma also have dangerous consequences, and so others are hesitant to cast it aside. Additionally, there is precedent for compartmentalizing Torah and science. This issue may touch upon previous questions of Torah versus science, and reconciliation will be possible, or it may continue to be a raging battle.

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[i] Lee Spetner, *Not By Chance!* (New York, NY: The Judaica Press Inc., 1997), 11–13.

[ii] Chaim Dov Keller, "Evolution versus Intelligent Design – a Torah Perspective," *The Jewish Observer* 39 (2006), 10.

[iii] A fourth, related issue is the discrepancy between scientific chronology and the simple understanding of the Torah's and Midrash's chronology. This issue is much larger in scope, as it pertains to much more than the theory of evolution and the question emerged well before Darwin, and therefore it will not be dealt with here.

[iv] Yoram Bogacz, "Random and Undirected," *Torah Explorer*, 29 April 2013. Accessed 16 June 2013.

[v] Darwin Correspondence Project, Commentary on a letter from Charles Kingsley to Darwin. Accessed 21 June 2013.

[vi] Charles Darwin, letter to Charles Lyell (1859). Accessed 16 June 2013.

[vii] Keller, "Torah Perspective," 13.

[viii] Ibid., 17.

[ix] See Darwin, *Descent of Man*, chap. III and XXI. Accessed 7 June 2013.

[x] For example, biologist William Provine, biologist Jerry Coyne, and David Baggett, all quoted in Bogacz, "Darwinism and Morality," *Torah Explorer*, 13 May 2013.

[xi] Ibid.

[xii] Binyamin Fain, *Dallut haKefirah* (Jerusalem, Israel: Mossad Harav Kook, 2010), 120–123.

[xiii] See, for example, several chapters about the theory of evolution in Yaakov Kornreich (ed.), *Torah uMadda`* (New York, NY: Shorashim, 1970), 31–70, and Rafael Falk, "*Evoluẓiyah: Motar HaḤayyim min haDomem – Ayin*," in Leah Mazor (ed.), *Beri'at ha`Olam* (Jerusalem, Israel: Magnus, 1990), 37–50, and Menachem Mendel Schneerson, "Theories of Evolution," in *Mind over Matter*, comp., Joseph Ginsburg and Herman Branover, trans. Arnie Gotfryd (Jerusalem, Israel: SHAMIR, 2003), 54–97. In the last, see specifically pp. 33–36.

[xiv] Ira Robinson, "American Jewish Views of Evolution and Intelligent Design," *Modern Judaism* 27 (2007), 182. Accessed 17 June 2013.

[xv] Joel Wolowelsky, "Teaching Evolution in Yeshiva High School," 1997. Accessed 17 June 2013.

[xvi] Baruch Sterman, "Judaism and Darwinian Evolution," *Tradition* 29 (1994), 48–75.

[xvii] Ibid., 50–51.

[xviii] Raphael Shuchat, "R. Isaac Halevi Herzog's Attitude to Evolution and His Correspondence with Immanual Velikovsky," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 15 (2009), 154. Accessed on 10 June 2013.

[xix] As both of these figures lived before the general acceptance of Darwinism in the scientific community, their unwillingness to accept Darwin's formulation of the theory should not be taken as an ideological rejection.

[xx] This is under the assumption that the theory does not affect Jewish learning and observance. Shai Cherry's understanding ("Judaism, Darwinism, and the Typology of Suffering," *Zygon* 46 (2011), 321; accessed 13 June 2013), that Rabbi Hirsch advocated "slow and incremental change" to Jewish practice in the spirit of evolution, is obviously incorrect.

[xxi] Samson Raphael Hirsch, "The Educational Value of Judaism," in *The Collected Writings* (New York, NY: Philipp Feldheim Inc., 1992), 263–264.

[xxii] This belief is also held by Rabbi Nosson Slifkin, as seen in Nosson Slifkin, *The Science of Torah* (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, 2001), 104.

[xxiii] Keller, "Torah Perspective," 21.

[xxiv] Shelomo Danziger, "Rav S. R. Hirsch – His Torah Im Derekh Erets Ideology," in Tsvi Tif'arto – The World of Hirschian Teachings, ed. Elliot Bondi (New York, NY: Feldheim Publishers, 2008), 162.

