

Communications

DARWINISM

TO THE EDITOR:

I was delighted to read Dr. Baruch Sterman's article on Judaism and Darwinian evolution (*Tradition*, 29:1, Fall 1994). As an undergraduate majoring in the biological sciences, I was required to take a course in human evolution last year. I began the class determined not to be "swayed" by subject matter, which I believed to be quite antithetical to my Judaism. Halfway through the course, my resolve began to weaken as I was presented with cogent arguments and fossil evidence which seemed to undermine echoes from various stages of my education regarding the implausibility of the "theory" of evolution. I decided that I needed backup; I went to a Jewish bookstore and bought a book recommended to me by one of my high-school *rebbeim* which was intended to "disprove" evolution. The book turned out to be a poor choice for my needs; arguments were illogical, unscientific, and generally disparaging toward the theory of evolution, "an unproven and outdated theory. . . . [which] should be placed in the same category as sorcery and witchcraft" (J. Greenberger, *Human Intelligence Gone Ape*). I did not find this at all helpful!

Fortunately, I had occasion to speak with another of my *rebbeim* from high-school who had himself done rather extensive research on the matter. As I sat down to talk to him, I said, "Please tell me what I'm missing. *Why* is the theory of evolution wrong?" To my pleasant surprise, he replied, "Why are you so sure that it's wrong?"

I agree with Dr. Sterman that the popular availability of the theory of evolution is a reason why it is ill-respected by so many. However, I would argue that disrespect doesn't result from the fact that the theory of evolution is easily explained to the public, but that when explained on a basic level, opponents of the theory can quite easily make it sound ridiculous. There is a popular misunderstanding that "evolution is obviously wrong because it says that man came from monkeys." Statements like this stem from a natural tendency to ignore logical evidence when the conclusion seems to contradict one's schema, and to forgo fair evaluation when one's *weltanschauung* is threatened. Therefore, I would say that it is not the availability, but the threat to psychological barriers that it presents, which makes the theory of evolution so denigrated. Sterman very accurately described those psycho-religious obstacles

which are challenged by Darwinism.

I have subsequently found several articles and books dealing with the issue, many of which were quoted by Dr. Sterman. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan writes (*Immortality, Resurrection and the Age of the Universe*) that God could not have created the world with fossils already in the ground in order to test our *emuna*, because then there would be no end to the extent we would have to distrust our most basic senses and perceptions. To subscribe to the general ideas behind the theory of evolution does not mean that one must resign belief either in God or His role as the Creator. Divine ordination of progressive development of each step along an evolutionary pathway, a possible framework within which to describe evolution, does not in any way diminish the greatness of His work; it could even be argued that it *enhances* one's appreciation of and reverence toward his Creator. It would certainly befit the *borei olam* to create the universe in the most elegant, sophisticated way possible—just as Hazal tell us that He created the world with ten *ma'amarim* and not simply one (*Avot* 5:1).

Finally, I would suggest that while Darwinian evolution currently poses difficulties to Judaism, another scientific frontier may yet present equal or greater challenges. The rapidly growing field of neurobiology is beginning to suggest scientific bases for many aspects of the human experience heretofore described as functions of the intangible soul. Sensation, cognition, learning and memory, emotions, dreams, and even thoughts are being characterized as physical systems obeying physical laws. Various neurological deficits seem to strip people of their very humanity, tempting scientists to uncover the physiological bases for these diseases. Sterman asks: what is a soul? Whatever it is that demarcates the difference between humans and animals, be it our intelligence, free will, speech, or capability of understanding montheism, can be found to be lacking in certain individuals as a result of neurological disease or defect. If one individual is lacking in whatever that delineation may be, is that individual any less human? Questions such as this require a careful understanding of Jewish philosophy and thought throughout the ages.

Clearly, anti-evolutionary rhetoric and condescension cannot suffice in responding to mechanistic secrets of life being unraveled before our eyes. Articles written with comparable scientific rigor presented by Dr. Sterman will provide students such as myself with the intellectual guidance required to grapple with such challenges.

