

Koshering Darwin: Is It Worth It?

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 Wednesday, 06 June 2007
 Last Updated Thursday, 07 June 2007

Schroeder does it, Aviezer does it, Slifkin does it. Even Torah giants like the Tiferet Yisrael did it. So why doesn't the Lubavitcher Rebbe join their ranks? Apologetics is the art of repackaging truth to gain popularity, but compromise sometimes backfires. Hirsch and Maimonides notwithstanding, pandering to the "cultured" Jew does not always pay off, for you or for him. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains.

Darwin's Hechsher[1] There are many famous explanations in various books attempting to "kosherize" the Theory of Evolution, and to tailor our Sages' statements accordingly. Possibly the most famous is the "Ohr HaChaim Discourse," written by the Gaon Rabbi Israel Lifshitz, author of the Tiferet Yisrael commentary on the Mishnah.[2] In that discourse, he also attempts to cite the mystics to support his theories. I must say that it is beyond me and many like me, where he found these ideas in any printed works of Kabbalah. With all due respect to his Torah knowledge, he distorted the meaning of several statements of our Sages. Eventually, the fact that the rest of his commentary to the Mishnah was accepted and publicized caused a very strange thing to occur: Although in the years since his time, and especially in our generation, the "facts" upon which his discourse is based have been scientifically disproved, many truly orthodox rabbis today state publicly that they accept the conclusions reached by that discourse because of his interpretations of our Sages' words?[3] [In their words: The questions on many of our Sages' statements from the theory of evolution, and Darwin's theory, and so on, have already been answered in the "Ohr HaChaim Discourse."] True, his words were said and printed. Yet, from the tone of these writings, they were obviously not written as a result of an honest belief in the veracity of those theories. They were written with a very specific agenda in mind: to demonstrate to the non-Jews that even references to their views and theories can be found in the holy Writings and in our Sages' words. Indeed, even the authors themselves admitted that their answers are extremely forced and often inconsistent with the plain meaning of the verses. But despite recognizing shortcomings of these answers, they felt it necessary to promote them regardless, in an attempt to improve the outlook of the outside "world" towards our holy Torah.

One Rambam—Two Teachings This approach has been followed by even the greatest among the Sages, such as the Rambam, about whom it is said, "From Moshe to Moshe, there was none like Moshe." [4] Anyone who studies his book *Yad HaChazaka* [5] can clearly see that the approaches he submits in his *Guide to the Perplexed*—especially the reasons he writes for many of the commandments—are not his true approach to Torah. [6] That being the case regarding Rambam, it is surely true of many other Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages [7] and of our own day as well. They distorted the meaning of our Sages' words in an attempt to tailor them to accepted "scientific" theories. They imagined that in this way G's name would be sanctified, since His words would receive greater respect from various segments of both Jewish and non-Jewish society.

When Compromise Backfires Regarding the practical fulfillment of mitzvot, compromises are obviously unacceptable. When dealing with attitudes, and explaining issues in Torah apparently contradicted by science, some people argue that only compromise will succeed at "conquering" the youth, who fervently believe in science and its conclusions. The truth is, however, that we can see how many casualties fell because of this approach; casualties, not only in the sense that they are filled with false beliefs, but even with regard to a weakening in the fulfillment of G's commandments, and—eventually—more so—in their willingness to undergo sacrifices for the sake of those commandments. This, despite the fact that specifically our generation, while truly an "orphaned generation," has merited a new degree of clarity in this area; today, even the scientists admit that their conclusions are all no more than theories. For instance: Some Torah greats [8] labored very hard to reconcile the plain meaning of the verses dealing with the movements of the sun and moon—the "the sun rose, the sun set," etc.—with Copernicus' approach, [10] an approach that was for many years accepted as absolute truth. They considered it a mitzva to distort the meaning of the verses to adapt them to this theory. Then along came Einstein's Theory of Relativity, which proved [11] that from a scientific perspective, it is impossible to verify which of the spheres is stationary and which are revolving around it; they are only moving relative to one another. It is therefore valid to posit that the earth is stationary and the stars are revolving around it, and any challenge posed to one of these conjectures can be similarly posed, with slight changes, to the opposite conjecture. [12] It is therefore unnecessary to interpret the verses in a roundabout manner, or to distort their meanings with forced explanations. Our Sages' statements, too, may be understood as meaning exactly what they said.

Science and Certainty The well meaning people who felt a need to explain various Torah sources in ways contradicting the traditional interpretation did so only because they (mistakenly) believed that the Torah's views (regarding, for instance, the age of the world, etc.) are successfully refuted by scientific conclusions. Otherwise, they would never have searched for new interpretations of the Torah's words. The body of apologetic writings, or at least a large part of it, arose from this mistaken perspective. It relied on the principle that just as "One may deviate from the truth for the sake of peace," [13] so too is it worthwhile to make some "legitimate" semantic concessions to science, if that would help maintain commitment to the Torah and its commandments. This approach stems from the mistaken notion that scientific conclusions are certainties. (Perhaps we can judge them favorably and better understand their approach to science based upon the fact that the Torah sometimes grants science an even greater degree of veracity than modern science claims for itself. For instance, halacha dictates [14] that Shabbat may be desecrated when human life is endangered. A doctor alone is authorized by halacha to decide whether such a danger exists. [15] There are many other examples.)

