

# Communications

## HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATION

TO THE EDITOR:

R. Dr. Jacob J. Schacter's well-researched, insightful, and moving discussion of the rabbinical deliberations over when and how to commemorate the Holocaust ("Holocaust Commemoration and *Tish'a be-Av*: The Debate over '*Yom ha-Sho'a*'", *Tradition* 41:2, Summer 2008) provides readers with an overview of what has been a sensitive issue for much of the previous and present post-war generations. In the final chapter of my book, *Kol Bekhiyot: ha-Sho'a Ve-Hatefila* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 1992), I discuss the historical background to some of these issues. R. Dr. Schacter has now expanded and enriched this discussion with additional historical information and an exposition of the theological sources behind a number of the rabbinical attitudes for or against establishing a special day of commemoration for Holocaust victims and composing a unique Holocaust-commemorative prayer.

Although the existence of general debate about these issues has long been known in historical and rabbinical circles, the background to many of the modern Orthodox rabbinical attitudes towards the chronological choice and liturgical form of Holocaust commemoration was less known, and R. Dr. Schacter is to be commended for his erudite and in-depth discussion of its development up to the present day.

However, in my own opinion, the most poignant part of this article was its ending, in which the author expresses his fear that neither the ninth of Av nor the 27th of Nisan (*Yom ha-Sho'a*) will serve as lasting memorials for the *kedoshim* of the Holocaust when the generation of their children and grandchildren are no longer alive. In response, and in a more hopeful vein, I can only point to the development and growing observance of a third memorial day for Holocaust victims, commemorated primarily in Israel but also in some parts of the Diaspora—*Asarah be-Tevet*—the 10th of Tevet, also known as *Yom ha-Kaddish ha-Klali*, the General Day of *Kaddish*. In Tevet 5709 (December 1948), the Chief Rabbinate of Israel declared this minor fast day to be the memorial day on which all those with first degree relatives who were killed during the Holocaust and whose date of death was unknown should recite *Kaddish* for their loved ones.

Hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Holocaust *kedoshim* fall into this category, and in my youth in Israel during the 1970's, I remember how large gatherings of survivors, many of whom were secular, would gather in closed movie theatres and public auditoriums on that evening to

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listen to a speech by a survivor and would then rise and recite *Kaddish* for their loved ones whose date of death was unknown.

Ostensibly, this was not supposed to be a commemorative date for generations, but rather one which would disappear as such with the last of the survivors, retaining only its status as a minor fast day connected to the cycle of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. However just the opposite appears to be happening, at least in National-Religious (Dati-Leumi) circles, particularly in Israel. During the past two decades the 10th of Tevet has become the national-religious *Yom ha-Sho'a*, a day of Holocaust commemoration in educational institutions (almost all religious schools have special commemorative programs on that day), public gatherings in shuls, yeshivas, and the like.

No longer directly connected to whether a particular individual is reciting *Kaddish* for his relatives on that day, it has metamorphosed into a general day of Holocaust commemoration in the Dati-Leumi and Hardal (Haredi-Leumi) sector.

*Tish'a be-Av* certainly does not appear to be connected in the contemporary national Jewish collective memory with Holocaust Commemoration. In Israel, where *Yom ha-Sho'a* has been mandated by law as a Holocaust commemorative day, it probably will last, but may metamorphose within a generation into much less than it is today. However, my guess is that it will be *Asarah be-Tevet*, the *Yom ha-Kaddish ha-Klali*—which has already become the National-Religious *Yom ha-Sho'a* in Israel—that will remain as the day of Holocaust commemoration for future generations. Now what is left is to write the commemorative prayer that will remain for generations. That, too, will come in time.

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## HOMER AND THE BIBLE

TO THE EDITOR:

“Homer and the Bible” (Editor’s Note, *Tradition* 41:4) raises some important issues. I believe we should distinguish two separate problems here. One is the sensationalism (or “Homerization”) of teaching—a fault of many teachers. Some indeed use provocative statements about biblical characters, some bash politicians or rabbis they disagree with, and others just gossip. Most of us, myself included, could benefit from constructive criticism.

However, I believe that in most *shiurim* taught by advocates of the so-called “*be-govah ha-einayim*” school, when the entire *shiur* is taken in its context, the characters are not degraded, just viewed as more complex. I don’t think Uriel Simon’s reading of David and Batsheva (see his *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, Bloomington 1997, pp. 93-129) degrades David, nor does R. Elhanan Samet’s claim (in his *shiurim* at Herzog College and elsewhere) that Mordekhai and Esther came from an assimilated family degrade them (although he tends to begin his *shiur* provocatively). These approaches generally share two elements absent from standard postmodern iconoclasm: 1. The criticism of the character under discussion is based on the evaluation of the text (biblical or midrashic) itself. 2. The criticism is balanced by mention of repentance or other good deeds, as it is these, not sins or failures, that we ought to revere.