[xxv] However, if the irreligious teacher had tried to convince the students of the lack of a Creator, then even Rabbi Hirsch might have approved of Rabbi Danziger's choice.

[xxvi] Natan Slifkin, letter to *The Jewish Observer*, 2006. Accessed 18 June 2013.

[xxvii] Shai Cherry, "Three Twentieth-Century Jewish Responses to Evolutionary Theory," *Aleph* 3 (2003), 261. Accessed on 10 June 2013.

[xxviii] Abraham Isaac Kook, *Igrot Ra'ayah* 1:91 and 1:134.

[xxix] Kook, *Orot HaKodesh*, *Ma'amar Ḥamishi* §19–21.

[xxx] John Loike and Moshe Tendler, "Molecular Genetics, Evolution, and Torah Principles," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 14 (2007), 178–179. Accessed on 10 June 2013.

[xxxi] Such as Bogacz, “Random.”

[xxxii] See Lee Spetner, “The Evolutionary Doctrine” and “Information Theory Considerations of Organic Evolution,” in *Science in the Light of Torah*, Herman Branover, ed. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1994), and Spetner’s book, *Not By Chance!* (New York, NY: The Judaica Press, Inc., 1997), and Nathan Aviezer, *In the Beginning: Biblical Creation and Science* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House Inc., 1990), 51–93, and Isidore Epstein, *The Faith of Judaism* (London, UK: Novello & Co., 1954), 194–204.

[xxxiii] Judah Landa, *Torah and Science* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1991), 291–296.

[xxxiv] Robinson, “Views,” 180. See Malbim, Genesis 1:20.

[xxxv] J.H. Hertz, “The Science of Creation,” *Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London, England: Soncino Press, 1990), 194–195.

[xxxvi] Keller, “Torah Perspective,” 15.

[xxxvii] Cf. Numbers 16:30.

[xxxviii] Nathan Aviezer, *In the Beginning: Biblical Creation and Science* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing, 1990), 60

[xxxix] Quoted in Slifkin, *Science of Torah*, 168–169.

[xl] Hirsch, “Educational Value,” 264.

[xli] Epstein, *Faith*, 201–202.

[xlii] Keller, “Torah Perspective,” 14–16.

[xliii] Rabbinical Council of America, “Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design” (2005). Accessed 18 June 2013.

[xliv] Loike and Tendler, “Principles,” 180-183.

Bricks and Stones: On Man's Subdual of Nature

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kolhamevaser

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By: Matt Lubin

Like so many of the stories that make up the first sections of *Bereshit*, the Torah's account of the Babylonian bricklayers, builders of the "Tower of Babel," is extraordinarily cryptic. Interpretations abound, and one would not be hard-pressed to find many varied explanations of this strange story throughout Jewish literature, some with profound theological interpretations. The classical interpretation favored by Hazal and so many of the medieval commentators is to see the mundane goal of building a city with a tower as a reference to some theological sin.[i] However, it is very difficult to understand how this reading is supported by the verses themselves, even if the religious importance of such a reading, namely, disapproval of idolatry, is self-understood.

To my mind, however, no reading of the eleventh chapter of *Bereshit* leads to as surprising a conclusion as that of R. Yitzhak Abarbanel. Noting that the Torah supplies no heretical, idolatrous, or otherwise nefarious motive for their construction projects, Abarbanel states that the construction itself must have been a sin in God's eyes. The statement that the Torah does attribute to these builders is, "Come, let us make bricks" (*Bereishit* 11:4). This was the sin that occurred at the Tower of Babel: the sin of innovation, of manipulating nature for man's purposes. Abarbanel recognizes that it might not be immediately apparent why such activities would be deserving of punishment, elaborating:

God created man as an intelligent soul and prepared all of his necessities for him, without him having to perform any personal labor, in order so that he involve himself only in lofty, necessary thoughts. But Adam sinned in that he was unsatisfied with the natural, and he was drawn after his lusts, destroying himself in that the purely natural no longer suffices… So too, the generation that was dispersed… and because they strayed from the natural way, they needed new names for their novel inventions… Thus, God caused them to differ in their terminologies, and thus the languages became confused, and this caused their dispersal.[ii]