Apologetics Then and Now These conciliation attempts are a throwback to the previous century, when

a wide body of apologetic literature was composed by various rabbis, including rabbis such as Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch and his followers, in response to the dogmatic stance of the scientific community of that era. These rabbis saw no better way to protect Torah-true Judaism in their "progressive" communities than to adopt contrived and hollow interpretations, so the Torah would conform to the worldview prevalent at the time. They surely recognized that their interpretations were contrary to the true Torah. In their defense, they felt that they had no choice. But the damage caused by that approach—which is being suffered to this very day—demonstrates that this was a mistaken approach even for their time, despite the temporary apparent benefits. My reasoning is that at the root of these apologetic reconciliations lies compromise, and compromise is antithetical to truth. Eventually, the truth will be revealed. Compromise weakens and ultimately destroys everything built upon it. Even conclusions reached through this method of compromise—which in and of themselves may be true, as they happen to concur with conclusions reached by a true approach—eventually fall by the wayside. Although my mind was made up about this long ago, my personal experiences here in the United States and the general behavior of the youth here have further strengthened this conviction. In reality, no confirmation is needed. Since our Torah and truth are one and the same, any deviation from it, even if undertaken with commendable intentions, will ultimately cause damage—since it is not, after all, the path of Torah. Who can be considered greater than the Jewish thinkers hundreds of years ago? As mentioned, they attempted to explain our Torah and faith in a manner consistent with then-current philosophical beliefs. Their intentions were definitely pure, and yet the effect on some of their disciples and their disciples' disciples was the exact opposite. Many of them ended up promoting philosophy to the central focus and final say in their lives. This result was so widespread that contemporary Jewish leaders felt it necessary to outlaw those Jewish philosophers' books—at least temporarily—and the damage continued to be felt for generations. Nowadays, there is definitely no justification to continue that inferiority complex by supporting views now only available in outdated textbooks. How disheartening that those who should be the foremost spokesmen and disseminators of the Torah's approach, especially amongst the "younger generation" of Jews and specifically amongst academics, instead find themselves confused and embarrassed to protest against what is going on. This is even more painful nowadays, when science has finally managed to shed its antiquated arrogance, and has recognized its limitations and borders. For example, science has accepted Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle." Thus, an observant scientist can now proudly adopt Torah's stance without any fear of contradiction. Yet, certain Jewish scientists have still not been freed from the chains of nineteenth century views, and from the feelings of inferiority that accompanied them. The time has surely arrived to consider anew whether any basis for such a stance exists today. The deciding factor is the fact that science's most recent achievements, which highlight its limitations, have caused a fundamental shift in science's self-perception. Therefore, science has decided that absolutes no longer exist. The principle of "causes" has given way to the principle of "probabilities"; i.e., "the probable chain of events." Furthermore, modern science has concluded that scientific theories are not absolute or final truth. They merely represent the best possible summation of experimental knowledge today; any theory may be overturned as more data becomes available. First and foremost, explain to the younger generation that asking questions from areas of scientific knowledge on areas of religion and faith is nonsensical, just as using a possibility to question a definite certainty would be absurd. Thus, clarifying this point automatically eliminates any push or need for apologetic material. All that then remains is to rectify the damage caused by the existing materials—the damage of compromise, which mutes the person and compromises the truth, and which, as mentioned, is contrary to truth.

For those who hesitate to completely reject the foundations that those Jewish philosophers worked so hard to build upon, it is worthwhile to remember the oft-quoted wise saying (which the Tzemach Tzedek mentions in a letter to one of the reformers of his day): "Love Plato. Love Aristotle. But love the truth even more!"

[1] This article is a compilation of translated Hebrew letters published in *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 7, p. 133; Vol. 15, p. 60 and p. 133; and *Emunah U'Smada* p. 45. (from *Mind Over Matter*, p.98-106)

