

[**NOTE:** Rabbi Light (all the names in this post are pseudonyms) is a Johannesburg educator. I had previously helped him to reply to the queries of one of his students regarding Judaism and science. I have made slight editorial changes to our exchange. None are significant in terms of content.]

[This is the email which I originally sent to Rabbi Light.]

בס"ד

Dear Rabbi Light,

Here is something interesting to bring to the attention of your student Jarrod:

<http://news.stanford.edu/news/2010/august/sun-082310.html>

כל טוב,

Yoram

[Here is Rabbi Light's response.]

Dear Rav Yoram,

Thank you very much, such a fascinating article - I will make sure Jarrod gets it.

I also want to apologise for the current stalemate w.r.t teaching your presentation at [a local Jewish day school]. I have a dilemma. On one hand my personal leaning is to agree with your view on evolution and I believe something must be done to combat the atheist agenda that generally accompanies teaching evolution. On the other hand my employers feel that your view is too rigid and perhaps not even correct, they also believe (and with this I agree) that teaching such an outright denial

of evolution (specifically from a religious standpoint) could have negative outcomes for their Yiddishkeit in the future.

I am not sure how to proceed. I would appreciate your perspective on how to move forward.

Wishing you and your family a g'mar chasima tova.

Sincerely

Roger

[Here is my response.]

בס"ד

Dear Rabbi Light,

I very much sympathise with your dilemma, and I don't think that an apology is necessary.

Here is a short excerpt from my forthcoming book, which I think is relevant to your conundrum:

But kiruv, like all areas of Jewish endeavour, is bound by halacha. The fact that kiruv is important does not mean that kiruv-considerations supersede other Torah principles and allow one to circumvent halacha.

This point is often not understood or is ignored, particularly by ba'alei teshuva (those who themselves became observant as a result of kiruv). The overwhelmingly positive transformative effects of kiruv have led many to overlook the fact that *all* Jewish endeavours are bound by halacha. Over the years, as I publicised the serial abuses of Torah sources found in Dr. Schroeder's books¹, many people have asked me whether Dr. Schroeder's tactics can be justified on the basis that he is successful in kiruv. The answer is unequivocal: The propriety of our actions is determined only by halacha. Even

¹ See, for example, the document *Genesis and the Big Bluff* on my website, www.TorahExplorer.com, and the Readers' Feedback page.

when we sincerely think that we are doing God a favour, only halacha determines whether the action is truly valuable. This idea is conveyed in countless classical sources. Here is one²: When King Hezekiah (חזקיה) fell ill, he was visited by the Prophet Isaiah. The prophet instructed him to wrap up his affairs, for God had decreed that he would die. The king asked why this should be, and was told by the prophet that his fate was decreed because he had failed to marry and fulfil the commandment to procreate. The king thereupon explained that he had had a premonition that any child that he begot would be wicked. So in order to promote God's agenda, he refrained from marrying. Hearing this, the prophet Isaiah responded with a sharp rebuke: Stop second-guessing God! Do whatever is incumbent on you, and let *Him* deal with the consequences.

The Talmud records this episode in order to instruct us that good intentions are not enough. King Hezekiah was one of the most righteous kings we ever had. His motivations were pure. He sincerely believed that it was better for God's scheme that he, the King, should refrain from bringing a wicked child into this world. But he was wrong in assuming that he could short-circuit God's plan on the basis of his own analysis. No matter how perspicacious we are, the ultimate consequences of our actions are hidden from us. Initiatives that appear to be correct and to further God's purposes can turn out – sometimes only centuries later – to have been foolish or downright tragic. There is plenty of historical precedent for this. The story of the Enlightenment Movement (השכלה) and the Conservative and Reform movements is replete with attempts to save God's people from demise. Without doubt, some Reform and Conservative clergymen were sincerely motivated. When they instituted mixed seating in shuls or recognised the children of mixed marriages as Jews in defiance of halacha, it was (sometimes) done out of genuine concern that our numbers were dwindling and that urgent action had to be taken. In retrospect, of course, their actions turned out to be as futile as pushing on the seat in front to make the bus go faster. The only guarantor that our actions will be

² מסכת ברכות (דף י). ויבא אליו ישעיהו בן אמוץ הנביא ויאמר אליו כה אמר ה'... צו לביתך כי מת אתה ולא תחיה וגו' מאי כי מת אתה ולא תחיה מת אתה בעולם הזה ולא תחיה לעולם הבא אמר ליה מאי כולי האי אמר ליה משום דלא עסקת בפריה ורביה אמר ליה משום דחזאי לי ברוח הקדש דנפקי מינאי בנין דלא מעלו אמר ליה בהדי כבשי דרחמנא למה לך מאי דמפקדת איבעי לך למעבד ומה דניחא קמיה קודשא בריך הוא לעביד

ultimately beneficial is halacha's stamp of approval. This is true for kiruv as it is for any endeavour. The fact that one is sincerely trying to influence uninformed Jews does not grant one licence to play with Torah sources. The sources are sacrosanct. **[This is the end of the excerpt. My email continues below.]**

The above excerpt is relevant to this statement in your email:

They also believe (and with this I agree) that teaching such an outright denial of evolution (specifically from a religious stand point) could have negative outcomes for their Yiddishkeit in the future.