The problem here actually is less common among teachers and authors than among the laity. I tend to hear a less-than-respectful attitude towards biblical characters when teaching adults in certain communities, and a certain excitement when they discuss a secular author’s attitude towards the biblical text (e.g. Yochi Brandess’ popular *Melakhim Gimme!*). This is a problem that we as Tanakh teachers should be dealing with. It is not caused by the nuanced “*be-govah ha-einayim*” approach, but by inevitable exposure to secular culture by people who grew up in the Modern Orthodox (or the Israeli *mamlakhti-dati*) school system years ago, and whose grown children today usually have moved farther to the right. The nuanced “*be-govah ha-einayim*” approach is, in my opinion, a solution to this problem, and not only because I believe it’s the truth. It enables students to vent their criticism in an open debate, showing how the characters are evaluated by God’s Word itself, which shows that the Tanakh does not give special dispensation to those it favors, and also allows skeptical students to understand our forebears as real people who really and truly strove to serve God and to do good in this world. Even if they were not 100% perfect, we try to emulate what the Torah says were their good deeds, not their faults.

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SHALOM CARMY RESPONDS:

I agree with Dr. Alster’s main point. In the current polemical atmosphere, nuanced, responsible literary and theological approaches that treat revered biblical figures as nonetheless human often are impugned, unjustly and with detriment to the study of Tanakh and *yirat Shamayim*, due to

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their superficial association with less rigorous approaches. Occasionally the putative similarity exists more in the mind of the accusers than in the substance of the contribution that arouses their ire.

R. Abraham Yitzhak Kook, whose work, one hopes, will continue to be acceptable to his third and fourth generation disciples, would have strongly endorsed Alster's last paragraph. After citing Rambam's view (*Shemona Perakim* ch. 7) that even the most perfect of human beings are not without defect, R. Kook wrote: "There are actions done by the very greatest that deserve criticism. There are plenty of such statements in the words of Hazal and the classical medieval books, well known to all who seek them" (*Ma'amrei ha-Re'iyah* 509).

## BIBLICAL CONCORDISM

TO THE EDITOR:

In reading R. Dr. David Shatz's fine article, "Is There Science in the Bible? An Assessment of Biblical Concordism" (*Tradition* 41:2, Summer 2008), specifically, but not exclusively, in regard to the discussions concerning the "shifting sands" arguments, my thoughts were drawn to the words of R. Moshe Feinstein in his Introduction to *Iggerot Moshe*. Therein he distinguishes between *emet klappei Shemaya* and *emet le-hora'ah*—effectively between the actual, real truth and the truth as we can best ascertain it. In that R. Moshe makes this distinction even with regard to *psak* and actual halakhic practice, the significance of this distinction would seem to be applicable to this discussion as well.

R. Moshe's contention is that our responsibility in studying Torah, attempting to understand its theories, guidelines and directives, is to ascertain, to the best of our abilities, what is correct, and then to act accordingly based upon these decisions. The fact that our conclusion may, in fact, be wrong, it would seem, is not to be our concern; we are not judged based upon our conclusion's actual accuracy, but rather based upon our process and our sincerity. It would seem that this is not just a concession to human fallibility but, actually, part of the original Divine intent. In the view of R. Moshe, if it was the Torah's intent to express a thought in a clear fashion that would be easily understandable, God could have also accomplished this goal. The fact that the Torah, both in its written form and in its corpus of oral thought, is most complex, allows for multiple understandings, and demands active human thought to open up its cadre of ideas, would seem to indicate that its

purpose is not solely to impart knowledge but to demand this thoughtful and creative human activity.

Viewed in this fashion, differences which have occurred over time in our ability to understand the meaning of the Torah based upon changes in our understanding of the world would seem to be similar to the differences that have continuously existed between individuals, each one thinking differently. What the concordist says today which is at odds with what a concordist said yesterday or from what a concordist would say tomorrow is thus not a problem but actually part of the very greatness of Torah. The recognition of this idea, in my opinion, adds a dimension to this debate that is most significant in terms of our very relationship to Torah study.

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TO THE EDITOR:

I read with great interest R. Dr. David Shatz's article "Is there Science in the Bible? An Assessment of Biblical Concordism" (*Tradition* 41:2, Summer 2008). The article assesses the merits of "bold Biblical concordism" which refers to the belief that the Bible is not only to be *interpreted* in light of current scientific knowledge but that such knowledge is actually *stated* in the text. For example, bold concordists will claim that the six "days" of the Genesis creation story correspond to the six epochs of evolutionary theory. Dr. Shatz analyzes arguments both for and against bold concordism. He maintains that while bold concordism fails, in practice, to convincingly find correspondence between the Biblical text and science, arguments that seek to reject its admissibility, as a matter of principle, are not conclusive. As such, bold concordism cannot, on theoretical grounds, be readily dismissed. In this letter I expand upon one of the arguments Dr. Shatz cites against bold concordism and demonstrate that, in fact, it succeeds in fundamentally undermining the arguments in its favor. Specifically, I will show that the vast qualitative difference between the modern scientific enterprise and that of the pre-modern era invalidates attempts to view medieval Bible commentators, who may have adopted a form of concordism, as providing precedent for contemporary Biblical concordism. In addition, I argue that recognition of the dynamic nature of the modern scientific endeavor leads to the conclusion that bold concordism is a flawed approach to Bible exegesis.

