

**Rosh Hashana 5766**  
**2nd Day Service**  
**Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen**

### **""Intelligent' Design?""**

On August 2, a sharp debate between scientists and religious conservatives escalated over comments by President Bush that the theory of intelligent design should be taught with evolution in the nation's public schools. Once again, the debate of creationism vs. evolutionism is showing its head. The debate over Church vs. State is in the forefront as we ask, what should we teach our children?

Unquestionably, today, as we read the story of Creation, we contemplate how to reconcile the story of creation and the facts presented to us by the scientific community. We are curious about the evolution of simple cell organisms to multi-celled intelligent creatures that inhabit the earth. However, as Jews we have always been aware of the importance of the separation of Church and state in order to allow religion to flourish in the United States. But this debate is no longer creationism vs evolutionism. No, a more sexy term is being thrown around in the halls of congress and our schools. This term is Intelligent Design.

Intelligent design, advanced by a group of academics and intellectuals and some biblical creationists, disputes the idea that natural selection – the force Charles Darwin suggested drove evolution – fully explains the complexity of life. Instead, intelligent design proponents say that life is so intricate that only a powerful guiding force, or intelligent designer, could have created it. [\[1\]](#)

However, the designer is not named and it is therefore, easier to try and pass off as scientific thought since with no mention of God. This is unlike the Creationism movement in which God and religion played a major role. Creationists failed to gain full momentum when they pretended to be engaged in science, not religious indoctrination: "creation science" was too crude to fool anyone. But what intelligent design has over creationism is that it spreads doubt about evolution without being too overtly religious.

Later in August, Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee suggested that the theory of intelligent design as well as evolution should be taught in public schools. Senator Frist said that "such an approach doesn't force any particular theory on anyone, I think in a pluralistic society that is the fairest way to go about education and training people for the future."

So the question comes down to: Can a scientific explanation of the history of life include the actions of an unseen higher being? There are scientists who are saying that the complexity and diversity of life go beyond what evolution can explain, therefore, there must be a great force at work.

But is this the easy way out? Is it just easier to say, I can't figure out how this all works, so it must be designed? But not all scientists aren't buying the argument. Afterall, there is a century of research that supports Darwinian evolution and invoking a higher being as an explanation is

unscientific. As Douglas H Erwin at the Smithsonian Institution says, "One of the rules of science is, no miracles allowed!." Scientists have learned that scientific evidence provided by evolutionary studies can explain complex natural phenomena and then use solid theories to fill in the blanks. One of the main reasons, evolution leaves tracks through DNA that is found in fossils.

But, as scientists have pointed out, while trying to fill in the missing blanks, intelligent design provides a more seductive attach on evolution because intelligent design accepts many of the conclusions of modern science. They agree that the age of the universe is 13.6 billion years, not fewer than 10,000 years if we were to read the Torah literally. They also believe that mutation and natural selection, the central mechanisms of evolution, have acted on the world in some small ways. And some intelligent design advocates even accept common descent, the notion that all species came from a common ancestor, a central tenet of evolution. So what's the problem?

According to one scientist, Douglas D. Axe, "If we've defined science such that it cannot get to the true answer, we've got a pretty lame definition of science." Scientists argue that the designer theory does not work because there are no artifacts or biological signs – no scientific evidence, in other words – to suggest a designer's presence. But does this mean that there are no scientists that believe in God?

At a recent scientific conference at City College of New York, a student in the audience rose to ask the panelists of Nobel laureates an unexpected question: "Can you be a good scientist and believe in God?"

Herbert A. Hauptman quickly chimed in with a clear, "No!" He declared that "belief in the supernatural, especially belief in God, is not only incompatible with good science, this kind of belief is damaging to the well-being of the human race." But this feeling is far from universal. Some scientists suggest that science and religion are two separate realms. Stephen Jay Gould put it in his book "Rock of Ages" that science speaks with authority in the realms of "what the universe is made of (which is fact) and why does it work this way (which is theory)" and religion holds sway over "questions of ultimate meaning and moral value."

