EDITOR’S NOTE

“A RELIGION CHALLENGED BY SCIENCE”—AGAIN?
A REFLECTION OCCasionED BY
A RECENT OCCURRENCE

Even as a youngster who counted himself pre-med, and a rationalist to boot, I doubt that I ever thought the great debates on cosmology and natural history and religion more than entertaining sideshows. If the Torah were intended primarily as a textbook in these subjects, it should have been a lot more explicit and detailed regarding scientific data and theory. The real questions were elsewhere, I knew intuitively: as yet without the benefit of a philosophical education, I sensed that we are human beings summoned to interact with our Creator before we are scientists. If God revealed Himself to us, it would be to guide us in confronting the mysteries of the human soul and the strange vicissitudes of human history rather than to utter oracular pronouncements about natural science that would be deciphered millennia later, not without the benefits of cleverness and hindsight. It seemed to me that those who devoted inordinate time to potential conflicts between the Torah and specific scientific propositions were missing the point of religious life or trying to evade it.

As a young adult, with my present religious convictions more or less in place, I had the privilege of spending a few hours with an eminent physician-scientist, well known as a lay luminary of Orthodoxy. He had recently published on Darwinism and religion and similar subjects. No sooner had we been introduced than, as if reading my mind, he exclaimed: “Don’t think that I care much about this stuff. I lecture on it because I’m asked to; I publish because there’s a demand. For me, a real religious question is a child dying of leukemia.” I understood completely.

This does not mean that one’s experience of science—and its interaction with theology—is irrelevant to religious matters, or that it has no role to play in the quest for religious truth. We do seek God in the realm of science, sometimes without being fully aware that we are doing so. In our contemporary situation, we ought to ponder how the developments of modern science affect our quest for God in ways that are different from our conventional assumptions.
Take one example: Most of us are familiar with R. Bahye Ibn Pakkuda’s version of the argument from design. When you find ink distributed to form sentences, you can safely infer that this is not the result of an accidentally spilled inkwell, but rather the product of intelligent design. Many educators embrace this argument. Often, continuing the tradition associated, at its best, with 18th century thinkers like Archdeacon Paley, they illustrate the principle by pointing to cases where the parts of an organism are wonderfully adapted to its function.

Despite what you hear from the bastions of academia, such arguments are alive. Some scientists continue to regard the intricacies of the human eye and other wondrous phenomena as evidence of a directing intelligence. Recent philosophers have devoted attention to the so-called anthropic principle, which argues that natural evolution is unlikely to have produced creatures capable of uncovering the laws of nature. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the revolution in biological thinking originating with Darwin has enabled scientists to devise plausible naturalistic explanations of unusual biological facts. Philosophical naturalists firmly believe that they will eventually produce compelling explanations of all such phenomena. Insofar as the arguments revolve around the probability that a particular event could have happened according to one story or the other, conclusiveness is lacking. The straightforward briskness of the inkwell argument is not available to us.

None of this changes the fact that many religious people—and I include myself among them—experience wonder when we contemplate examples of adaptation, regardless of how they may be explained, and this apprehension of the wonders of creation enhances our awareness of God. Despite all the philosophy I have digested since then, my sense of wonder is as immediate today as it was almost half a century ago, when I heard my father marvel at the fact that “this piece of flesh can see, and that piece of flesh can hear.” Indeed, it is precisely when I learn how various organs that seem perfectly intended for their present function may have evolved in a purely fortuitous manner, as with the panda’s “thumb” about which Steven Jay Gould wrote his famous essay, that I am most fascinated and awestruck by the strange twists and turns of creation.

What does change, for those of us who have studied a little science, or have heard about it second hand, is that the road to God through the biological world and the knowledge of that world does not turn up at the end of a proof, as a clinching inference from a string of inferences and information. Instead, even when it emerges from study, it expresses an immediate sense of being overwhelmed by the grandeur of God.
In crucial respects, the experience to which I allude is more akin to an aesthetic apprehension than to the kind of metaphysical result that many of us expect. And while the customary argument for design carries a certain tranquility about it: all is harmonious and well-ordered—“God’s in His heaven, all’s right with the world”—I speak of an experience that is frequently disturbing and even frightening. We find God, not only in a neat teleological account, but also (perhaps especially) in phenomena that fascinate and frighten all at once. In the language of aesthetic theory, when we meet God in the overwhelming, non-teleological aspects of nature, we encounter the sublime rather than the beautiful, and I do not believe that the development of this contrast in the work of Burke and Kant, among others, in the same period when the harmonious conception of nature began to crack, is entirely coincidental. In existential terms, we are closer to the bedside of the child with leukemia than to the realm of late 18th century teleological theodie- cies parodied so effectively by Karl Barth.