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Dr. Shatz cites two arguments in favor of the in-principle admissibility of bold concordism. First, it was espoused by some of the most prominent medieval Jewish thinkers and is found extensively in the writings of, for example, Rambam. Second, bold concordism enjoys a strong intuitive appeal in that it allows for the Biblical text to be understood as being scientifically accurate.

Against bold concordism, Dr Shatz cites the “shifting sands” argument. This argument notes that since scientific knowledge changes, the bold concordist will, per force, have to revise what he previously claimed was stated in the text when new scientific data comes to light. Accordingly, the presumed intent of Biblical verses will be in constant flux. Such flux is problematic, according to Dr. Shatz’s presentation of the argument, either because it is embarrassing to the Biblical exegete or because the changing nature of the enterprise makes any interpretation unreliable. Dr. Shatz finds the shifting sands argument unpersuasive and ultimately rejects it.

I submit, however, that “shifting sands” deserves further consideration as its significance goes far beyond concerns about embarrassing or unreliable exegesis. Indeed, Dr. Shatz himself notes (pg. 210) that proponents of the shifting sands argument identify a fundamental difference in the nature in which scientific knowledge was perceived by medieval scholars as contrasted with modern scientists. Additionally, Dr. Shatz cites (in footnote 41) the work of Professor Menachem Kellner who argues that while Rambam recognized the possibility of scientific progress, he “did not actually expect anything more than incremental change in (scientific) detail” and “cannot credibly be thought to have entertained the idea that science would some day undermine the (scientific basis which supported belief) in God.” Stated somewhat differently, Rambam accepted the possibility that specific details of scientific knowledge might undergo revision, yet, the fundamentals of scientific belief were perceived to be overwhelmingly immutable facts. This, presumably, explains why Rambam included an analysis of physics and metaphysics in his *Mishneh Torah*. The foundations, if not every last detail, of the scientific truths of *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, were understood to be as static as the laws of festivals and torts. Rambam, then, was not studying the science of *his* time; he was studying the science of *all time*. Contrast this, for example, with the National Institute of Health Consensus Statements which address controversial issues in clinical medicine. The statements are accompanied by the following preamble: “Consensus Statements reflect an assessment of the medical knowledge available at the time the statement was written. In the period following a statement’s release, new knowledge is inevitably accumulating through medical research. For this reason, statements more than *five years old*

(emphasis mine) are deemed ‘historical,’ as information contained in them is likely to be out of date.” (<http://consensus.nih.gov/FAQs.htm>). Rambam was studying the then 1000 year old medical teachings of Galen while the present day physician advises his patients based on clinical guidelines with a five year shelf life!

Change is not, of course, limited to the field of medicine. All areas of science, including cosmology and evolutionary theory, undergo continuous modification whereby previously held propositions are replaced, in part or in full, by new theories. While the pace of change differs between disciplines, scientists of all fields recognize that our current knowledge is not definitive and that it contains inaccuracies and errors.

Moderns view the scientific endeavor as a journey along an ever changing and presumably infinite path of discovery whereas Rambam saw the basic underpinnings of science as representing immutable facts. To Rambam, it made perfect sense to search for, and find, these truths in the Bible. The modern concordist, however, is engaged in an entirely different, and highly questionable, undertaking. He claims to find contemporary science stated in the Biblical text yet fails to explain why the Bible chose to teach the provisional science of 2009 and not that of the year 1880 or 2150.

Of note, “shifting sands” does not result in intellectual paralysis or inaction, nor does it imply that scientists do not believe their science. Indeed, physicians make life and death treatment decisions based on clinical guidelines. This is so because they firmly, and often passionately, believe that the guidelines represent the best available data and that acting in accordance with them will improve their patient’s health to an immeasurably greater degree than if they were to rely on Galen.

Similarly, “shifting sands” does not freeze or frustrate Biblical interpretation. Linguistics, archeology, physics, and biology are all expected to undergo change and progress. Nonetheless, these disciplines are legitimately utilized for Biblical exegesis as they provide the best tools available to understand the Bible. Yet our Bible exegesis is a work in progress. As our science is imperfect, so is our exegesis imperfect. Bold concordism, however, imposes this same imperfection on the Bible itself. According to the bold concordist, the Bible is *teaching* what we know to contain error. While concordism may allow specific verses to be understood as being accurate according to currently accepted scientific theories, its attribution of imperfection to the Bible robs it of any intuitive appeal.