Dr. Noah Efron of Bar Ilan University in Israel, said, "scientists, like other people, were guided by their own human purposes, meanings and values. The idea that fact can be separated from values and meaning jibes poorly with what we know of the history of science. [\[2\]](#)

It is a relatively recent phenomenon that scientists profess to be non-believers. Isaac Newton, for example, wrote more about the Bible than he did about the laws of nature, yet look at what we remember him for. And when examining a recent survey in the journal of Nature, scientists who did believe in God believe in a God who is behind the laws of nature but who is not intervening. And finally, there is the issue of understanding what it means to be a human being. No answer can be found through natural observation. We can't understand why we are here and what the meaning of life is through science.

Judaism has always tried to balance between science and belief in God as creator of not only the world, but the natural laws that are in play. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of the 19<sup>th</sup> century wrote:

"Judaism is most anxious to make its adherents aware that all the phenomena of nature are subject to certain unchanging laws. Since Judaism itself is a system of laws through and through, it attaches a profound ethical value to the study of the natural sciences. Judaism considers it vitally important for its adherents to become aware that their entire universe is governed by well-defined laws, that every creature on earth becomes what it is only within the framework of fixed laws, and that every force in nature can operate only within specified limits.

"Not by his whims of the moment but only by his own detailed knowledge of, and regard for, these laws can man make nature serve his purposes. Man himself, then, can exercise power only if he, in turn, obeys the laws set down for him and for his world."

So it is suggested that there exists a relationship between science and religion, yet, where does this relationship exist? Does it belong on a sticker on a science textbook in Georgia which reads, "this textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully and critically considered." Also in Cobb County, Pennsylvania, a school district decided to place the evolution disclaimers on students' biology texts after parents complained that the book did not present alternative views.

Deborah Lauter, the director of the Anti-Defamation League in the southeast region said that "efforts by people from the Christian right who have a real agenda, whether they couch it as intelligent design or creationism, is not only harmful for Jews, it fundamentally undermines American democracy. Securing religious liberties in this country means preserving church-state separation."

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism said "the efforts of others to impose a theological discipline where it doesn't exist is unfortunate. It violates church-state separation. It's bad technique and not good for children." And when asked about those few in the Orthodox community who are in favor of teaching intelligent design because God has been banished from public life, Rabbi Yoffie said it was "totally absurd. America is the most religious of the industrial countries. And that is attributable directly to the church-state separation that is embedded in the Constitution. Stronger religious life goes hand in hand with church-state separation."

As we have read from the story of creation and as we see creation unfold before us daily, Jews can believe that God's intelligence set in motion some kind of evolutionary process. Afterall, there are great questions that remain, such as why are we here and what do our lives mean?

These questions are not questions that belong in the public school system. These are questions that should be explored with our families and in our synagogues and religious schools. The forefathers of our country were wise in creating the separation of church and state in order that we can seek answers to both questions of "how" for the facts and the "why" for our souls. And

the "why" does not seem to have one answer, nor should it. We are challenged to not only investigate our world through scientific exploration, but we are also challenged to develop our relationship with God. And as each of us can attest, that relationship is as unique as the individual. Hence, it cannot be taught in school in a science class, it can only be nurtured through the study of Torah and the life-long relationship the individual creates with God.

Stanley Gevirtz suggests that one may approach Bereshiet in much the same manner as one approaches poetry. He wrote:

"To the question of the 'truth' of Genesis the sensitive response can only be: it is, indeed, true; not in the sense in which a statement of a physical law is true, but few things that really matter to the poet ever are. It is true in the way that great poetry is always true: to the imagination of the human heart and the orderliness of the human mind. This God-and-Israel-centered account discriminates, as every good historical narrative must, in its choice of events and presents us with history not, perhaps, as it was but as it ought to have been."

Torah presents for us, not a modern explanation of the way the world was or came to be, rather it makes suggestions of the nature of human history, the meaning of existence, and the presence of God.

The debate over creationism or intelligent design vs. evolutionism will continue for generations to come. After all, don't we all want the answer to every question regarding how we came to be and our purpose? While we should continue to ensure that the respect for church-state separation is sacred, we should seek a balance in answering the questions we can through science and bask in the beauty of the unanswerable question with, "O God Who works in ways we do not yet understand -- Blessed are you O God, creator of all."

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[1] New York Times: "Bush Remarks Roil Debate on Teaching of Evolution," Elisabeth Bumiller. August 3, 2005.

[2] New York Times: "Scientists Speak Up on Mix of God and Science," Cornelia Dean. August 23, 2005.