

**Darwin, Genesis, and Judaism: Making Sense of it All**  
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The Torah is not a science book. The Torah does not describe the laws of gravity, motion, or thermodynamics. It does not dwell on genetics, biochemistry, or astrophysics. If you want to read about those sciences you should consult Newton, Boyle, Einstein, Mendel, Hawking, and yes, even Darwin. That six letter word, Darwin, is not a bad word in the synagogue. Neither evolution nor science is the enemy of Judaism; they are not in conflict with faith or belief in God, and they are not inconsistent with how Jews read the creation narratives. If the Torah meant to be a science book it would be filled with equations, chemical formulas, and mathematical proofs. But it does not set out to describe the physical or biological existence of the world. The Torah, the Bible is a book of moral guidance, religious values, and faith. The Torah is a blue print for a society built on justice, compassion, and holiness. If this is the subject matter you are looking for then I strongly encourage you to consult your Bible.

A beautiful and thoughtful treatment of this point is contained in the *Notes to Genesis* in the blue Hertz Chumash. You see on most days you're considered lucky if you are sitting in the seats with the large red book, the Etz Hayim. It's newer, its language is more accessible, and its commentary is more modern. But sometimes there's nothing like an old classic. The Hertz Chumash was the classic Bible commentary in synagogues of all denominations for over a half century. Dr. Joseph Hertz, the late Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, as he is auspiciously referred to on the title page, created this masterpiece of commentary that is now relegated to the *farthest* rows and the *overflow* seats. Yet Rabbi Hertz writes on page 193 that Genesis is fundamentally about the fact of creation, not the manner of it. The manner of creation—that is to say, the process by which the universe came into existence—has been the domain of philosophers and scientists for millennia. What is revolutionary about Genesis is that the world was created at all. And the claim that Genesis makes is that the world was deliberately and planfully created; That life on earth has purpose; That our existence has meaning; That all life is sacred and that human life is most sacred because it has the most potential.

This is the revolutionary, countercultural message that Torah comes to deliver to the world in its opening lines.

Hertz goes on to say: There is... “nothing inherently un-Jewish in the evolutionary conception of the origin and growth of forms of existence from the simple to the complex, and from the lowest to the highest. The biblical account itself gives expression to the same general truth of gradual ascent from amorphous chaos to order, from inorganic to organic, from lifeless matter to vegetable, from animal to man...”

Now we have to admit that Darwin was not particularly convinced of God’s existence. In fact he once said that he would scrap his whole theory of natural selection “if it requires miraculous additions at any stage of descent.” Okay, so on that note Darwin and Judaism part company. I believe that the creation of the world was deliberate, Darwin believes it was accidental. I don’t vilify him for that, like the creationists or intelligent design proponents do all the time. Dallas is the hotbed of the intelligent design community. The Institute for Creation Research is headquartered not far from here on Royal Lane. For them it’s a bumper sticker battle between the *Ichthys*, or as it’s otherwise known, the Jesus fish and the Darwin fish often seen consuming the Jesus fish. My father in law has a gefilte fish on the back of his car, and though you laugh, these goofy marine wars actually demonstrate the Jews don’t really have a fish in this hatchery! Rashi, one of Judaism’s greatest exponents of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, wrote in the introduction to Genesis “*lo ba ha’mikra le’horot seder beriyah*,” the Torah does not mean to teach the specific order of creation. Furthermore he states, “*ein ha’Mikra haze omer eile darsheini*,” which means this text is nothing if not mysterious. It requires, literally cries out to its readers, Explain me! More information is required to understand what Genesis means to convey to its readers. So while some Christians argue for teaching creationism based on a fundamentalist reading of Genesis, Jews are content to learn the science in school and the various meanings we ascribe to it at shul.

So since we are all here at shul today, I want to share with you some of the powerful meanings I take from this text. And again, I thank the late Rabbi Hertz for inspiring me and for elucidating these principle Jewish teachings...

1. Genesis teaches that there is a Creator of the Universe that is above and beyond the natural world. While ancient peoples worshipped the moon and sun and modern people worship houses and cars they often can't afford, the straightforward message of Genesis is that the source of goodness and beauty and hope in the world comes from none of those things, but from the *Ein Sof*, the Infinite God Who transcends all time and space. And while that God is so beyond anything we can touch or envisage here on earth, that God nevertheless cares enough about this creation to provide it a detailed owner's manual. A user's guide if you will, for getting the most out of this magnificent gift we call the world.