Not only did the population of Shin'ar sin against nature by building a city of brick, but exactly such an affront is ascribed by Abarbanel to the primal, perhaps quintessential, sin of Adam. Similarly, he continues that Kayin was guilty of the same by preferring to sacrifice to God an artificial, human product rather than the unspoiled wild animal sacrificed by his brother. While Abarbanel himself doesn't point this out explicitly, the same anti-nature streak can be seen in Kayin's descendants, about whom the Torah writes developed

innovations in livestock raising, music, and metallurgy (cf. *Bereshit* 5:20-22). Abarbanel would likely tell us that we are meant to look upon these advancements with distaste, and associate the sons of Lemekh with their famously sinful ancestor. Could it really be that the Torah is intimating to us that God disapproves of technological innovation? Did God not command humanity to gain dominance over the natural world, instructing Adam to "rule over the animals?" (*Bereishit* 1:28) The standard reading of the first two chapters of *Bereshit* leads to the conclusion that God intends for mankind to engage in material productivity and the harnessing of nature, and yet Abarbanel insists upon reading this subtext of naturalism into the very same story.

One could dismiss Abarbanel's interpretation and its philosophical baggage by pointing out that because Hazal and the vast majority of traditional commentators interpret the story of the Generation of Dispersion in a very different manner, they must have disagreed with Abarbanel's conception of man's sin. Not only that, but several statements of Hazal indicate that they do not share Abarbanel's fondness for naturalism. One relatively well-known story related by the Midrash records how Rabbi Akiva was asked by a Roman, "Whose acts are better, those of man or those of God?" Knowing that the Roman was planning on challenging the practice of circumcision, Rabbi Akiva responded that man's creations are more beautiful.[iii] Rabbi Akiva saw a parallel between the commandment of circumcision, which involves altering a natural state, and a general divine approval for man to alter nature, to believe that man's acts are better than those of God. The invention of mules, seemingly attributed by the verse in *Bereshit* to a descendant of the murderous Kayin, is attributed by the Talmud to the ingenuity of Adam, in a passage that Maharal reads as celebrating man's dominion over nature through innovation.[iv] This could not be more different than Abarbanel's reading of these passages as condemning such alteration of the natural world.

On the other hand, other sources imply that Abarbanel's sentiments are not against the spirit of Hazal. Another well-known Midrash writes[v] that God warned man, "Note, do not destroy my world," perhaps interpreting the divine intention of man's placement in Eden "to work it [*le-ovdah*] and guard it," (*Bereishit* 2:15) as meaning to serve [*la-avod*] the land, and not to use it for man's own purposes. Such a reading would resolve any tension between the two directives, *le-ovdah u-le-shomrah,* as both words are aimed to limit man's involvement to preservation. The implication of *le-ovdah* is not, as some interpret the phrase, a mandate to develop the world, but to avoid tampering with it.[vi] The Talmudic sage R. Shimon b. Elazar appears to understand the sin of man in a similar manner as does Abarbanel: "I have never seen a gazelle drying leather, a lion as a porter, or a wolf who is a shopkeeper, and yet they are sustained without laboring… but I acted wickedly and sullied my manner of sustainment."[vii] While the exact meaning of this statement is not clear, Abarbanel may have had it in mind when associating man's fall with a disconnect from the natural world, by seeing in this teaching a disapproval of man's efforts to have to change the natural world.

In order to find some resolution to this tension, it is instructive to return to the biblical passage and try to understand what this story teaches us regarding technological advancement. It is introduced by mankind's migration to the east, where they came upon a valley in Shin'ar. There, they said to each other that they would create mortar bricks to be used instead of stones, and use them to build a city with a tower whose top reaches the very sky, in order that they not be dispersed throughout the land. Even before asking why this event prompts God to foil their plans, the description requires further analysis as it stands. First of all, this is the third time in the eleven chapters of the Torah that a person or people are described as moving eastward, and, to paraphrase a favorite phrase of Rashi's,[viii] the matter begs to be expounded. Why does the Torah need to tell us that the people found a valley to settle in? Furthermore, why were they worried about being dispersed that they needed to create a city to remain together? Additionally, what did God view as the major problem: the tower, the city, or the bricks that they developed in order to build them?