In summary, the “shifting sands” argument, rather than being *an* argument against bold concordism, actually fundamentally undercuts the arguments in its favor. “Shifting sands” shows the modern day concordist to be involved in a wholly distinct exegetical enterprise from that of

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Rambam, and demonstrates that viewing the latter's writings as providing precedent for today's bold concordists is inaccurate. Furthermore, the concordist's claims that the Bible chose to teach today's provisional science is curious and his imputing error to the Bible is problematic. It is perhaps for these reasons that most Modern Orthodox thinkers, while acknowledging the tremendous contributions science makes to Torah study, reject, on theoretical grounds, bold Biblical concordism.

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TO THE EDITOR:

In his paper entitled, "Is There Science in the Bible?" (*Tradition* 41:2, Summer 2008), Dr. David Shatz divides the world of Bible interpreters into three colorfully named groups: "bold concordists," "modest concordists," and "anti-concordists." I was quite surprised to find my name among the few actual bold concordists cited in endnote #5 (p.233) on the basis of my 1999 *Tradition* article ("The Biblical Stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and the Flood: History or Metaphor?").

The thesis of the bold concordist according to Shatz is as follows:

- The Bible "teaches science and metaphysics in a positive fashion."
- Only when we know science can we interpret Genesis correctly.
- Bold concordists are the "emulators and standard bearers" of the medieval rabbis' approach to Biblical exegesis.

If so, I must submit that since I do not subscribe to any of the above views, nor does anything in my article imply that I do, that categorization is inaccurate. (Nevertheless, I am rather flattered since I have never before been accused of being "bold" about anything!)

However, this entire typology is much too broad and renders Shatz's analysis imprecise and unnecessarily complex. He starts out by equating the approach of medieval rationalists such as R. Saadya Gaon and Rambam, whom he sees as "seeking to demonstrate harmony between the Torah and the science and metaphysics of their day," with those today who attempt to reconcile the Genesis account of creation with contemporary science. This equation ignores the significant difference between the two schools. For Rambam, Aristotelian natural science and metaphysics represented the exclusive model of "knowledge" as such. While the Torah contains

the truth and nothing but the truth, it is not necessary to believe that it contained all the truth. Thus Rambam had no problem in using general knowledge when wishing to provide a broader context for related Bible themes such as history, ethics, or astronomy. Contrast that with Western trained Orthodox students of the Bible today, who reach out to the newly developed science of cosmology primarily for help in understanding the problematic Genesis account of Creation. For the first time, science feels competent to deal with the question of the origin of the universe on the basis of advances in physics.

Thus neither for Rambam nor for the physicists Aviezer and Schroeder is the issue “Is there Science in the Bible?” For Rambam, it was a matter of presenting certain Torah teachings against the background of accepted general knowledge—where it conflicted, Rambam opted for the Torah view. For today’s interpreters of Gen. 1 and 2, excited as they are over scientific evidence that there was indeed a “beginning,” it is a matter of exploring further and to what degree the new discipline of cosmology can help to unravel some of the obscurities of Gen. 1 and 2.

Both science and biblical (non-halakhic) exegesis are works in progress; all opinions are to be treated with degrees of tentativeness. As an extremely “modest” rationalist (small “r”), I concur with Dr. Shatz’s conclusion that interpretations of Biblical texts are to be accepted or rejected only on the grounds of verse-by-verse considerations—coherence, comparison of alternatives, and common sense.

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DAVID SHATZ REPLIES:

There is something odd that frequently occurs when authors respond in print to their critics. Often, before finalizing an article for publication, the author, besides dealing with criticism from anonymous referees, sends drafts to colleagues for comments and criticism. This process strongly suggests that the author is acutely conscious of his or her fallibility. Yet after publication, when rejoinders arrive and the author replies—at that point, suddenly the work is perfect and no criticisms can be right. The author’s verdict on his own work is often utterly predictable. It is therefore with considerable sheepishness that I report that, after giving much thought to my critics’ important and incisive letters,

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and after grappling with the difficult issues they raise, I, true to stereotype, stand by my article.

I welcome R. Hecht's valuable remarks as a friendly addendum, and thank him for pointedly suggesting that my claims about biblical interpretation apply to halakhic decision making. And I agree that changes in interpretation across time can profitably be compared, in certain respects, to differences of opinion at a given time. I hope R. Hecht will excuse me for turning quickly to my critics.

Dr. Meir Becker advances an extremely clever and interesting version of the shifting sands argument. Using the modern recognition of science's mutability, which I highlighted in my essay, he argues as follows: Since it is likely that our science will be revised, a bold concordist is likely to be imputing at least some errors to the Bible, hence imperfection, and this is religiously objectionable. Therefore, we may declare bold concordism readings unacceptable even in principle, without examining how well they conform to the text.

