

Communications

FOOD PIPE AND WIND PIPE

In a very interesting paper in *Tradition* (41:2, 2008), R. Marc D. Angel discusses the difficulties of teaching scientific data when it is in contradiction with some rabbinical sayings. Among other examples, he discusses the explanation given to the prescription to recline to the left on Passover eve at the Seder; students in Torah classes learn that “the food pipe is on the left and the wind pipe is on the right.” This is a “widespread teaching” based on a note by Rashbam in *Pesahim* 108a, “cited by the *Magen Abraham* and the *Taz*.” Angel writes that this is “factually incorrect,” “the food pipe and the wind pipe are not side by side,” “the wind pipe is in the front and the food pipe is behind it.”

A good traditional confirmation of Angel can be found in Rashi (*Hullin* 28a, “*misbum de-veshet*”), where he writes that “the *veshet* (food pipe, esophagus) is between the *kaneh* (wind pipe, trachea) and the *mafreket* (cervical spine)”. But the problem is more complicated. First, Torah students might answer that the food pipe is on the left, but the original note of Rashbam and all other sources (such as *Magen David*, and not *Magen Abraham*) related to him clearly state the contrary, i.e. that the food pipe is on the right (*le-tsad yamin*)! Second, according to anatomy, the relative location of the two pipes changes: in the neck, as stated by Rashi, the food pipe is right behind the wind pipe, while in the chest it is partially behind and to the left of the trachea.

SHMUEL RICCARDO DI SEGNI

Chief Rabbi of Rome

Head of Dept. of Diagnostic Imaging

S. Giovanni Hospital, Rome

TO THE EDITOR:

Marc D. Angel writes (“Reflections on Torah Education and Mis-Education,” *Tradition* 41:2, p. 15): “The Talmud records the view that there were 974 generations before Adam (*Hagigah* 13b).” But that is clearly not what the Talmud is saying. The actual statement reads, “*She-kumtu le-hibarot kodem she-nivra ha-olam ve-lo nivre’u*.” In other words, the Talmud is not talking about the period prior to Adam (actually prior to the fourth day of creation). Rather it is prior to creation, period—prior to day one. Furthermore, the Talmud says “*ve-lo nivre’u*,” they were

never created. How can Rabbi Angel write that the Talmud records “that there were 974 generations” when the Talmud says the opposite?

I would also point out that Rashi explains this Talmudic statement to mean that these 974 generations were supposed to have existed prior to *Matan Torah*—not prior to Adam or to creation—which is the literal translation. This too should have been mentioned.

Additionally, on the following page, R. Angel claims that “Rashbam, though, takes issue with Rashi and cites his teachers who claimed that the wind pipe was on the right.” However, Rashbam says that the “*veshet havei al tsad yamin*.” The *veshet* is the food pipe, not the wind pipe.

(RABBI) MICHAEL DRUIN
North Miami Beach, Florida

RABBI MARC D. ANGEL RESPONDS:

I thank R. Druin for his careful reading of my article.

I cited *Hagigah* 13b to indicate that a view was expressed in the Talmud that allowed for the possibility of the universe having been created far more than 5769 years ago. I referred to the article by R. Aryeh Kaplan on this topic. R. Kaplan wrote: “According to the Talmud, and some Midrashim as well, there were 974 generations before Adam...The “Ma’arekhet Elokut” [a kabbalistic work] states explicitly that these generations existed in the Sabbatical cycles before Adam’s creation.” This is from Aryeh Kaplan’s “Immortality, Resurrection, and the Age of the Universe: A Kabbalistic View,” Ktav, Hoboken, 1993, p. 7. Classic rabbinic sources had no problem imagining a universe that long pre-dated the creation of Adam.

Pesachim 108a indicates that lying on one’s back does not constitute reclining, nor does reclining on one’s right side; not only that, but there is also the concern that perhaps the windpipe will precede the esophagus in receiving the food, thus causing a person to choke. Rashi applies the choking problem to the case of lying on one’s back. Rashbam disagrees, and applies the choking problem to “the windpipe preceding the esophagus.” Rashbam does indeed say that the *veshet* (esophagus) is on the right side, and he explains the choking problem as follows: when one leans to the right, this causes the epiglottis that covers the windpipe (on the left side) to open up, thus entailing a risk of choking since food might go down the windpipe instead of the food pipe. This explanation, aside from

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being anatomically incorrect, is difficult to understand. I believe that the general understanding of “the windpipe preceding the esophagus” is that the windpipe is on the right side, and thus reclining to the right will more likely result in choking. Although this is also anatomically incorrect, it seems to be a more realistic description of our concern that someone reclining to the right will be more likely to choke.

It is important to remember that neither Rambam nor the *Shulhan Arukh* offer this explanation for why we recline to the left. We can and should teach our children correct halakha—and correct science.