Certain aspects of this construction project inspire comparison to another biblical building endeavor: the construction of the *Beit ha-Mikdash.*[ix] The people of Babel intended to build a high tower, and the *Beit ha-Mikdash* is also referred to as a "tower" (cf. *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 4:4). Seen in this light, the contrast that arises between the two building projects appears to have heavy symbolic significance, and this contrast will help us to provide context for the interpretation of Abarbanel, as well as see the connection between the story as described in the Torah and the sin which Hazal ascribe to it: idolatry. Two of the descriptions provided by the Torah of the tower built in *Bereshit* stand in stark contrast to depictions of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*: first, the Tower of Babel was built in a valley, but the *Mikdash* was built upon a mountain, and second, the Tower of Babel was built by using out of "bricks instead of stones," (*Bereishit* 11:3) but in the Temple, the Torah forbade using building material that had been hewn from iron tools.

While bricks made from mortar bear no apparent similarity to the materials from which they were made, uncut stones are unambiguously natural materials. By beginning its foundation in a valley, the tower would symbolize that they needed no start-up loan or external support —they could perform all on their own, with no help whatsoever. By celebrating the invention of bricks, the craftsmen of Babel were in effect reveling in their ability to outdo God's creation, and how they do not need Him. Their tower could have been a highly noble enterprise: symbolically, the contractors' motivations appear to represent aspirations to reach greater heights and to promote international unity—what could be so bad? Utilizing personal growth for self-aggrandizement and human cooperation to snub the God who created man spoils even the loftiest of goals. The entire story is introduced by a migration eastward, which is also symbolic of traveling away from God's presence: Adam had to move to the east when he was evicted from Eden (*Bereshit* 3:24) and Kayin traveled eastward when leaving "the presence of God" (ibid. 4:16).[x] The laws and location of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, however, represent the opposite: it was to be built on a mountain, in recognition that all

spiritual heights begin with God's natural gifts. As God's hand in the process was all but hidden, building material was to be limited to uncut stones so no spectator could make the mistake of thinking this structure to be a celebration of man's technological and architectural ability. The Talmud states that the rabbis approved a blue-green marble for the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, "because it is reminiscent of waves."[xi] Perhaps their intention was that waves remind a person that no matter what building he may build, there are forces of "nature," of God's, that will always be more impressive, and that cannot be forgotten.

This approach to the Tower of Babel bridges the interpretations of the Midrash and that of Abarbanel: perhaps it is true that the sin of the tower-builders was their rejection of nature, but it was a rejection of nature as an expression of God's will that was deserving of punishment. [xii] Thus, there truly is something sinful about technological advancement: the danger that it poses in distancing man from seeing the source of all of his strengths and all of his materials. In the proper religious framework, however, if the changing of nature is done in the glorification of He Who made nature, then those same endeavors can result in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*.

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[i] See Rashi *Bereshit* ad loc., *Sanhedrin* 109a and *Bereshit Rabbah* 6:6

[ii] R. Yitzhak Abarbanel, Commentary to *Bereishit* 11:1

[iii] *Midrash Tanhuma* to *Tazria, Vayikra* 5:5

[iv] *Pesachim* 54a and R. Judah Loew, *Be'er ha-Golah* 1:10 (Hartman ed. page 232)

[v] *Kohelet Rabbah 7*, commenting on *Kohelet* 7:13

[vi] Cf. Radak ad loc., as well as *Sefer Hovot ha-Levavot*, *Sha'ar ha-Bitachon* Ch. 3

[vii] *Kiddushin* 82b. Note, however, that *Tiferet Yisrael* Ch. 1 (Hartman ed. page 30) writes that this is not meant to reflect negatively on man's general need to improve upon nature, but specifically that man requires such behavior in order to sustain himself.