To pretend that we know how particular influences will play out in the case of individuals in the distant future is sheer folly. I have often marvelled how, at the end of an Arachim seminar (I have lectured at dozens of them over the years), we have no idea as to who, among the delegates, will flourish as Jews and who will just fizzle. You can try this with your students. I guarantee you that in twenty years, you will be utterly amazed at how things have turned out. Often, the students you thought would drift away end up committed, and vice-versa. Human beings are just too complex for this kind of prediction. Their ultimate level of Yiddishkeit is subject to countless interactions, events, social developments and, of course, their *בחירה*. There is only one responsible thing you can do – teach the truth.

In the document *Professor Shapiro and Rabbi Blue*, I applied this to a recent historical precedent – the emergence of the Big Bang hypothesis, barely 45 years ago. There too, the argument could have been made that one should not be so bold in denying the scientific dogma: *They also believe (and with this I agree) that teaching such an outright denial of an eternal universe (specifically from a religious stand point) could have negative outcomes for their Yiddishkeit in the future.* It turned out differently... Those who wanted to bend the Torah to the prevalent scientific paradigm ended up with egg on their faces, when the scientific community itself embraced the Big Bang model and abandoned the eternal universe paradigm. What's more, their claims that they were helping Jews who struggled with this conflict between the Torah viewpoint and the reigning scientific ideology was exposed as a sham: alienated Jews who saw how the Torah can be manipulated with every changing wind grew to despise its practitioners; those who saw how Torah-Jews refuse to buck to the

current ideology often (grudgingly) acknowledged our integrity. The Torah is what it is! You cannot bend it, nor can you suppress it. Here is an important statement from Rashba³:

ישראל the inheritors of truth, descendants of יעקב the Man of Truth, זרע אמת, would prefer to suffer continued exile and its horrors rather than accept something without critically and thoroughly analyzing it, step after step, to separate out anything of doubtful validity... even when it appears to be miraculous and absolute!

Exactly the same is true here. All the pontificating and calculating assumes that we have perfect knowledge about human free will and psychology. If that were true, we wouldn't need the Torah in the first place. But throughout history, Jews have understood that regardless of our logic, there is a higher Being whose thoughts are not necessarily the same as our thoughts. Here are two obvious examples:

1. Is it not logical to expect that anyone who closes his retail business on שבת will lose his livelihood? It's so obvious! Those observant Jews are loony if they think that working one day less than their competitors will enable them to survive in the free-market jungle.
2. It is perfectly logical to expect that a marriage will be more successful if the couple have known each other for three years and have lived together for six months before deciding to get married. How can you possibly expect a marriage to be successful if a couple met for five dates and then got married?

In these and countless other examples, logic is undeniably on the side of the critic. Nonetheless, the critic is wrong. If you really understand that the world was created and continues to be managed by an omniscient, omnipotent Creator, the *only* logic that works is His logic. We must do our part, and let Him deal with the consequences. In our context, what is *our part*? To teach the Torah with integrity. As long as we maintain the integrity of the Torah, we have *nothing* to fear.

Now, let's look at the options. At the moment, the students are exposed to a biology syllabus (and countless outside influences like Maropeng, National Geographic magazine and David Attenborough documentaries) that exposes

³ שאלות ותשובות רשב"א חלק א תקמ"ח.

them to full-frontal Darwinian evolution. There is not a shred of doubt that this is deleterious to their Judaism. Furthermore, it *necessarily* brings to a contravention of הלכה in that one needs to start treating Torah sources as plastic. For example, if evolution is true, we cannot read the creation of Adam as we always have; we will have to treat the whole episode as allegory. This is forbidden by all ראשונים who understood the passage as literal. This is ודאי.

The alternative is to teach this material – it is too late to change this fact now – but to supplement it with my seminars. This will be beneficial for the students' critical skills, if nothing else. As far as the long-term consequences, I pointed out above that we are obligated to follow הלכה and nothing but הלכה. The rest is up to הקב"ה. At the very least, there is a ספק as to whether this will be ultimately beneficial or not. Even Rabbi Fleischman acknowledges this; he does not pretend to be a prophet. He only professes a concern about the possible effects of the seminar.

I have no doubt that in this case, ספק מוציא מידי ודאי.