I find this argument problematic on several counts.

As a preliminary to the first problem, notice that Dr. Becker's argument (in contrast to one I will consider later) does not show that bold concordists are wrong in their answer to my article's title question, "Is There Science in the Bible?" At most, his argument shows that there is something wrong in *practicing* bold concordism, that is, in trying to figure out *what* scientific claims the Bible is making (See p. 209 of my article). The assertion that the Bible expresses a scientifically accurate account of creation thus survives Dr. Becker's argument, and coheres with a traditional view that, although we cannot fully understand the verses, the truth about creation lies therein.

Dr. Becker might grant that his argument has this limitation, and might note that my article dealt mainly with the propriety of bold concordist interpretation and not with the question of whether there is some eternally inscrutable body of science in the Bible. But once we have no argument against the thesis that the Torah *is* stating science, a second point follows: namely, that *refusing* to interpret Torah as expressing contemporary science may, no less than interpreting, impute false claims to the Torah. Suppose, for example, that an interpreter refuses to take the term "*or*" (in "*va-yehi or*," "let there be light") as denoting what one bold concordist suggests—the primeval fireball—lest it turn out that our science is wrong and in truth there was no primeval fireball. Presumably one will then take "*or*" to refer to some light other than the fireball. But what if God did not in fact create any light *other than* the fireball—and the fireball *is* what "*or*" designates? (Contemporary science could after all

be right on some details, and later theories may build on older, less complete ones.) In that situation one will have imputed a false claim to the Torah, namely, that God created a light that was not a fireball.

In other words, the problem with rejecting *a priori* a scientific interpretation of a term—or at least this ought to be deemed a problem given Dr. Becker’s considerations—is that one might then take the term to refer to something else, a something else that never existed. The same holds for understanding obscure events like the separation of light from darkness; construing them non-scientifically may impute an erroneous claim about what occurred. So either we must not interpret any term of Genesis 1, for fear that the term *does* refer to something today’s scientists describe; or we must say that the narrative is not describing events at all, but only conveying moral truths. Dr. Becker does not explain how he reads Genesis 1, but neither of these options seems hopeful given his views. He sounds averse to option one, i.e., refusing to interpret; and the moral truths approach could end up imputing something erroneous too: a mistaken moral claim that reflects the sensibilities of interpreters living at a particular time in history. Moral sensibilities change often.

Given how frequently new interpretations arise (recall Rashi and Rashbam’s phrase: *ha-peshatot ha-mithaddeshim be-khol yom*, Gen. 37:2), a given construal of terms for an object, event or place may change, and often, one assumes, the original reading “imputed” a falsehood to the text by saying that this-or-that existed or happened. In fact, my colleague Dr. Mordechai Cohen, in a forthcoming book on Maimonides’ theory of interpretation, states that Rambam regarded *tawil* (non-literal interpretation) as “subjective and potentially fallible” and “acknowledges that any such interpretation cannot be regarded as definitive.” A supporting passage that Dr. Cohen cites from Rambam’s *Treatise on Resurrection* suggests that if Rambam originally interpreted a verse figuratively because science ruled out a literal reading, he may well reconstrue it as literal if new scientific knowledge allows him to do so. Rambam says nothing to rule out the reverse possibility—a literal reading that is based on one set of scientific assumptions is replaced by a figurative one due to changes in the science. In this latter case the earlier literal reading imputed a falsehood to the text. Yet Rambam apparently would not be bothered; such imputations are unavoidable unless we swear off interpreting.

Admittedly, it is debatable whether risk of imputing error and likelihood of imputing error should be regarded equally. But (i) I am doubtful that undertaking a risk of imputing a falsehood should be acceptable given Dr. Becker’s concerns; (ii) Dr. Becker may be overstating how “likely” it is that our science will change. Since I anyway see other difficulties with

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Dr. Becker's approach, I content myself with having brought my first argument this far and turn to those difficulties.

Let us therefore consider a second point. Dr. Becker is conspicuously aware of a key argument in my article: that, if we take shifting sands seriously, then, since all disciplines change, (a) "the shifting sands objector must confess to knowing nothing in many, if not all, fields" (p. 239, n. 44) and (b) all interpretation must come to a halt. To repel this rejoinder, Dr. Becker tries to sustain a distinction that I discussed but whose relevance I rejected (pp. 239-40, note 47): between saying that one needs knowledge of a certain field to understand the Bible, and saying that the Bible expresses or states the truths of that field. Thus, Dr. Becker is clear that we can licitly use current philology, history, literary theory, geography and even (he says this explicitly) physics and biology as background theories to interpret the text, even though we know that their assertions are likely to be inaccurate, incomplete, or downright false. If some of our beliefs in those areas are mistaken (as the shifting sands argument would dictate), we will have misinterpreted the Bible, but we will not have imputed falsehoods to the Bible. So, contrary to what I argued, Dr. Becker maintains that a shifting sands objection need not freeze all interpretation.