[viii] Cf. Rashi, *Bereshit* 1:1 and 25:19

[ix] Correlations between these two building projects is noted by the Zohar, Volume 1, 74a. This source was brought to my attention by R. Ahron Lopiansky of Yeshivah Greater Washington, whose shiur on this topic served as a significant inspiration for the ideas presented in this article.

[x] Such an explanation is particularly poignant considering the phraseology of Midrash *Lekah Tov* to *Bereshit* 11:13, which homiletically interprets "traveling East [*mi-kedem*]" in another context to "traveling away from the One who originated the World [*m-kadmono shel olam*]." The tower-builders, too, were distancing themselves from God by changing nature so that its original creator would be unrecognizable; they were almost literally moving away from the origin of the Earth.

[xi] *Bava Batra* 3b

[xii] For a very similar approach to reconciling the text with its midrashic interpretation, see the commentary of R. Samson Rafael Hirsch to this passage (*Bereishit 11:1-12*).

Art, Torah, and Nature: An Interview with Rabbi Ozer Glickman

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Rabbi Ozer Glickman is a Rosh Yeshivah *at RIETS and teaches about the intersection of Halakhah and business at Sy Syms School of Business. Over the last few months, Rabbi Glickman and I have chatted about a number of topics. Through these conversations, his deep knowledge of art history, the philosophy of art and a wide range of literature became increasingly apparent. It was a discussion about the intersection of art and Judaism that sparked the idea for this interview, conducted by email with an in-person meeting to clarify a number of points.*

David Selis (DS): *As a* halakhist *and* Rosh Yeshivah*, what are some challenges of being an art lover?*

Rabbi Ozer Glickman (ROG): A little introduction to explain the minor role of the visual in my religious persona: Spending so much of my life with texts, I have become even more of a verbal person than my natural dispositions may have made me. The bulk of my Torah learning is not spent reading. When I sit down to learn, I may read a few lines or a whole *sugya*. Most of the time is spent with my eyes closed thinking, reconstructing, saying over, saying better, asking questions, trying to answer questions. Talmud Torah is a cognitive act, not always a declarative act. I think about the material more than I physically perform it in the act of reading.

It is clear that the material, the raw stuff of my Torah learning, is words. They may represent things, or relationships between and among things, but they are words, and I internally ponder them more than I read them aloud.

With my eyes closed then, the visual recedes. This already circumscribes the physical in my internal world.

I have often joked that for Litvishe *benei Torah,* "*keitzad merakdin lifnei ha-kallah*"[i] is more a sugya than a song. Torah learning can be very formalist and the physical realities that underlie it can even disappear completely from view.

I did not love art in my younger years. One, I have a tendency to lose interest in things where I am a passive observer with limited inside understanding. I cannot watch hockey, for instance, because I don't ice skate and never played the game. I couldn't appreciate any more than the physicality of it and that misses the art and the technique that probably makes the sport exciting to those who do understand it. As the math kid in my class who couldn't draw, I never had an interest in art.

I actually came to art via philosophy, specifically Hegel. At Columbia, we enjoyed the presence of the late Professor Arthur Danto. In addition to being the art critic of *The Nation* for many years, he was professor of Philosophy at Columbia. Under his influence, all philosophy majors took Aesthetics and we all read Hegel. That is the beginning of my love of art. Characteristically, it came via words, not images.

If you haven't read Hegel on art, you need to get to the library or Amazon and get hold of it. A brief taste, although this is my take as I have assimilated it into my own thinking over the years: all of human life is a struggle toward perfection, a very Maimonidean idea. Art has stages (*Kunstformen*) as well. At first, art went through what he calls the symbolic phase. Symbols are awkward expressions of ideas. They never quite capture the idea which is the *ikar*. Egyptian figures with their animal heads and grotesque depictions of evil spirits and demons are a good example.

Art progresses from here to a second stage, the "classical," where the technique of representation is perfected. Think of the Greek statues of the gods and great athletes—the human form without distortion, perfect, graceful. Ironically, art had moved farther from the pure aesthetic as everything is taken up with the replication of the human form. Representative art is a profanation of the artistic idea because it attempts to create an equivalency between the representation and the idea.

