

BERESHIT: Creation and Evolution

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A Lecture Sermon: Why the debate between "Creationists" and "Evolutionists" is not a Jewish problem. What we really learn from Bereshit.

A "Lecture Sermon" on Creation and Evolution

You hear a great deal, nowadays, about the debate between Creationists and Evolutionists. That is not a Jewish problem, and I'll tell you why.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch once explained: "There are two revelations open to man; nature, and the Bible (Commentary to Pentateuch). We believe they are both the word of God. If God created this world, and if He did indeed give us the Torah, then they cannot contradict each other. The same Divine Architect, who made the world, gave us the instructions and the words of the Torah. What then must we say when our observations of nature seem to contradict what we read in the Bible?

There are either of two possibilities: Either we haven't observed nature properly, or we haven't understood the Bible properly."

Rabbi Moshe David Tendler, in a lecture delivered in Australia, gave a detailed talk on Evolution and the Bible, and demonstrated the uncertainty of scientists, not so much in their observations of nature, but rather in explaining these observations. Scientists are at present in turmoil as never before, seeking to find a satisfactory expression of evolution to solve the puzzles of nature.

But however difficult it is to find a satisfactory answer to phenomenon we observe, it is obvious that there is evolution, and in fact we make use of it all the time. We evolve better strains of wheat, we evolve sheep that yield more wool, cows that give more milk, and we treat disease with treatments based on the kinship of the animal and human world. Does this contradict the Bible?

I maintain that it does not. And further, that Judaism never had a problem of this sort. It is a Christian, not a Jewish problem. Because the Bible never intended that the Jew should take the story of Creation in Bereshit literally. The Rabbis forbade learning Bereshit till one is a mature scholar and learned in the rest of Torah. They surely did not mean that we may not read Bereshit' story of Creation! After all we read it once a year in Synagogue when we read the Torah portion of that week! They meant to say that a mature scholar would understand that the story of Creation is not to be taken literally. What they forbade was to teach Bereshit as science! They stressed science must be learned by observation! Mikol etz hagan achol tochel is taken by our Rabbis to be the mandate to learn about the world and to enjoy it, according to God's command. As far as this world is concerned, science provides the

observation. The Torah provides the instruction.

What, then, is the purpose of the story of Bereshit? The purpose of the story of Bereshit is to teach man how to relate, morally and ethically to the world around him, and that is an entirely different thing. It is to teach him how to act, towards God, towards fellow humans, towards animate and inanimate things of the world. And that is the purpose of Bereshit.

Our Rabbis proved this by the searching questions they asked, demonstrating that there are built in to the story of Creation contradictions purposely placed to demonstrate that it is not to be taken literally. For instance: "When were days created? The Rabbis pointed out that if taken literally – days were created on the fourth day! Can this be possible? Consider the verse,

"And they (sun, moon and stars) shall be for signs and for times and for days and for years." It is obviously described in this way for some very different purpose than to teach a physical phenomenon.

The Torah was never studied literally. It was always studied together with the oral tradition. In fact, without the oral tradition, it is quite meaningless and misleading. Without it we could never understand what Tefilin were, what an Etrog is, and how to slaughter in a kosher way. All these things are explained in detail by the oral tradition. And there is no law of the Bible that is not further explained by this tradition.

The same is true of narrative portions of the Torah. And we were never expected to take the Bereshit narrative of the Torah literally. In fact, if you consider the question of days created on the fourth day, it becomes even more complicated by the fact that the whole question of time consciousness is depended on the human being. He is the only historical creature. Since his creation is recorded as taking place last of all, time consciousness could only begin when man comes on the scene!

Rashi, in the first passage of the Torah, addressed this problem. He asked why the Torah didn't start with *Hahodsh haze lachem rosh hadashim*, "This month is the first month to you." He really asked why the Torah needed the whole of Bereshit and part of Shemot. After all, it is a book of laws. It does not tell stories pointlessly. The answer is that the stories are not pointless. They teach us about our relationships. Rashi's example is about our relationship to other nations, vis-à-vis the Land of Israel. If God made the whole earth and all its people, we are all His. So is Canaan. He can remove it from whomsoever He chooses, and give it to the people of His choice.