But is it really worse to be a bold concordist than to use science, history, philology, and so on, as interpretive tools? One rationale for licensing use of the other fields—that we are *forced* to use them as interpretive tools—is in my opinion not convincing. After all, critics of Modern Orthodoxy interpret extensively without using those modern tools. But there is something more fundamental. Suppose (to return to an example I discuss in the note) that someone uses contemporary psychology to interpret the relationships among Jacob's sons. Based on that background theory, the interpreter makes certain claims: Reuven was motivated by this or that reason, Jacob thought such and such, and so on. If the interpreter's background theory is erroneous in some way—as, by the present hypothesis, it is likely to be—then our interpreter, assuming he or she accepts the Bible's historicity, is likely to be making false claims about major figures in our history and is imputing those false claims to the text. Likewise, having an incorrect philology or theory of narrative can lead one to attribute to the Torah false claims about events or geography, and, like a mistaken moral sensibility, could lead one to extract a moral lesson from the Torah that is erroneous.

Dr. Becker's reply would be, I surmise, that in the case of Jacob's sons and the philology, geography and morality cases, the interpreter is not imputing falsehoods to the Bible, only interpreting incorrectly. But I have argued that he or she *is* imputing falsehood, and yet the method used is

perfectly legitimate. Here, then, is what a bold concordist can say in defense: “I think the Bible expresses true science. I know that the science of today is likely to need revision, that it is incomplete, inaccurate in detail, or whatever. The exegesis I suggest at this juncture is tentative and subject to revision. But just as people use secular disciplines to interpret biblical texts knowing full well that as a result they are likely to arrive at some historical and geographic statements that are false, I will interpret the Bible as saying X, Y, Z and at worst arrive at a false interpretation. If the text is not saying what today’s science says, I will say that it is saying something else. The fault is not with the Bible, it’s with me. I’m really not in any different position than the reader in Shatz’s other examples who is imputing falsehoods to the text.”

I find this insistence on parity and equal treatment quite cogent.

A third problem with Dr. Becker’s argument is that it leads to awkward and paradoxical results that I am quite sure he would not affirm. If Dr. Becker’s argument is sound, then it would be religiously unacceptable to interpret any verses as expressing a claim that *matches* contemporary science. After all, the science is likely to be false. Suppose that in the year 2100 scientists proclaim, “We were wrong! The world was created in six days and is (then) 5,860 years old, winged animals preceded terrestrial ones, looking at speckled sticks makes animals produce speckled offspring, dew comes from the heavens, and Ptolmey was right, so Joshua could have stopped the sun and Psalms 93:1 is correct that the earth does not move.” According to Dr. Becker’s argument, we would not be allowed to interpret the Bible—again, not even tentatively (which is, I suggest, the only way to advance such an interpretation)—as saying any of those things, since those claims are likely to change over time. This consequence turns Torah u-Madda and medieval rationalism upside down. Instead of striving to interpret the Torah to *accord with madda*, we are obliged to interpret it in a way that makes it *contradict madda*. To take things to the next step, whenever Torah *accords with* science, we have to interpret the Torah text figuratively! Clearly something is amiss here. It will not do to say that it is not really likely that the science will change, since the likelihood of change is the lynchpin of Dr. Becker’s argument. Of course, in our hypothetical example we must not wax triumphant about finding concord between Torah and other fields, lest we embarrass ourselves if and when the science changes. But as explained in the article, this danger does not affect the legitimacy of the interpretation, only (at worst) the wisdom of publicizing it or of failing to hedge it with qualifiers.

That Dr. Becker’s enticing and, again, quite interesting argument yields the conclusions I have outlined leads me to reject it. We may and

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should interpret the Torah by our best lights, whether we are using those as background knowledge or as something the text expresses; we will revise the interpretation if the fit is poor. Taking this position has another advantage. From Dr. Becker's perspective (to be fair, he does not say this explicitly, but I think it follows from his position), the now-refuted rationalist *Rishonim* could be paraded forth as an example not just of what can go wrong *exegetically* when we read science into the Bible, but—far worse—of what can go wrong *religiously*, even if only *be-shogeg*. This assessment is discomfiting. It scarcely needs to be added that once the shifting sands objection fails, the *Rishonim* do after all serve as a precedent for today's bold concordists. For the medieval/modern distinction does not change the fact that both groups think that the Bible expresses what they believe to be scientific truth.