This to me is the fundamental profanity of idolatry and the key to understanding the Torah's objection to the reproduction of the human form. Reduction of a human being to musculature and shape and coloris an abomination of a sort. Worship of God in physical form is the essence of profanity.

The highest stage, the third stage, is the romantic. It focuses inwardly. The figures are blurred and even intentionally distorted, to rely more on what is inside the observer.

Just as there are stages in the human development of art, there is a hierarchy in the arts themselves. An outgrowth of this analysis of stages is that the less grossly representational the art, the more closely it approaches the aesthetic. Beauty is the expression of rational perfection. In Keats' words, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty ."[ii]

And so the basest forms of art are three dimensional: sculpture, particularly lifelike sculpture. The more we abstract, the closer we get to beauty. Two-dimensional drawings are closer to pure aesthetics. Music is among the highest, because it represents almost pure relationship and idea. The highest form of art is mathematics.

This is why I am surprised you haven't asked me about music. It is the art form in which I have the most experience both as an aficionado and a composer.

Although I can see craft in the works of Christian artists like Fra Angelico, the profoundly Christian nature of the subject has too many connotations in history that interfere with my

appreciation of it.

It is less the *avodah zarah* aspect of alien religion (isn't that what *avodah zarah* means?) that offends me. It is more Christian art as an expression of the Catholic Church and its role in Jewish history that I find off-putting. In its identity as an orthodox religion with its own particularistic traditions of language and law, I can relate to some aspects of Catholicism but the role of the Church in the mass murder of Jews complicates any interaction with Christian art.

These are more visceral than formally halakhic objections. I just cannot relate to depictions of the apostles, Crusaders, august clerics, or the Church hierarchy.

DS: *What are your thoughts on visiting the Sistine Chapel to see the Michelangelo paintings?*

ROG: My understanding of the halakhah is clear. The only circumstances in which it is permitted for me to enter a church is to save Jewish lives. Since I am a Jew of little consequence on the grand scheme of things, I never enter churches.

In Walter Benjamin's[iii] era of mass reproduction, art loses its iconic nature and I can view such works in digital reproduction in the privacy of my den where it is certain permitted to enter.

DS: How do you understand the Torah prohibitions on graven images as they relate to art?

ROG: I interpret Torah prohibitions as both rabbinic tradition and Jewish law interpret them. For me, that is found in *Yoreh Deah*. We have moved past the understanding that two dimensional representations of the human face are prohibited and follow the legal opinion that the human form may be drawn, certainly if the entire body isn't depicted. I understand the impetus behind banning the bird's head *haggadah*[iv] but Jewish law would not require it.

While I am sympathetic to the opinion that the force of the law was to prevent idolatry and that there is little if any true idolatry today, we are not in the practice of eliminating mitsvot because of their perceived *ta'am* (reason). The law remains in force.

DS: *What restrictions would a frum artist face in painting scenery and how can these be overcome?*

ROG: No restrictions come to mind other than not painting religious symbols of other religious traditions, or engaging in mixed dancing while painting. Because I do not see the sun, moon, and stars as objects of religious worship, taking photographs of them or painting a sunset does not offend me.

DS: *What is your favorite artistic movement and why?*

ROG: Easy–the impressionists. The creation of light through the mixing of simple, two dimensional oils and dyes…The technique amazes me. But most of all because they abstract from the representational and capture the purer aesthetic. My favorite artist unsurprisingly is Monet and my favourite painting is his Le Jardin a Argenteuil.

DS: *Are there are depictions of nature in popular culture which speak to you on a spiritual level?*

ROG: Well, it's not popular but Claude Debussy's *La Mer*. It is an impressionist painting in sounds. More specifically, the sounds of the water lapping at the dock as the great Otis Redding sits on the Dock of the Bay.

DS: *What is your favourite Biblical depiction of nature?*

ROG: Easy. The second *perek* of Shir ha-Shirim. The image of the lovers under the apple tree, his arm under her head, reminds me of a summer day 28 years ago when I sat by the Kinneret with my pregnant wife. Incidentally, the daughter who was born is named Maya because just as she kicked as we sat there, we heard a young mother call her toddler Maya not far from us.

That *perek* has enormous theological power for me, partly because of the resonances with my own experience.