The fact that you feel that you are in a dilemma and that you approached me is a positive sign. I have tried to explain to you and to others in the past that one of the signal failures of this generation is to believe that regardless of the gravity of the question under consideration, anyone can choose for himself and the advice of Torah sages is unnecessary – איש הישר בעיניו יעשה. Thank Heaven, there are a few of us left who do not follow the fashion of looking at גדולי תורה as old nincompoops who are cynically manipulated by outsiders with an agenda. In my opinion, teachers and administrators like Rabbi Fleischman and Rabbi Blue, for example – intelligent and capable fellows that they are notwithstanding – should not be making fateful decisions for thousands of young, uninformed Jews because they have done a smattering of reading and have vague impressions and ill-defined concerns. They don't have the shoulders for it.

In the latest issue of *Jewish Life*, there is an advertisement for a seminar that I am scheduled to present at Oxford Shul, starting on Wednesday evening 13th October, for 4 weeks. As a first step, I suggest that you attend, in order to gain familiarity with the audio-visual seminar.

I sincerely wish you all the best, and success in your הינוך endeavours.

כל טוב,

Yoram Bogacz

Hi

Rav

Yoram

Thanks for the reply (and the time taken to compose it). The only thing that I am uncertain of is how could certain gedolim be prepared to even potentially accept evolution if it is such an outright contravention of halacha ? (Rav S R Hirsh, Rav Kook etc).

Please also explain how if the Rambam says that we cannot understand Ma'aseh Breishit literally (as quoted by Rav N. W. in the email I sent you - I haven't seen the source myself) how we can unequivocally maintain a definite position on evolution and state that it is a "vadai" as you have in your email?

Thank you again for your time spent and patience in dealing with an ignoramus on the issue as I am.

Regards

Roger

Dear Rabbi Light,

The fact that an individual suggests a certain position, which is subsequently rejected, is not at all surprising, even if he is a world-respected figure. This is true in השקפה as it is in הלכה. Here are two examples. Rabbi Hillel states (מסכת :סנהדרין דף צח:) that the משיח will not come. Countless Jews have learnt and will continue to learn the words of Rabbi Hillel. We treat these words as Torah; nobody would dare to suggest that Rabbi Hillel was guilty of מינות and אפיקורסות. Nonetheless, the majority of אמוראים rejected his position and that became the consensus (and only acceptable) opinion. For anyone to suggest now that the משיח will not come would most definitely constitute כפירה.

Here is a second example. Rambam wrote his famous איגרת תחיית המתים in response to the writings of Rav Shmuel, the Rosh Yeshiva of Baghdad. The latter had written that תחיית המתים must be interpreted allegorically. He

insisted that this was imperative because philosophically one could not justify such an occurrence which violated all natural law. He also claimed that many verses in תנ"ך stated unequivocally that the dead could not be resurrected. I doubt that you have heard of Rav Shmuel. That's because his views were ultimately rejected by כלל ישראל. But he was the leading scholar in Baghdad at the time when that city was still the leading centre of Torah study in the world, and the ראשונים were just starting to establish themselves in Europe and North Africa. His stature among his contemporaries was easily equal to that of Rabbi Hirsch. Consider this. To us, תחיית המתים is an inseparable part of Judaism. It is one of Rambam's thirteen עיקרים, after all! Nonetheless, a leading light in Rambam's generation did not believe that this was a Torah notion. His view was so popular, in fact, that Rambam had to write his famous epistle to refute it.

Numerous similar examples from various historical periods can be given. It takes time for the situation to be clarified. Even people who undoubtedly made major contributions and were even considered world-class Torah figures can turn out to have been wrong on fundamental issues.

Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that Rabbi Hirsch was sceptical of what historical sciences can achieve. Jewish theistic evolutionists often cite one comment Rabbi Hirsch made in his *Collected Writings*. But here is another relevant point, from his Torah commentary:

One who visits the Dead Sea region today and sees the sulphur springs and the volcanic terrain will interpret the destruction of these cities as an ordinary natural occurrence... The causes would then appear natural, without need to refer to God... But the words *from God, from Heaven* show that this view is incorrect... You are confusing the cause with the effect... You hold that the catastrophe was caused by the character of the terrain as you see it now, when in truth the present form of the terrain is only an effect of this catastrophe... **The geological theories of the origins of the Earth are probably based on similar errors.** The visible phenomena upon which these theories are based are real, but the conclusions based upon them are false. These theories, too, confuse the causes with the effects. The phenomena which they interpret as the causes of

geological upheavals are in reality only the effects of upheavals called forth by God when He formed the Earth.

The Pentateuch T'rumath Tzvi, The Judaica Press 1986, page 96 (commentary on Genesis 19:24)

This comment, of course, is totally at odds with the usual portrayal of Rabbi Hirsch as a proto-evolutionist.