From a Jewish perspective, of course, there is nothing particularly modern about all this. The special occasions for which the Mishna ordained berakhot do not pick out the purposeful displays of God’s cre- ative power. If anything, while perfection of adaptation is an appropriate theme in the asher yatsar that follows the call of nature, it is often in the odd and frightening that the Halakha bids us bless Him: gales, thunder, fulgurations, comets, and the like; mountains, seas, deserts, and rivers; exceptionally beautiful people, but also those of abnormal appearance and anomalous form. Psalms celebrate the orderly governance of nature. Yet when God finally appeared to Job from the whirlwind, He exhibited His mastery of nature less in the purposeful arrangement of the cosmos than in His creation of bewildering natural processes and monstrous beings like Behemoth and Leviathan. I know that some people, despite having recited these blessings all their lives, will find the notion that we encounter God in these experiences puzzling. That is why thinking seri- ously about them is important.

II

These are the types of discussions we should be having about science and our religious world. Notwithstanding which, the fact remains that many believers are still pitching their tents at the old battlegrounds, agonizing endlessly, and sometimes with real pain, over the acceptability
of natural history and its incompatibility with a literal reading of Genesis. Many young people, unprepared for such challenges, feel intellectually helpless when interrogated by curious and sometimes hostile outsiders. Though I doubt that any compilation of localized terutsim, clever as they may be, can satisfy, without a grasp of the fundamental difference between the knowledge revealed by Torah and the knowledge discovered by science, the inquiry does not seem illegitimate. I surely don’t think my emuna was harmed by the innocent teenaged hours spent reading about these controversies and attending lectures intended to resolve them.

Others are not as tolerant. As of this writing, there is much sympathy for a young talmid hakham who has suffered calumny because he published his attempts to relieve the intellectual tension many feel in connection with these matters. I cannot evaluate his efforts, which are, as noted, peripheral to my major interests. It is generally agreed, however, that his work is earnest and well intentioned, his approach steeped in piety and very much within the bounds of respected Jewish thought. Like most books in an imperfect world, they presumably could be improved upon: in most areas of Torah, such open debate is welcomed. Harmless, then, at worst; helpful, perhaps even inspiring and conducive to religious growth, at best.

I have not studied the comminations directed against the works of this teacher of Torah. Those I have perused fail to undermine my initial positive impression. The virulence of the denunciations, combined with the apparent thinness of the reasoning behind them, caused embarrassment, consternation, and genuine crisis among many who had previously been wont to ascribe authoritative centrality to the pronouncements of contemporary Torah sages, even as they inspired chortling among those “modern” Orthodox pleased to highlight their alienation from their more rigorous brethren to the right. In any event, the objections seemed so sweeping, so censorious of so much that we consider mainstream Orthodox thought, that I am led to believe that the true difficulty is not being stated openly.

The most charitable understanding of all this, from my limited perspective, is that those who were quick to condemn, and those who joined the chorus of condemnation reluctantly and unhappily, are motivated by the fervent desire to safeguard wholesome belief. Of course, it is obvious to almost all of you that ignoring or anathematizing standard science is neither a live option for us, nor is it an honest one. The crisis currently affecting many participants in the “yeshiva world” indicates the
risk of bad faith in adopting a policy of avoidance today. In this respect I stand with the “modernists.” Yet because I am convinced that preoccupation with such matters is theologically and religiously unhealthy, I can therefore understand, if not endorse, the intuition that avoidance is the best policy and that this end is best achieved, according to insider opinion, through a total, ruthless, and relentless embargo on all discussion, however innocuous.

Let me make it clear that when I criticize giving too much attention to the standard sugyot of conflict between science and religion, I do not mean to imply that such tensions or contradictions are impossible, or that correct theological belief is unimportant, or that it is good for us to compartmentalize our lives. Here is what Maran ha-Rav Joseph Soloveitchik z”l wrote (in a treatise on the philosophy of science!):

It would be absurd to maintain that the interference of organized religion with scientific advancement was prompted by political or practical motives alone. The conflict arose rather from the essential cognitive interests of a religion challenged by science. The controversy did not rage so much about single scientific propositions as it did about the entire world perspective which was incommensurable with the basic religious cognitive outlook. Religion could not (and will not) recognize the scientifically postulated universe as its own.

(The Halakhic Mind 119)

Even a cursory reader of this passage—and of the book from which it is taken—will grasp that the Rav is not interested in simple affirmations or negations on the part of religion towards science. It would take a great deal of intellectual labor to unpack the ramifications of his position—what he says, and what he studiously avoids saying. Those interested in his utilization of modern (mid-20th century) evolutionary biology can consult his posthumous The Emergence of Ethical Man (recently edited by Michael Berger). But he definitely lends no support to the notion that religious belief must passively conform itself to the scientific weltanschauung.

The “Modern Orthodox” community has its own problems with internecine politics, and little reason to gloat over the deficiencies of others. But the premature exclusion of legitimate discussion is not our besetting temptation. To the contrary, members of our community are more likely to fall into apathy regarding the distinctive cognitive commitments of Judaism. For believers firmly committed to Orthodoxy, the tragedy of unfounded accusations is not only the harm done to undeserving targets, but also the way such actions cheapen our theological convictions. Every
time incendiary language is let loose irresponsibly, one hears the message
that, as practiced by the world, imputations of heresy are not about life
and death truth, but about something else. It is precisely because correct
belief is essential to Judaism that we must combat the kind of careless
condemnation that has lately come to the surface.

Shalom Carmy