Dr. Becker has another objection, however. He maintains that bold concordists have no answer to the question "Why would the Torah include the science of 2009 instead of 1880 or 2150?" But, to begin with, the question should read, "What makes it admissible for an interpreter living in 2009 to believe, tentatively and provisionally, that the Torah expresses the science of 2009?" And this question, so far as I can see, does not raise new issues beyond those considered in my paper. It's like asking "What makes it admissible for an interpreter to believe, tentatively and provisionally, that the philology, linguistics, literary theory, psychology, philosophy, and science of 2009 will yield a correct interpretation of the Torah, as opposed to the philology, linguistics, literary theory, psychology, philosophy and science of 2500?" The main answer, roughly, is that the interpreter believes certain 2009 teachings in those disciplines, and interpretation is conditioned by what the interpreter believes at a given time. Furthermore, as I noted in the article, both questions are akin to, "Why may a scientist believe the science of his or her time when most likely there will be another science at a later time in 2500?" As I wrote, "If you swear off interpreting according to science on the grounds that science is mutable, you should swear off believing scientific theories altogether" (p. 211). Whatever philosophers do to justify holding beliefs in the face of science's mutability, it is clear—and this Dr. Becker I think concedes—that scientists and scholars believe certain claims on the basis of available data, and have the right to do so. Dr. Becker's caution about particular medical claims does not change the fact that scientists *believe* that some version of evolutionary theory is true. Otherwise, whence today's fuss and hostile controversy about evolution? But just as we don't swear off believing by our best lights, we need not (and should not) swear off interpreting by our best lights. If often a theory's defect is incompleteness, holding beliefs is still more defensible.

I would be remiss not to point out that the shifting sands objection seriously undercuts certain Modern Orthodox positions. (What follows is not aimed at Dr. Becker since I do not know his views on the matters I will cite, but I think it is important to raise the issue.) Modern Orthodox Jews forcefully assert the truth of evolutionary theory and bemoan the fact that other Orthodox Jews do not embrace it, often lambasting the deniers. Ironically, in that context it is *opponents* of Modern Orthodoxy who wield the shifting sands argument to discredit science (in addition to presenting arguments from rabbinic authority). Likewise some Modern Orthodox figures criticize rabbis who refuse to accept blood testing to determine paternity, or who insist on *metstisah be-peh*, on the grounds that today's science must be accepted as correct. In that context, too, a successful shifting sands argument would refute the Modern Orthodox position under discussion, even more so since accepting the science affects halakhic decisions (as opposed to biblical interpretation). Modern Orthodoxy's loud trust in science *prima facie* contradicts any use of shifting sands arguments to dismiss bold concordism out of hand. If only those who object to bold concordism would end their quest to find something wrong *in principle* with it, and instead content themselves with rejecting it, as I do, on the grounds that bold concordist readings do not fit the text, they would rid themselves of the contradiction. That the shifting sands argument, which creates skepticism about science, continues to be invoked by Modern Orthodox Jews against bold concordism, despite its self-defeating effect, intensifies the mystery with which my article began—why do Modern Orthodox Jews reflexively reject bold concordism before examining details?

I turn next to R. Spero. In contrast to Dr. Becker, R. Spero agrees with my essay's conclusion and does not quarrel with my treatment of the six arguments at its core. But like Dr. Becker, he asserts that one must distinguish between medieval rationalist interpreters and those authors today who find contemporary science in biblical verses (more precisely, in Gen. 1). He also rejects my categorization of him as a bold concordist, which was based on his 1999 *Tradition* article.

R. Spero's explication of the distinction between medieval and modern bold concordists contains several themes. Each is interesting and worthy of attention in its own right, but none, I think, renders the comparison I drew between medievals and moderns inappropriate.

1) Rabbi Spero notes that for Rambam, "it is not necessary to believe that it [the Torah] contained all the truth."

I agree. But neither do the interpreters whom I call "continuers" of medieval rationalism find *all* of contemporary science in the Torah. I said that bold concordists hold that "the Bible teaches science and metaphysics in

a positive fashion,” but was cautious not to say, “they hold that the Bible teaches *all of* science and metaphysics in a positive fashion.” (On this point, see p. 225)

2) Rambam “had no problem in using general knowledge when wishing to provide a broader context for related Bible themes such as history, ethics or astronomy. . . [It] was a matter of presenting certain Torah teachings against the background of general accepted knowledge.” As I understand this claim—I hope I am not misconstruing it—it makes the distinction I already note in the article (p. 239, n. 47) and referred to in my response to Dr. Becker. Namely, there is a difference between saying that one needs knowledge of a certain field to understand the Bible, and saying that the Bible expresses or states the truths of that field. Sometimes, indeed, “history, ethics or astronomy” do provide background assumptions. Yet the thesis that the Bible actually expresses scientific truth (again, *some* such truth) is so central to medieval rationalist exegesis that I do not see how it can be denied that rationalists held it. Note that with regard to ethics and history, which R. Spero mentions, there should be no doubt that the Bible at times *expresses* claims in those areas even when one has to draw on general knowledge to interpret the text.