GIL MELMED
Philadelphia, PA

TO THE EDITOR:

Baruch Sterman's article on "Judaism and Darwinian Evolution" was rational, intelligent and thought provoking. I would like to add two notes I believe to be relevant.

Regarding the challenges posed by Darwinism, I recall the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, retelling a discussion he had with an evolutionary biologist. Responding to the scientist's query as to why Judaism could not accept Darwinism, the Rav made one simple statement: he believed that man was endowed with a soul. Any attempt to define the soul, the spark of divinity, must fall as short as must any attempt to define divinity itself. Sterman's attempt to narrowly define the soul as the capability to understand the concept of monotheism may sound plausible to the scientific Adam I, but rings hollow in the ears of religious Adam II and leaves him feeling empty.

In a footnote, Sterman refers to a theory that proposes "Divine direction of life punctuated by certain explicit acts of creation (i.e., the initial life forms and Man)." I would note that in the first chapter of the Torah a variety of verbs are used to describe acts of creation. The verb *bara* (creation *ex nihilo*) is used only three times: the creation of *shamayim va-arets* (matter), the creation of the first life forms, and the creation of Man. Apparently, the rest of creation can be described as formation, separation, development and, if one chooses, evolution—all scientifically explicable. Three acts of creation defy plausible scientific explanation, precisely because they involve creation *ex nihilo*, a scientific impossibility. One of those three is the creation of mankind, a species as different from the rest of the animal kingdom as living beings are from inanimate objects. Humans are not merely beings that evolved past a critical threshold of intellectual capacity. They are qualitatively different from all life forms which preceded them. No laboratory can quantify *Tselem Elokim*, nor can any other species become human without divine intervention, another *ex nihilo* creation.

While Modern Orthodox Judaism has taken a positive stance on scientific inquiry, it needs to avoid what Carl Klahr calls *scientism*, the belief that the only valid answers are those that come from extrapolations of science. Scientific explanations of the world of the spirit are not more plausible than religious explanations of natural phenomena (explanations offered via divine revelation are a different matter altogether). Science and religion should recognize their own limitations and respects the realms of the other.

(RABBI) ZVI GRUMET
Riverdale, NY

RELIGIOUS ZIONISM

TO THE EDITOR:

The symposium on Religious Zionism (*Tradition*, 28:4, Summer 1994) was unbalanced in that its opening statements, questions and list of contributors reflected only a limited (moderate or left-wing) view of Religious Zionism, and dismissed right wing schools of thought (ranging from the current National Religious Party to Kahanism) as beyond the pale and not even worthy of debate.

A Religious Zionist, in my eyes, is one who, on religious grounds, sees the creation of *Medinat Yisrael* as a positive development and a large step toward the complete *ge'ula*. All points of view embracing this commitment should be debated; none should be dismissed.

It is true that some rabbis are in agreement with “land for peace,” but they are an admitted minority. Surely, it is not proper to dismiss without mention what I consider to be the majority of Orthodox rabbis. Kahanism is indeed opposed to democracy, but so is the Torah, which calls for a monarchy in Israel. The idea of transferring non-Jews from Israel, which has been seen by many non-Kahanists as the only solution to a potential demographic disaster in Israel, has a biblical basis. And Kahanism’s most criticized aspect—the desire to increase the level of religious life in the state of Israel—reflects the whole purpose of all the religious parties.

The third question in your introduction asks if we are denigrating “traditional *galuti*” values. In your questions and the responding essays, I see not a denigration, but rather a championing of them to too high a degree.

NACHUM LAMM
Flushing, NY

TO THE EDITOR:

Writing in *Tradition*’s symposium on Religious Zionism, Rabbi Aharon Feldman attacks Religious Zionism for believing, absurdly, that it could work together with the secularists. He concludes that “Religious Zionism must make an abject soul-reckoning, . . . open its windows to the spiritual leadership of *Gedolei Yisrael*, . . . to divorce itself from its disastrous marriage with secular Zionism.”

