

Do we take the Torah literally?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Are we supposed to take the Creation narrative literally or not? On the face of it, it contradicts everything we know about how the world developed. The process took millions of years, not seven days. Was a "day" the sort of 24 hour days we mean now? What was day then if the Sun and Moon were not in position until the fourth day? Perhaps the universe was once "chaos" and the process of life emerging from water to earth seems accurate. But did God, a completely non-physical force, so tired that rest was necessary? Indeed, did God speak and in what language and to whom? And when we talk about the hand or finger of God, does it mean there really is a hand and a finger?

If one wants to one can easily combine science and faith. Faith argues that the world was not an accidental process but rather one of design. That in addition to the physical, there is a spiritual dimension. That God's time is different to ours. Indeed, we talk nowadays about matter and dark matter. There is so much about our universe we still do not understand. Who knows. Perhaps God is dark matter too!

The Torah is not in my opinion intended as a scientific journal. It is a book of spirit, tradition and law. A guide for imperfect humans. Its narrative is a poetic expression of moral guidance. It places humans in the natural world demanding interaction based on responsibility and custodianship. It argues against selfish exploitation. It explains how originally laws were not thought necessary. Only human frailty clearly needed rules.

Even so the Torah is remarkable in what it includes in the narrative. Clues of the early phases of humanity. It is not a tale of gods and goddesses frolicking, fighting and producing worlds out of their physical forms. There is one force, concerned only with what is best for the universe. Yet amazingly hints at the earlier forms of failed humanoids. The Nephilim who might well have been the Neanderthals, or the Sons of Gods or Sons of Judges, primitives who thought they had some divine right to do whatever they wanted.

The Torah has to be understood, in context and intention. We rely on the Oral tradition for law and we rely on Midrash for a variety of different interpretations of the narrative. Many of them contradictory or supplementary. Some rational, some mystical and some fanciful. As Maimonides says, only a fool takes things at face value. It is amazing poetry, language that is not meant to be understood at face value or like prose. Indeed, the Torah itself calls it a song (Shira). It instructs but it inspires. In a language they would have understood in those days, and that anyone can understand on some level. But also one that is so deep and complex there is no end to its ongoing inspiration and relevance.