

Evolution

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In a recent article, Yale University computer science professor, David Gelernter, said that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution has too many holes and is now too old to be a probable scientific theory. Gelernter, who the *New York Times* called a "rock star", also argues that intelligent design (ID) is a genuine theory that cannot be dismissed by researchers with anti-religious sentiments. Gelernter says there is a lack of free speech and honesty within the scientific community. Darwinism has become like a "religion" to many academics.

But he stops short of fully embracing intelligent design. Even if there was an intelligent designer, we still do not know who or indeed what the designer was. Naturally, Gelernter has been attacked vociferously by the "scientifically correct." The fact that he is a self-proclaimed and practicing Jew does not help.

In my youth, the champion of atheism and denial of any divine involvement in the universe was the British Philosopher, Anthony Flew (1923-2010). In books and debates, he argued in favor of Darwinism and against any notion of design. But, in 2004, he co-authored a book called "*There is a God. How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind.*" In a debate in New York that year he said, "What I think the DNA material has done is that it has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce (life), that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements to work together. It's the enormous complexity of the number of elements and the enormous subtlety of the ways they work together."

But what still remains at issue is exactly what or who was responsible!

I have often written about theories of evolution and whether they present a problem to religious believers. As science continues to change the way we look at the world, some Jews believe there is a conflict between the ways of science and religion. The scientist sees a slow process of evolution that can take millions of years. Many religious people of different faiths, on the other hand, believe in a spontaneous act of Divine creation. Fundamentalists date this as being some six thousand years ago and reject any scientific alternative. Those in between think the Big Bang was God's work and science explains how it has proceeded, slowly, under Divine guidance.

Until a hundred and fifty years ago, almost all of the western Christian world believed the Bible should be taken literally and that the world was created some 6,000 years ago in six days. The human mind often takes time to catch up with new discoveries. In 1616 the great astronomer, Galileo, was summoned by the Pope and ordered to recant his discovery that the earth revolved around the sun. Galileo almost got burnt for heresy.

Most ultra-Orthodox Jews still profess that the world is 5779 years old. But this is a relatively recent idea in Judaism. In response to Roman and Christian calendars, we changed our system from counting years according to kings (as mentioned in the Mishna) to going back to the beginning of creation. Not all rabbis agreed on the calculations. Fixing days and dates in the bible depends on interpretation. What was a 'day' before the sun was put in position on the fourth day of creation in Genesis? Perhaps the light created at the beginning of creation was energy – or even enlightenment. The *Midrash Rabba* even says that God made worlds and destroyed them until He settled on the present one.

Evolution, for all its faults and gaps, is a scientific theory based on some demonstrable examples. In the way we can tell the age of trees from their rings and rocks from different strata. We now notice how animals can adapt and change to different circumstances. Fossils clearly show how there were earlier forms of humans and animals. I do not believe God has nothing better to do than plant fossils to test us (as some have claimed). For me, although problematic, evolution was the best rational explanation available.

The great palaeontologist, Jay Gould (1941-2002), contributed a great deal to theories of evolution. Initially, he had no time or sympathy for religious explanations at all. Towards the end of his life, he too went through something of a conversion. He continued to argue that evolution, for all its inadequacies, was still the most acceptable theory. But Gould did not want to write God out of human life altogether. He developed the idea of 'non-overlapping *Magisteria*' – primary principles of life that need not conflict. God and science were simply different spheres of human knowledge and experience. He argued, controversially, that one should not interfere with the other.

Very orthodox Jewish schools have refused to teach any form of evolution. The yeshivahs I attended never even considered the idea. It was heretical. They would laugh at the notion of humans evolving from monkeys. They were in good (or not so good) company. Think of the famous US Scopes trial of 1925 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scopes_Trial. But as schools that object to Darwinism in the Diaspora have come under pressure from State Educational Authorities, they have had to compromise.

The latest orthodox explanation I have heard comes from North London. It says that even if humans evolved from monkeys, at the crucial transitional phase, God inserted spiritual souls into the mix. And voila – Homo Sapiens. We can argue which side the Neanderthals occupied.

But we don't know exactly what "soul" is. In the Talmud, R. Yehuda HaNasi got involved in an unresolved argument over when the soul enters the body – at conception, birth or both? Our liturgy implies that our souls return to God when we sleep and return when we wake.

There's nothing wrong with alternative world outlooks. I like science and I like faith. I don't think you need to reconcile them. I'm as opposed to a doctrinaire scientist who excludes spirit as much as I am to a spiritual person who thinks science has nothing to offer.

All embattled religions have seen science and modernity as a threat. The real threat to a spiritual life comes from bad behaviour, not from ideas. Evolution is, after all, a theory and Darwin still believed in God. The exact way that God works is beyond science and human ingenuity. It is a matter of faith, not logic.

Religion actually needs science to bring it down to earth. And science needs religion to give it a spiritual dimension. I do not want to see them separated into hermetically sealed compartments. Some people want, and need, absolute certainties. Others relish the challenges of new ideas even if (or just because) they are forced to rethink their preconceptions. A living mind is a questioning mind.

Intelligent Design still does not make rational sense to me. But then neither does Darwin. I continue to have an open mind. And that is, in my opinion, a healthy state. Our brains were designed to question!