I agree with only the first part of this accusation, though there is nothing abject about soul-reckoning. Soul-searching is an essential part of *teshuva* for each individual and each organization, and I thought that

conducting such a process was precisely the purpose of the symposium. The debate between Rav Lichtenstein and other *rashei yeshivot* of *hesder yeshivot* on the same issue is indicative of such a soul-searching. It is only within the Religious Zionist movement that such soul-searching is permitted. Some other Orthodox journals do not allow any debates about their principles, thereby forbidding such fundamental soul-searching.

This is not the place to study in depth the underpinnings of Religious Zionism and its relationship to secular Jewry. Briefly, there are two approaches. One, espoused by Rav Kook, is that the secularists have “holy sparks” that need to be redeemed and that God gave them the privilege of rebuilding the land. The other, followed by Rav Soloveitchik, is that we have to accept reality; whether we like or not, the secularists are in charge.

Furthermore, Religious Zionism certainly *does* follow *Gedolei Yisrael*, among them Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik, Rav Lichtenstein, Rav Shapira and Rav Yisraeli. Most Sephardic rabbis have a positive attitude towards a secular Jewish state. Had more *Gedolim* urged their followers to move to Israel in the early twentieth century, they would have survived the Holocaust and Israel today would have a religious majority. I still remember Ben Gurion’s visit to Yeshiva University, when he declared that if a hundred thousand religious Jews made *aliya* from the United States he would wear a *kippa*. They did not come. Not only did they not come, but they failed to appreciate the contributions of secular Jews towards rebuilding the country. There are numerous *midrashim* about the requirement of *hakarat ha-tov* (gratitude), even to the Egyptians who enslaved us, because good came out of their actions. There are probably more *yeshivot* today in Israel than in any country in the history of the world. It is doubtful that Torah Judaism would have so flourished had the country remained a British mandate. It is painfully ironic that even though religious Jews have not and are not coming to Israel in large numbers, they continue to complain that the country is non-religious, refusing to recognize that it is these non-religious elements that built the country. Rabbi Feldman points out that many Israelis know nothing about *Shema Yisrael*. Nevertheless, they still know more than most of their American brethren, who have a huge rate of intermarriage. If not for the State of Israel, the Russian Jews would remain in Russia and would be lost forever to Judaism. Now there is a chance of bringing them back to religion.

As to the “marriage,” it is no secret that religious Jews of any stripe are unhappy with many things that occur in the State of Israel.

This is nothing new. Rav Kook had his share of disappointments. Rav Soloveitchik continuously warned about accepting situations in Israel that are against halakha. Instead of divorce, I prefer to work within the system. Religious Zionism's love of Israel is not dependent on the secularists. Whether one accepts the *athalta dige'ula* or not, Religious Zionists view the state as something that is ours. My sons went to *Hesder yeshivot* and my daughters to *sherut le'umi*, not because we felt that this was a compromise but because it was our contribution to the country. One can debate the views of Religious Zionism, but such debates must focus on the intrinsic beliefs of Religious Zionism (e.g., the debate of Rav Lichtenstein and the other *rashei yeshivot*). I refuse to accept the blame for the sins of the non-religious; I am just as upset as Rav Aharon Feldman about these deeds. Nevertheless, we work with the non-religious, accepting the philosophy of Rav Kook or Rav Soloveitchik.

Rav Feldman accuses the Israel government of jeopardizing the lives of the Jews living in Judea and Samaria. It is precisely the Religious Zionists who are in the forefront of settling these lands based on their beliefs. Thus, I feel that Religious Zionism has no reason to regret its partnership with other groups that are willing to help in the building of Israel on its way towards an eventual state of halakha. We will continue to work, strengthening the state both physically and spiritually. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 98) describes the spiritual difficulties in the world in the era before the Messiah. Some rabbis preferred not to live through the pains of the Messiah (*hevlei mashiah*). The road to the Messiah is not an easy one and certainly has its ascents and descents. Nevertheless, Rav Yosef stated that he would be willing to live in the shadow of the dung of the donkey of the Messiah. Rav Kook concludes his eulogy for Herzl saying "The essential preparation of the generation of the Messiah is the use of the coarsest powers for the good and the special holiness that crowns the Jewish people."¹

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NOTES

1. Sinai, volume 47. See also, *Torat Eretz Yisrael, the Teaching of HaRav Tsvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook*, Commentary by David Samson, Jerusalem, 1991, and Rabbi Ahron Soloveitchik, *Logic of the Heart, Logic of the Mind* (Jerusalem, 1991), p.183.

