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## **Why Is Evolution So Scary?**

Evolution Shabbat 2011

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Today is the anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin in 1809, making this Evolution Shabbat. It's part of a three-day Evolution Weekend, which the Islamic Association in Big Flats observed yesterday and some Christian churches will observe tomorrow.

The purpose of Evolution Weekend is to explore the relationship between science and religion, with the specific goals of mustering religious support for the teaching of evolution in public schools and resisting efforts to insert "creation science" or "intelligent design"—both terms are code words for a particular religious view—into the school curriculum.

I said last year that the appearance of conflict between the Torah and modern science is not a problem for most Jews, even the most Orthodox Jews. All of us fall on the side of teaching the best science. If it seems to conflict with the Torah, we deal with it in various ways: by reading the creation story in Genesis as metaphor, as many liberal Jews do; by treating science and religion as separate spheres of knowledge, as most Orthodox Jews do; or by treating any conflict as a demonstration of the limits of our knowledge and understanding. The last of these was the approach of Moses Maimonides, the Rambam, about 800 years ago, so it has the authority of time. (Maimonides generally opposed excessively literal readings of Scripture, although he also said that literal readings were not conclusively wrong.)

Thus, even ultra-Orthodox schools in Israel—there is a parallel system of religious day schools, also funded by the government—do not object to teaching the theory of evolution on the grounds that it is untrue or contrary to Torah. On the other hand, according to Noah Efron, a science professor at Bar Ilan University and a member

of the Tel Aviv city council, some of them do object to devoting the total amount of time to science that government standards require—not because they think it’s untrue, but because they think it’s unnecessary.

But if evolution is not a big problem for Jews, why am I speaking about it today? One reason is that others *make* it a problem for us. Both for the sake of our own children and for the sake of our society, we *have* to care about what is taught in public schools.

Another reason is some of the things that give others problems with evolution really do matter to us, even if we often choose to ignore them. What I’m suggesting is that the first Biblical account of the Creation addresses innate human needs. I mentioned last year that we all see the point of teaching the version of the Creation in Genesis 1 to children, because it represents the world as orderly and meaningful, one in which God knows what God is doing. Like other ancient creation stories, it serves psychological needs that still exist.

In particular, the fact that human beings are the last thing created on the sixth day leads us to feel that *we* are the point of the whole shebang: it’s all leading up to God’s creation of *us*. This view is supported by God’s seeing that the creation on the sixth day is not merely good, but *very* good, and by Gen. 1:28, “God blessed them [humans] and God said to them, ‘Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.’”

The King James version of the Bible, familiar to almost every English-speaking person, doesn’t say, “master it.” It says, “subdue it” and “have dominion.”

In other words, God didn’t only create us last. God put us in charge.

That idea, by itself, would seem to authorize unlimited appetites of all kinds—including desires for land, possessions, and money. Although it’s implicit in the text, that reading has no standing in Jewish thought. The most traditional Jewish view is that we were created to serve God, not to be God’s stand-ins on earth. It’s not a license to drive other species to extinction or to make parts of our planet uninhabitable. We’re not even commanded to exterminate snakes. A traditional view would be that every species is precious to God, even snakes.

But I do think that this is why some people so firmly defend the Biblical account of Creation and so vigorously oppose the theory of evolution. In an evolutionary view, no species is inherently more important than any other: we all evolved together and it seems that the paths of evolution, the mechanisms by which it takes place, are the same in all of us. For example, the same genes are found in wildly different organisms, sometimes performing different functions, and the genetic differences among species are comparatively minor.

But we *want* to be more important than other species, and we don't like being told that we're not. In the evolutionary view, we do things because we have evolved in a way that makes them possible, not because we were given special license to "have dominion" over all other animals.

In a sense, this is the difference between what James Kugel, one of my teachers, now calls the "small human" and the "big human" points of view. In the "small human" point of view, each person is only a tiny part of the universe, while in the "big human" point of view, each person's psyche fills the entire universe and everything else is perceived either in relation to it or as a component of it.

Kugel says that "small human" is the ancient view, in which humans can readily perceive relationships to the Divine, while "big human" is the modern view, in which we perceive the Divine as existing only within ourselves.

It should follow that those who defend the Biblical account and oppose the evolutionary account would also oppose efforts to protect the environment, because the Biblical account can be read to justify doing just about anything we please to the environment. Remember, by that view, we're in charge; we "have dominion" over all other animals and we don't owe them a thing.

And that's exactly what is happening. The same religious extremists who denounce the theory of evolution and try to force "intelligent design" into schools have now decided to broaden their fight against science by promoting a so-called Biblical view of environmental stewardship. What this means is largely to claim that human-caused global warming *has* to be a myth because it's contrary to the Bible. It's a religious attack on protection of the environment.

This is most evident in a new 12-part DVD entitled *Resisting the Green Dragon*. Its distributors state, “Around the world, environmentalism has become a radical movement. Something we call ‘The Green Dragon.’ And it is deadly, deadly to human prosperity, deadly to human life, deadly to human freedom, and deadly to the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

I think it’s significant that the first “deadly” they list is “to human prosperity.” To my mind, that suggests that it’s profit, not spirituality, that’s really behind it all.

The Jewish view is almost completely the opposite of this. Our tradition would say that the Torah exists not to give us unlimited rights over the world, but to limit what we can do. That is certainly the thrust of rabbinic thought, and I venture to say that even our earliest rabbis would have been baffled by a claim that environmental stewardship was contrary to Torah.

But we *want* to believe that we’re important, that we’re the center of everything. I think that this need, although exaggerated by modern culture, is hard-wired in us. Some religious traditions, such as Christian asceticism and, more notably, Buddhism, try to eliminate it.

Jewish tradition does not. Rabbinic law is realistic; it attempts to impose limits. So, while the Talmud instructs us to say, *Bishvili nivra ha-olam* — “The world was created for my sake” — our tradition warns against taking that too far.

A favorite Hasidic story concerns Rabbi Simcha Bunem, who was known for moderation. He carried in two notes in his pockets. When things went especially well and he felt a lot of pride and self-importance, he would reach into one pocket, take out one of the notes, and read it. It said, “I am but dust and ashes.”

But if he was overcome by anxiety and self-doubt, he would reach into his other pocket and read the other note. It said, “The world was created for my sake.”

*Bishvili nivra ha-olam*. The world was created for my sake. For our sake:  
*bishvilanu nivra ha-olam*.

But if we are mindful of evolution, we must add, “not only for our sake.”