[2] It is printed at the beginning of his commentary to the Order of Nezikin. [3] On another occasion, the Rebbe wrote regarding another apologist: "With even cursory thought it is obvious that Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's approach is utterly inappropriate for the Holy Land today, or even for the United States. In fact, it can bring great harm. It involves confusing youth with questions and doubts totally removed from their frame of reference, and then attempting to answer those questions. Nobody was interested in the whole complication in the first place; they were seeking the pure truth. In our Sages' words: "The simpler, the better." Even someone who was himself educated in this approach may have been far better off without all these falsified questions and long, complicated, and dangerous responses. Rather, one should follow directly in the straight path—the study of the Torah of Israel, just like our ancestors who are called "believers the sons of believers," without dabbling in foreign vineyards and secular studies." (*Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 19, p. 144.) [4] From inscription on the Rambam's gravestone in Tiberias. [5] Rambam's legal code, also known as *Mishnah Torah*, or simply "Rambam," an acronym of the author's Hebrew name. [6] It is important to remember that every field of Torah or science has its own set of rules. Therefore, the statements that Rambam makes in his philosophical/scientific books do not always concur with his own statements in his legal works. For instance: In his philosophical opus *Guide to the Perplexed* (3:26), Rambam states that there isn't, and there can't possibly be, a reason for every specific detail of every commandment. Yet, in his legal code (end of *Temurah*) he writes: "Although all the statutes of the Torah are G-d's decrees, it is still worthwhile to meditate upon them, and to find a reason anywhere possible." Similarly, in *Teshuva* 3:4 (and at the end of *Tahara*), he offers an ethical reasoning—almost a symbolism—for commandments that are "statutes" or "Divine decrees." Furthermore, Rambam (end of *Me'ilah*) lists the prohibition against consuming pork, and that

against eating milk and meat together, as being “statutes”—without reason. Yet, in the Guide 3:48 he explains that eating these foods is detrimental to one’s health. (The Abarbanel in his commentary on the Torah (Vayikra, 11:13) completely rejects this reasoning.) The Ramban (Vayikra, 1:9) similarly rejects Rambam’s interpretation of the sacrifices (Guide, 3:45-6) as being merely a tool to help the Jews avoid the temptation of idol worship. Cf. Likutei Sichot, vol. 16, p. 529. and Vol. 24, p. 149. See also Biur HaGra on Yoreh De’ah (179:13) regarding various problems arising from Rambam’s legal approach. [7] Compiler’s note: It is interesting to note the attempts made by Rabeinu Zerachia HaLevi (in his commentary HaMaor HaKatan on the Rif, Rosh HaShana, 20b, 25a.) to explain the Talmud’s statements regarding the moon’s movements in accordance with astronomical theories prevalent in his time. The Ra’avad, on the other hand, strongly rejected these attempts: “he [i.e., Rabeinu Zerachia HaLevi] is crowning himself with a crown that is not his. We should not base ourselves on statements made by those who were not “men of the Talmud,” and corrupt the law to fit their words when it is not so. We have heard that R’ Yitzchak son of R’ Baruch, who was an expert in this field as well as in halacha, completely refuted these attempts. He is to be commended for doing so.” [8] See the notes in Geva Tzarfati’s “Talmudic Cosmology,” printed in Tarbitz 5726 issue 35, pp. 137-148. [9] Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), 1:5. See Rambam, Yesodei HaTorah, 3:4. Also, the Shabbat liturgy: “Who brings the sun out of its place.” [10] In his famous book, which was printed approx. 450 years ago, Copernicus suggested that the assumption in astronomical equations should be that the sun, and not the earth, is at the center of the universe, and all the planets, etc., including the earth, revolve around it. He stresses, however, that he himself did not believe that this was necessarily the case. Rather, he merely felt that the calculations would be much simpler if predicated on this assumption. The proponents of his theory later took the additional step of teaching that Copernicus’ approach is indeed fact. [11] Of course, even this is merely a proof based on the present state of scientific knowledge. Interestingly, specifically this theory of relativity, which by its very nature precludes the idea of an absolute truth, is currently accepted by the scientific community as absolute truth, and they are oblivious to the contradiction inherent in their position. [12] The same applies to Euclidian and non-Euclidian geometry. In the past, the a priori assumptions upon which Euclidian geometry was based were accepted as absolute fact. The conclusion of modern science, however, is that both theories are acceptable, and that any challenges posed against one can be posed, with slight changes, to the opposing theory as well. [13] Yevamot, 65,b. Rashi ibid. [14] Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 328:2; 329:1. [15] Compiler’s note: Isn’t it enough for there to be a possibility of danger to life? What proof is there that the Torah gives the doctor’s opinion the status of certainty? Who says the Torah says the doctor’s always right? Indeed, the Pitchei Teshuvah (Yoreh Deah, 187:30) quotes the Chatam Sofer’s conclusion that the Sages did not trust a doctor’s opinion as being a certainty, but merely as enough to consider such a situation one of danger to life. They did, however, consider medical opinion to be fact regarding general statements as to the existence of a given type of condition. The Tzemach Tzedek (Yoreh Deah 119), however, questions this conclusion based on other, conflicting sources. Possibly the Rebbe’s intent is to a proof acceptable to all opinions: Where the doctor feels that intervention is unnecessary, or where he declares that the patient has died, we would not desecrate the Shabbat. Therefore, we accept medical opinion as a certainty.