2. Genesis regards human beings as the goal and crown of creation. Rabbi Hertz is not at all troubled about humans being cousins with the apes. "But it is not so much the descent as the ascent of man which is decisive," he says..."It is not the resemblance, but the differences between man and ape that are of infinite importance." *Na'aseh adam betzalmeinu kidmuteinu*, God says. Man is the only part of creation that is made in God's image, and is therefore precious and holy. Would that Stalin have understood the intrinsic holiness of every human being—because if he did he could not have systematically killed 30 million people, or Hitler 12 million, or Mao 40 million, or Pol Pot 1/3 of his fellow Cambodians. This claim of Genesis is the greatest indictment against raw secularism. How do Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and bestselling atheists argue that religion is so dangerous when secularism has been far more horrifically violent in the history of the world? Yes religion can be diabolically manipulated (I am the first to admit that), but to ascribe the world's evils to religion while exonerating the secular is irresponsible and dangerous. The fact is that no human life is expendable if you take Genesis seriously.

3. You cannot escape the optimism and hope that is laced throughout the creation story! We often miss this as we get mired in the details of what was created on which day. Yet we ought to stop and recognize God's reflective response to each day of creation. *Vayar Elohim ki tov!* God surveys the results of each day and says: This world is fundamentally good...it is *meant* to be good. When we read the newspapers or watch the evening news or feel the stress of financial markets and wars and terrorism it is easy to imagine that the world is anything but an intrinsically good place. Instead of shirking from that challenge, Judaism responds by calling upon each one of us to work toward the redemption of the world...that is, redeeming the world from its current suffering so that it can be what it was intended to be. Judaism, whose adherents have known a disproportionate amount of suffering, never gave up on the conviction laid out in Genesis that goodness and hope is still possible even in a complex world.

4. There is one institution, one contribution that our text makes to the world that is found in no other ancient literature or creation myth; One idea that is quintessentially Jewish—an idea that changed the world and our relationship to it. The “culminating teaching” of this chapter says Hertz is that the Sabbath is part of the “cosmic plan.” Last night we sang about it in *Lecha Dodi*...at the end of the second stanza: “*sof ma’asei be’machshava techila,*” which means that though the Sabbath was the last to be created (so to speak), after the world and everything in it was finished, it is as much a part of creation as anything else. To work is important, it is our own participation in the creative process six days a week. But to rest from our labors, to pause in order to celebrate our existence, to sing, to pray, to have uninterrupted time with family and community—this is the gift of Genesis to the human family. And it is as relevant to agrarian, primitive societies as it is to our fast paced, electronically over-stimulated and overworked world today.

5. I want to add one more eternal value that Genesis teaches that Hertz doesn't mention. The Mishnah does, however, in Tractate Sanhedrin 4:5. The rabbis wonder why Genesis teaches that we have one common human ancestor, namely *Adam Ha'Rishon*, the first man. It's a good question when you think about it. God could have created a whole society on the sixth day to populate the world, rather than creating one person then a

second one and commanding them to be fruitful and multiply. The reason, says the Mishnah is the following:

*Mipnei shalom ha'beriyot*, for the sake of peace between people. *Shelo yomar adam lechaveiro*...so that no person can say to another...*aba gadol mei'avicha*...my father is greater than your father. Genesis speaks of one common ancestor so that there can be no hierarchy of value among human beings, so that no one's pedigree can be considered better, more sacred, more worthwhile than any other. All these centuries later some of us have not learned that message. How much suffering has our world endured because the Genesis message was not understood... Because people felt free to tamper with an ethical system that did have room for discrimination or racism. If we all have the same ancestors, if we are all branches on the same family tree as Genesis teaches, then regardless of our skin color or ethnicity, there is simply no toleration for bigotry of any kind.

Chief Rabbi Hertz, who I might add was the first graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1894, my alma matter, concluded his commentary on Genesis on the following note:

The purpose of Genesis is “to reveal these teachings to the children of men—and not to serve as a textbook of astronomy, geology, or anthropology. Its object is not to teach scientific facts; but to proclaim highest religious truths respecting God, man, and the universe. The ‘conflict’ between the fundamental realities of Religion and the established facts of Science is seen to be unreal as soon as Religion and Science each recognizes the borders of its dominion.”

To that, my dear friends, I say ‘amen.’ And I hope you do too.