So Rashi's answer must be understood in the light of the purpose of Bereshit; to teach us how to live in this world.

For we live in a milieu. We are a people amongst other people, Jews among other nations of the world. And we together with all humanity, because of our humaneness, face the world with common problems as human beings. We are therefore told about the world, and every

story we are told in Bereshit has a point to teach us something vital about the way to relate to the world and to the people in it, to God and to our own consciences, learning about our obligations, our duties, and the gifts we are given.

So if you examine the Bereshit account carefully, you find many lessons for life. For instance: It teaches the order of creation, hence the fact that creation has a purpose. It teaches the orderliness, hence the perfection of creation. But it also teaches that creation is not yet finished, and it was created by God *laasot*, so that man continue with the work of creation and in this way become a "partner with God in creation".

In this connection, if you placed the first three days next to the last three days of the Creation story, you find a remarkable orderliness, in that the first three days relate to the last three days. What was created on the first three days was necessary for the "derivative". For example: if you arrange the days thus:

Day I-Day IV;

Day II-Day V;

Day III-Day VI,

you find the following relationship:

On the first day light and darkness was created. So on the fourth day were created sun and moon and stars, to be "for signs, times, days, seasons and years".

On the second day were created the heavens above, the *Rakia* (a division), and the waters, above and below this division. Thus, on the fifth day were created the fowl of the air, the birds, and the fish of the sea.

On the third day were created earth, land, grass, and herbage. So consequently, on its counterpart, the sixth day, were created the creatures to enjoy this, animals and man. Obviously the narrative has nothing to do with the way in which they were created and the episodes in history. It has to do only with the remarkable balance and wholeness of creation, and the fact that it was created in harmony. And with such harmony, there must be purpose to this creation.

To continue with some of the lessons we learn from Bereshit:

From Creation, the order, orderliness and purpose of Creation: that there is a Creator, not an accidental creation, and that the Creator continues to create. And this is not taught with philosophical proofs, or through miracles, but with powerful words of God speaking from the pages of the Torah, like later He spoke from Mount Sinai, "I am the Lord your God".

We learn also about the nature, function, purpose and duty of man, family and society. We learn about the relationship of man and woman, of man to the world, to science, to God. We also learn of the purpose of society and its limitations too.

From the Tree Of Life, we learn of the nature of temptation and sin. We learn about teshuva, that there is such a thing as return and forgiveness, and that there is also accountability and punishment. We learn about the nature of law, and commandment, and from where it comes, and that man doesn't make up laws Himself, but God ordains them. Who is obliged to heed the law? Is man's choice really free? And we learn many things about life and death.

From the story of CAIN and ABEL, we learn how to serve God with sincerity. We learn about the consequences of human jealousy, and how it arises. We learn the nature of moral law, and whether it is natural. For if Cain is held accountable for the crime of murder, he must have been warned, somehow, beforehand. Where is this warning? Within him? In previous verses of the Bible? We learn also about the result of crime, and the relationship of crime to sin, and the birth, the nature and the origin of evil. We learn, too, of man's obligations when confronting evil, and his duty to make the proper choices between good and evil, right and wrong. Nowadays we can learn the lesson that no-one may blame his genetic nature impelling him to do evil, as Cain tried to do, as if to say, "Its your fault, God, for making me the way I am. I couldn't help it. "Am I my brother's keeper"? God's answer is "Lapesach chatat rovetz, veelecha teshukaso", Sin crouches at the door ready to pounce upon you and compel you, "veata timshol bo", "but you are obligated to rule over your nature, and not the other way around".

All this and so much more are the lessons of Bereshit. Perhaps we begin to study it in our schools too early. Because it is surely composed of the deepest, most awesome, most significant words and thoughts; words and thoughts that go directly into the heart of man, reveal his relationship to fellow man, society, nature, the world we live in, and Almighty G_d Himself.