At the time Rabbi Hirsch wrote, there was little clarity because these ideas were so new. Rabbi Hirsch was נפטר in 1888, scarcely 30 years after *The Origin of Species* was published (in 1859). Whatever he wrote on the subject was probably written only within a decade or two of the publication of *The Origin*. The ideas contained in *The Origin* would take decades to become fashionable within science, and they barely registered within the Torah world. I suggest to you that Rabbi Hirsch's writings were preliminary, tentative thoughts. At any rate, we now maintain that he was wrong. This takes nothing away from Rabbi Hirsch. The fact is that the consensus coalesced around the conviction that Darwinian evolution – and I mean this is the broadest possible sense – is incompatible with the Torah. *Even* if Hirsch himself would have remained sympathetic to these ideas, it won't do today to point to his position and say that it is acceptable, just as it is invalid to point to Rabbi Hillel's position or Rav Shmuel's position and claim that they are acceptable.

You wrote that *we cannot understand Ma'aseh Breishit literally (as quoted by Rav N. W. in the email I sent you - I haven't seen the source myself)...*

This is incorrect. Here are Rambam's words (מורה נבוכים חלק ב, פרק כט), followed by the correct translation:

שכל מה שנזכר בתורה במעשה בראשית אין כולו כפשוטו כפי שמדמה
ההמון

For all that is recorded in the Torah about the process of Creation, the entirety is **not merely** the simple translation as the masses imagine.

What Rambam means is that there is **more** to מעשה בראשית than the literal meaning. There is a world of difference between that and saying that מעשה

cannot be taken literally. Rambam insisted in innumerable places that *מעשה בראשית* must be understood completely literally. Thus, we find Rambam repeatedly referring to *אדם הראשון* as an actual person, not an allegory for human beings who were really the end-product of an evolutionary process. Here is a typical example:

It is a fundamental belief that the world was created *ex nihilo* and that a specific human being, *אדם הראשון*, was created individually and that from his creation until *משה רבינו* approximately 2500 years elapsed.⁴

Following the opinion of *רבי מאיר*, Rambam writes that *אדם הראשון* was created initially as an androgynous being. He refers throughout *משנה תורה* to the fact that *אדם הראשון* was created on a specific day, with an absolutely literal interpretation of the first chapters in *בראשית*⁵. He takes literally the Talmudic passages and *מדרשים* that say that *אדם הראשון* offered a *קרבן* on the day that he was created.⁶

Furthermore, in many places, Rambam unequivocally wrote that *everything* was created with a specific purpose. He would have totally rejected the notion of vestigial organs, which are a central tenet of Darwinian evolution.

I don't think it is necessary to elaborate. It is absolutely *ודאי* that Rambam totally rejected anything except the belief that *אדם הראשון* was a unique creation of *הקב"ה*, created at *הר הבית* on a specific day, having had no history whatsoever.

⁴ **מורה נבוכים חלק שלישי פרק נ.** כאשר היתה פנת התורה שהעולם מחודש ואשר נברא תחלה היה איש אחד ממין האדם והוא אדם הראשון, ולא היה באורך הזמן אשר מאדם עד משה רבינו רק אלפים וחמש מאות שנה בקרוב.

⁵ **הלכות שמיטה ויובל פרק י הלכה ב.** נמצאת אומר בשנת שלש וחמש מאות ואלפים ליצירה מר"ה מאחר מולד אדם הראשון שהיא שנה שניה ליצירה התחילו למנות.

הלכות בית הבחירה פרק ב הלכה ב. ומסורת ביד הכל שהמקום שבנה בו דוד ושלמה המזבח בגורן ארונה הוא המקום שבנה בו אברהם המזבח ועקד עליו יצחק, והוא המקום שבנה בו נח כשיצא מן התיבה, והוא המזבח שהקריב עליו קין והבל, ובו הקריב אדם הראשון קרבן כשנברא ומשם נברא, אמרו חכמים אדם ממקום כפרתו נברא.

⁶ **שבת דף כח:** דאמר רב יהודה שור שהקריב אדם הראשון קרן אחת היתה לו במצחו, שנאמר ותיטב לה' משור פר מקרן מפריס. מקרין תרתי משמע אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק מקרן כתיב.

I appreciate your candour in admitting to a lack of knowledge of the relevant sources, both in the Torah literature and the scientific literature. The truth is that many rabbis are ill-informed in this area. Between you and me, how many תלמידי חכמים do you know who could actually tell you where in the בית מדרש you could find a copy of מורה נבוכים? People hear snippets here and there and think they are qualified to form firm opinions in areas where they are entirely incompetent. Many בני תורה would readily acknowledge their ignorance in הלכות נידה, say. But it is extremely difficult for them to acknowledge ignorance in an area of השקפה. Every rabbi considers himself an expert in השקפה, even when this is entirely unwarranted.

כל טוב,

Yoram Bogacz