DS: *How do you find God in nature?*

ROG: Just a random thought…when I am in Eretz Yisrael, I like to look up at the night sky and block out my surroundings so that when I return to Teaneck, I can look up again and know I am broadly on the same planet. For me, God is to be found in memory and time more than in nature.

DS: *What are your thoughts on* Paradise Lost[v] *and* East of Eden[vi] *as secular literary midrash?*

ROG: I'm usually disappointed by secular writers who are unconsciously attempting to improve on the midrash. Example: *Fear and Trembling*.[vii] I studied the book closely for my senior thesis in Philosophy. It is so completely a Christian perspective, the Divine not as Non-rational but as explicitly irrational. Kierkegaard must break off his engagement precisely because he needs to submit to an irrational command, to take the leap of faith.

East of Eden is not my favourite work by Steinbeck. Very spelled-out, intricate plotlines are too representative to be good midrash. Midrash works because canonical texts are indeterminate. They leave much to the reader to work out, re-imagine. There is too much grit and detail in East of Eden to be good midrash.

DS: *What is your favourite illuminated manuscript or compilation of illuminated Jewish works?*

ROG: There was a big coffee table book called *Ha-ketubah*[viii], I believe, with beautiful examples of ketubot. My wife and I took elements of different *ketubot* for our own. I find few things more evocative than love and family.

DS: *What are your thoughts on illuminated* megillot *from an artistic-halakhic perspective?*

ROG: I have a visceral dislike of the very idea. *Megillot* are *mikra*, *pesukim* to be read aloud in the order and format in which they are written. Illuminations interfere with my ability to reimagine on my own. They are like vocalized texts. The *nikkud* may capture the plain meaning, but it may also interfere with my ability to read the text in its full range of meanings. Illuminations are one *peirush*.

DS: *Which secular works had a profound impact on your emotions and thinking?*

ROG: Books that disrupted my emotions: Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*[ix], Augustine's *Confessions*. A young friend, a student, once told me he felt like Joyce had written *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* specifically for him. I felt the shock of recognition as he said it. I encountered Augustine's *Confessions*[x] through an article by Professor J.J. Schacter, one of my favorite YU personalities, on autobiographies and the Jews.[xi] Rabbi Schacter was reflecting on why religious Jews wrote more about community than self before the Enlightenment and mention Augustine, or referenced scholars who mentioned Augustine, as the first of the religious autobiographers. This moved me to read the *Confessions* and some of the expository literature on it. It seems that Augustine may have invented the Western concept of the self.

DS: Who is your favorite poet and which of their poems is your favorite?

ROG: John Keats; specifically his poem Ode on A Grecian Urn.

Postscript: There were further points about literature, photography, and other philosophical views of the interviewee which, although originally intended to be part of the interview, are not included here.

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[i] BT. Ketubot 16b. translation: in other words, while the phrase is a sugiyah in shas, it is also a wedding song. This second use is at times lost on litvish bnai yeshiva.

[ii] See John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," first published in *Annals of the Fine Arts* 15 (1820).

[iii] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry

Zohn, in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

[iv] Technically known as the worm's haggadah (Israel Museum, Jerusalem MS 180/57. Southern Germany, 13th century). The illuminations in this haggadah are distinctive in that the figures have a human lower body and a bird's head. Many scholars long assumed that this unique feature was due a to a literalist interpretation of the prohibition on graven images which was taken to mean that creating realistic depictions of figures was strictly forbidden. However, current scholars are divided as to whether the unique nature of the figures depicted is due to halakhic or artistic considerations.

[v] John Milton, 1674.

[vi] John Steinbeck (New York: The Viking Press, 1952).

[vii] Søren Kierkegaard, 1843.

[viii] David Davidovitch. *Ha-ketubah be-'iturim / The Ketuba: Jewish Marriage Contracts Through the Ages* (Israel 1968).

[ix] James Joyce, 1916.

[x] Ca. 397 CE.

[xi] See: Jacob J. Shacter, "History and Memory of the Self: The Autobiography of Rabbi Jacob Emden," in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*," ed. by Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, David N. Myers (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), pp. 428-52.