Torah and Evolution: Thoughts for Parashat Bereishith

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I recently received an email communication from an Orthodox Jewish organization stating in unequivocal terms that “Orthodox Judaism rejects the theory of evolution.” In certain Orthodox circles, it is posited as a matter of faith that “true” Judaism does not and cannot accept evolution. God created the universe; God created Adam and Eve. This is clear from the first chapter of Bereishith, and there is nothing more to say on the subject. Any other position is heresy.

Actually, there is much more to say on the subject. I believe that it is religiously incorrect to state that “Orthodox Judaism rejects the theory of evolution.” This is not only an invalid statement from an intellectual point of view, it is also invalid from an Orthodox religious point of view. The statement reflects obscurantism, not faith.

The first chapter of Bereishith presents a lofty, beautiful and poetic account of creation. It does not present a scientific account of creation. It does not describe how God created things, only that He did indeed create the world.

It has been pointed out that the six “days” of creation are not 24-hour days as we know them today; the sun wasn’t created until day four! Rather, the Torah poetically speaks of six periods of time—each of which could have been billions of years long—in which the universe came into being. Current scientific calculations place the “big bang” at a bit over 13 billion years ago. These calculations are not based on idle speculation but on carefully studied cosmic phenomena. Religious Jews, along with all thinking people, should feel comfortable embracing the findings of science. There is no contradiction at all between Torah and the “big bang” calculations.

The theory of evolution, which has a strong body of scientific support, posits that life emerged gradually, over the course of many millions of years. Simple life forms gradually evolved into more complex life forms. Human beings ultimately emerged from a long process of evolution. The Torah neither affirms nor denies the theory of evolution. It makes clear, though, that God created the world; things did not develop randomly. God could have created things in an instant; or He could have created things by a process of evolution spanning millions of years. When the Torah states that God created Adam from the dust of the earth, this could mean that God created Adam via a process of evolution spanning a vast period of time—beginning with the simplest cells found in the dust and ultimately developing into thinking human beings. The Torah simply does not provide us with scientific details about the formation of human beings.

Since the weight of scientific information indicates a gradual development of life, we can embrace this information without religious qualms or conflicts. The Torah tells us that God created the world; scientists have been trying to figure out the process of the creation. Thus, the theory of evolution poses no threat whatever to our religious tradition. Rather, it fills in scientific information that was not discussed in the Torah.

Our conflict is not with the theory of evolution per se. Our conflict is with those who claim that evolution happened entirely on its own, without any Divine impetus. Religious Jews may properly accept the findings of science, but must always make clear that it was God who fashioned the universe, who set things in motion, and who indeed created the scientific phenomena upon which the scientists are drawing their conclusions.

During the middle ages, a conflict raged between science and religion on the question of the nature of matter. Science, as represented by Aristotle, argued for the eternity of matter. Religious tradition, based on the first chapter of Bereishith, argued for a created universe. Maimonides, in his Guide of the Perplexed 2:25, maintained the traditional religious view of God as creator. He argued that it is philosophically impossible to prove the eternity of matter. On the other hand, since it is philosophically plausible to posit God as creator of matter, we can safely rely on religious tradition to teach us that which science/philosophy cannot teach.

Yet, Maimonides points out that if indeed it could be demonstrated that matter is eternal, then we would necessarily accept scientific truth. Since God is the Author of both Torah and Science, it is impossible for the two to be in conflict. If science could prove the eternity of matter, then the Torah would need to be re-

interpreted accordingly. “Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been produced in time. For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality.”

Maimonides’ methodology is of profound significance. Religious texts do not and cannot conflict with demonstrated scientific truths. If the texts seem to conflict with scientific truth, then the texts need to be re-interpreted.

People are welcome to accept or reject the theory of evolution, as they think best after they have actually studied the scientific data carefully. But regardless of their personal opinion, they are not entitled to say that “Orthodox Judaism rejects the theory of evolution.” If the theory of evolution is scientifically valid, then religious Jews—along with all thinking people—should necessarily accept it—with the proviso that the process of evolution itself was God’s means for creating life.

Angel for Shabbat