(3) Perhaps R. Spero’s main point is the *opposite* of understanding #(1): that today’s bold concordists focus “primarily” on Genesis, whereas *Rishonim* cast their net wider. This is true; Ralbag’s reading of *Shir ha-Shirim* as a dialogue between the passive and active intellects illustrates that point dramatically. But in my context, that is a distinction without a difference. I am concerned with a shared approach to the text that is being (in my words) “continued and rehabilitated,” not with the scope of the approach. Distinguishing sharply between medieval and contemporary, or dropping reference to the medievals altogether, would, first of all, omit a striking comparison that I believe is helpful both conceptually and historically. Moreover, failing to note similarity would unfairly deprive today’s bold concordists of an argument in their favor—namely, that their view, although focused on only a small stretch of Tanakh and not part of a far-reaching, systematic program, is admissible because they emulate *Rishonim* closely enough to justifiably cite them as precedent.

This is not to say that locating differences between medievals and moderns (for example, in the scope of their respective projects) is not interesting or worthwhile as a separate enterprise from the one pursued in my paper. But philosophical examinations of subjectivists, determinists, utilitarians, dualists, empiricists, theists, and mystics often justly homogenize numerous and diverse variants of these schools. In many contexts (and ours is one), what unites those in a particular camp—their deepest

and most fundamental shared assertion—is far more significant than what divides them, so for the purpose at hand the discussion can carry on as if they are soulmates. There is nothing imprecise or overly broad about identifying a central, nuclear thesis that powers diverse thinkers across time. Furthermore, it is not as if today’s bold concordists think, contrary to medievals, that one *cannot* or *must not* go beyond Gen. 1; they simply don’t offer interpretations of other passages. Incidentally, I fail to grasp why, as R. Spero implies, creating *more* distinctions would have made the paper *less* complex. Perhaps R. Spero means that I should have dropped reference to the medievals altogether. But that step is undesirable for reasons given at the end of the previous paragraph.

4) I am confused by the paragraph beginning “Thus neither for Rambam nor for the physicists Aviezer or Schroeder is the issue ‘Is there Science in the Bible.’” That paragraph suggests that these groups *are* ultimately similar. Perhaps the intent here is that given (for R. Spero) that Rambam used science only as background, and bold concordists limit themselves to Gen. 1, neither asserts that there is science in the Bible. I have already denied the Rambam part of this twofold assertion, and one cannot plausibly argue that because he deals only with Gen. 1, Aviezer is not saying there is science in the Bible.

I now turn to whether R. Spero is a bold concordist. Here is a quotation from p. 9 of his 1999 article, referenced in note 9 of my essay:

. . . [T]he Torah indeed wished man to know something about the methods God used in creating the universe. . . The Torah intended the story of creation to be taken literally, but with one reservation: that it be understood that. . . in the event that future scientific discovery should broaden our knowledge of such phenomena as light, time, water, sun, stars, heaven, firmament (*rakia*), we should be prepared to “stretch” their primary meanings to cover and include these new phenomena, with the overall account remaining essentially “true.”

He goes on to cite, apparently with approval, “Torah-knowledgeable scientists” who point out that “light” may be referring to the radiation that was detected in 1964—and there he footnotes Aviezer and Schroeder! I take these passages to show that he believes that Genesis 1 (suitably interpreted!) expresses accurate scientific truth. I certainly appreciate that, unlike the *Rishonim*, R. Spero is making very limited use of his approach. Yet Aviezer makes limited use too.

(Noteworthy, too, is that R. Spero takes the Flood narrative to refer metaphorically to “all the destructions and mass extinctions which took place on the planet from the very beginning” [pp. 14-16]. By means of

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the story, the Torah is saying something that modern science teaches: that “after each disaster certain life forms, plants and animals survived *thanks to man*. That is to say, those which were inimical to the evolution of man became extinct; those useful to man survived” through Divine guidance [p. 15; italics are in the original]. Even though, one might say, this approach is less boldly concordist than bold concordist readings of Gen. 1, it does see the Torah as expressing something that modern science teaches, and affirms that, in order to accurately interpret what events are referred to by the text, one requires modern scientific knowledge.)

There is another claim in R. Spero’s letter that needs correction or at least qualification. R. Spero states that I “divide the world of biblical interpreters into three colorfully named groups: ‘bold concordists,’ ‘modest concordists,’ and ‘anti-concordists.’” This formulation is very much of an overstatement, and I want to correct the impression it leaves. I divide “the world of biblical interpreters” that way *with regard to one particular question* (viz., “Is There Science in the Bible?”), and do so simply because that is the question I am considering. With regard to other, more important exegetical questions, other categories are appropriate: *pashtanim*, Kabbalists, etc. For those purposes I would divide “the world of biblical interpreters” differently.

All that said, I must register, in closing, a disagreement of a quite different kind. Rabbi Spero is all too modest when he says he is not bold. His original, challenging, bold, and stimulating essays and books have enriched Orthodox thought for over half a century. As a long-time admirer, I welcome this opportunity to thank him for his rich and rewarding body of work.