AHARON FELDMAN REPLIES:

I agree with Dr. Turkel that *Tradition* deserves to be commended for opening its pages to a full spectrum of opinion on Religious Zionism, including opinions which criticize it.

However, he misinterprets my call for separation from secular Zionism as a call to refuse to recognize the fact that there is a secular leadership in Israel. I have no problem addressing Zionist leadership as a *political* entity presently empowered in Israel. But I do believe that Religious Zionism should cease perceiving secular Zionism as an embodiment of Jewish aspirations and begin to treat it as what it is: an attempt to redefine Judaism in a manner which is a serious danger to the continuity of the Jewish people.

At a time when a daily *kulturkampf* is being successfully waged against Torah by the secularists, we must realize that we will lose it unless we resist by strengthening our own commitment to Torah and *mitsvot*. Teaching our children that we identify with the ideals and the heroes of a movement designed to redefine Judaism clearly undermines their commitment to Torah. Concentrating on settling lands at a time like this is as irrelevant as putting a *kippa* on Ben Gurion's head. (In line with this, it is encouraging that Mafdal Knesset Member Rabbi Druckman recently stated in a radio interview that the strengthening of Torah education and not settlement should now become the main agenda of Religious Zionists.)

Turkel says there is no reason to regret joining with secular Zionists in "the building of Israel on its way to an eventual state of halakha." The naive belief that living in Israel in itself will bring an "eventual" return to Judaism has been clearly discredited by history and is downright dangerous. If we do not take appropriate measures, there will never be such a return.

The argument that out of elemental gratitude to secular Zionists for having built the State, we must join with them, is incorrect. Gratitude does not obligate one to submit to being robbed by someone who has done him a favor. This is why gratitude has not caused Religious Zionists to submit to having the territories taken away from them. Why, then, should gratitude commit us to acquiesce to an ideology which is trying to rob us of our heritage?

Turkel's statement that Religious Zionism *does* obey the edicts of *gedolei Yisrael*—those who "have a positive attitude towards a secular state"—begs the question. We cannot choose our leaders by having them fit a preconceived ideology. Granted that the exalted personages

whom Turkel cites are *gedolei Torah*, can we disqualify other no less exalted personages such as Hafetz Haim, Hazon Ish, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Elyashiv and Rav Kanefsky because their ideology is “wrong”? Can we deny that the predominant majority of recognized world-class *gedolei Yisrael* of previous and present generations believe that we should not identify with secular Zionism?

I would like to address a most deplorable implication of this letter (and an oft-repeated statement), that the *gedolim* of the turn of the century (i.e., Hafetz Haim, Reb Haim Brisker and colleagues—no less!) contributed to the Holocaust by refusing to endorse *aliya* to Palestine. Even disregarding the unsupported assumption which this statement makes—that there will not be a future Holocaust in Israel (an occurrence not too far-fetched under present circumstances)—it is unprovable: one cannot know how Hitler would have acted had millions of Jews been in Palestine. More pointedly, it contravenes the Jewish belief in Divine Providence, since it implies that political events, not God’s will, brought on the Holocaust and that He could not have brought it on in the Middle East.

Finally, one does not prove the correctness of a decision on the basis of hindsight. If the Allies had lost the war to Germany, would this have meant that Fascism was justified and should not have been resisted? Decisions are made on the basis of the facts present. The facts at the turn of the century were that the religious and physical well-being of those who made *aliya* would have been in danger. Any responsible Jewish leader should have made the same decision.

In conclusion, it is time that those who now perceive that the secular Zionist leadership has put Jews into physical danger recognize that it has no less put Jews into spiritual danger.