RASHI WAS NOT A CREATIONIST-
NEITHER NEED WE BE.
A sermon delivered on Parshat Bereishit, October 6, 2007
by
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The scene took place over 65 years ago. The participants were a 14 year old sophomore in Hunter High School, sitting on the bed of her 9 year old brother and discussing with him the latest revelations about evolution, about which she had learned in her biology class.

“Do you believe in evolution?” she asked her brother.

“What's evolution?” he asked.

The young 10th grader proceeded to explain evolutionary theory to her brother. At the end of the explanation, the brother responded: “Well, it sounds reasonable to me.”

Then came the more difficult question: “Well, how do you reconcile that theory with the description of creation in Bereishit?”. The nine year old responded: “I guess you have to say the Bible is the Bible, and the scientific theory of evolution is a scientific theory. There is no real need to reconcile them.”

My sister looked at me with a combination of astonishment and annoyance and said: “Where is your intellectual honesty?”

I confess, I didn’t understand the term “intellectual honesty” at the age of 9, but I’m not sure I would answer her questions differently were they posed today. However, in the intervening 65 years or so, I have found some support for my instinctive response as a nine year old.
The support begins with Rashi’s understanding of the purpose of the Biblical account of creation. In his second comment on the word Bereishit, Rashi says as follows: “This Biblical expression begs for a deeper explanation, as our sages have said, “For the sake of the Torah which is referred to as Reishit… and for the sake of the righteous who are referred to as Reishit… And if you want to explain it according to its literal explanation, explain it thus: ‘In the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth, the earth was void and in a state of confusion and darkness, and God said let there be light.’ For the Biblical text does not intend to explain the order of creation and to say that this came before that. For if it did want to do this, the Torah should have started with the words ‘First, God created the heavens’… And if you insist that the Torah actually intended to teach that in the beginning God created this and that…you would have to ask yourself in wonderment where the waters came from because in the very second verse the Torah states that a wind from God was hovering over the waters, and there has been as yet no revelation from the text about the order of which came first and which came second, so when were the waters created? Apparently, the waters preceded the Earth!” Furthermore, Rashi indicates that if the Torah had wanted to give an account of the order of created things, the first word in the text would not have been Bereishit which means “in the beginning of” but rather Barishona which mean “first.”

If, then, the order of the first chapter of Genesis is not chronological – establishing what came first and what came second and third, and so on, why does the first chapter of Genesis exist? Why not begin, as Rashi commented in his first words about Bereishit, with the first mitzvah in the Torah – the sanctification of the months, which actually appears in chapter 12 of Exodus? The answer, as implied from Rashi’s first comment on the Torah, is that the descriptive
part of the Torah serves the same purpose as the *Halachic* part: to teach a way of life. The *Halachic* part of the Torah teaches it directly by giving us positive and negative commandments. The *Aggadic*, or descriptive, part teaches indirectly by stories and descriptions.

What then can we learn from the story of creation? There are many things that we can learn. We might cite just a few.

1. We can learn that there is a first cause, a prime mover in the world. The world did not just happen. There is a God who set things in motion. Many scientists who approach the world without a basis in faith have come to such a conclusion. As a matter of fact, many prominent scientists whom we would not normally identify as religious feel that an understanding of how the world works actually leads one to faith in God. In a recently published book “The Challenge of Creation: Judaism’s Encounter with Science, Cosmology, and Evolution” Natan Slifkin cites a number of such supporting sources.

Albert Einstein, *Lettres a Maurice Solovine*, page 102

    You find it surprising that I think of the comprehensibility of the world to the degree that we may speak of such comprehensibility as a miracle or eternal mystery. But surely, *a priori*, one should expect the world to be chaotic, and not to be grasped by thought in any way… even if the axioms of the theory are posited by a human being, the success of such a procedure supposes in the objective world a high degree of order, which we are in no way entitled to expect *a priori*. Therein lies the ‘miracle’ which becomes more and more evident as our knowledge develops. And herein is the weak point of positivists and professional atheists, who feel happy
because they think that they have pre-empted not only the world of the
divine but also of the miraculous.

In other words, as Slifkin writes, “We take order for granted. We have been brought up
with the concept of laws of nature. To us, it is obvious that the universe should make sense. But
Einstein considered it “miraculous” that the universe evinces order.

A distinguished Biologist, Waldemar Mordecai Wolff Haffkine (1860-1930), inventor of the
cholera and Bubonic Plague vaccines, wrote as follows:

Alone of all religious and philosophic conceptions of man, the faith which binds
together the Jews has not been banned by the advance of research, but on the
contrary has been vindicated in its profoundest tenets. Slowly and by degrees –
passing through innumerable stages in an analysis of the life of animals and plants
and of the elemental phenomena of heat, light, magnetism, electricity, chemistry,
mechanics, geology, spectroscopy, astronomy – science is being brought to
recognize in the universe the existence of one Power which is of no beginning and
no end; which has existed before all things were formed and will remain in its
integrity when all is gone; the source and origin of all; in itself beyond any
conception or image that man can form and set up before his eye or mind… This
sum total of the scientific discoveries of all lands and times is an approach of the
world’s thought to our Adon Olam, the sublime declaration of the creed by the help
of which the Jew has wrought and will further work the most momentous changes
in the world…

Cited by Rabbi Dr. Isaac Herzog, “The Talmud as a
Source for the History of Ancient Science”
Slifkin concludes Chapter 2 of his book with the assertion that the more that science succeeds in discovering the laws of nature, the more their existence and design points to a Creator. He cites the following words from Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch:

Indeed, each discovery in the natural sciences only confirms the fundamental truth first set forth by Judaism: There can be no thought without a thinker, no order without a regulator, no law without a lawgiver, no culture without a creative spirit, no world without God and no man without the gift of free-willed morality.


Slifkin concludes by citing a statement by Paul Davies, Professor of Mathematical Physics at the University of Adelaide, who writes as follows:

It might seem bizarre, but in my opinion science offers a surer path to God than religion.

Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics*, p. ix

This is the first thing we can learn from Bereishit: the order in the universe is the result of God as Creator.

A second principle that we can learn from the stories in Bereishit is that God not only is the organizer and creator of the world, he is also involved in the world. He is engaged in the effort to have mankind function morally and ethically. We learn this from the story of Adam and Even and the interaction between them and God. We then see that God’s plan for the world, to have mankind function morally and ethically did not work out, “for the Earth was filled with violence” (Genesis, 6:11). God tried to fix things with Noah and it didn’t work. He finally chose
Avraham Avinu and saw him and his family as the solution to creating a moral and ethical world: “for I love him because he will instruct his children and his household so that they should preserve the way of God and live according to righteousness and justice.” (Genesis, 18:19)

There is much more to be learned from the Aggadic tales of Bereishit but these two ideas are fundamental: that there is a Creator and that the Creator is engaged with the world.

But, despite the conclusion of Rashi that the Torah is not trying to teach chronology, there is, I believe, a strong hint to evolutionary theory in the Torah and the hint, strangely, is actually provided by Rashi, quoting the Talmud in the Tractate Hagiga, 12a. The Talmud, and Rashi comment on the fourth day of creation: “And God said let there be luminaries in the heavens to divide between day and night…” (Genesis, 1:14). Rashi, apparently troubled by the creation of the sun on the fourth day when light was created on the first day and vegetation on the third, cites the Talmud as follows “They (the luminaries) were created on the first day, and on the fourth, God commanded them to take their places in the heavens.” He then goes on to say something quite startling: “and the same is true for all the creations of heaven and earth; they were all created on the first day, and each one was placed in the universe on the day for which it had been decreed.” This last statement comes from two Midrashic sources: Tanchuma Yashan, and Bereshit Rabba, 12:14.

Rashi, of course, writing in the 11th century, could not have conceived of the theory of evolution, but he explains the creation of the world in a way which lends itself fascinatingly to our understanding of how things came into being under the supervision of a Creator. Everything was planned and conceived of on the first day and it was placed in its proper location – or in its proper time – in accordance with that plan.
Almost 50 years ago, the late Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits in his book God Man and History offered an explanation without reference to this Rashi which we can use to understand what Rashi may have meant. He asked the question: what is creation? When can we say that something was actually created? For example, when was Beethoven’s 5th Symphony created? When a symphonic orchestra played it? Certainly not. Beethoven’s 5th Symphony was created as soon as Ludwig von Beethoven conceived of the final note of that symphony and then committed it to paper. At that moment, the symphony was already created; it was merely actualized by musicians who at some future time played the symphony as Beethoven had created it.

Similarly, who created the Eiffel Tower? Was it the bricklayers or the steelworkers who brought it into being, or was it not an architect by the name of Eiffel who conceived of that tower and wrote out all the plans and then had the last line in his mind prior to writing it down on paper. At that moment, the Eiffel Tower had been created. Subsequently, workmen with sledgehammers and all other kinds of equipment came along and actualized the tower; but they didn’t create anything.

Similarly, God created the world by constructing a plan. At the moment of creation it is quite possible that nothing happened. For example, when God said “Let there be light”, it wasn’t like an engineer throwing a switch in a Broadway theater and the entire house bursts into light. The world may very well have remained dark, but light had already been created because God conceived of it. The same is true with all the features of heaven and earth, as is suggested by the Talmud, the Midrashim, and Rashi when they say that everything was created on the first day and only came into place on the day assigned to it. That’s about as close as we can come to
understanding the story of creation as it is found in the Bible and reconciling it with evolutionary theory.

The Torah, then, is not a science book, nor a history book. Stories are written in the Torah out of chronological order. According to the Talmud and many commentators, “Ein mukdam um’uchar ba-Torah – there is no chronological order to the Torah stories.” But there is a logical order in the Torah. Rashi always asks the question: Why does one story or law always follow another? The question assumes that the Divine Author of the Bible had a logical order in mind, but not necessarily a chronological one; not scientific and not historical.

That said, there is no need to deny basic evolutionary theory that explains how simple forms of life evolved into more complex forms. The theory of a Prime Mover, a Creator, and Planner is clearly stated in the Biblical text and through the words of our sages we can see a serious suggestion on how things developed from the plan.

I have a feeling that my sister, of blessed memory, would have found that explanation quite satisfying, though with a 65 year lag.