

Bereishit, Darwin and Jewish values

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Scientific revolutions often lead to cultural upheaval. Our current information revolution has altered almost every aspect of human experience, and it will take decades to fully assess its long-term impacts.

The two most transformative scientific revolutions of the past one thousand years occurred in the 16th and 19th century respectively. In 1543, Copernicus proved that a stationary star was fixed at the center of our galaxy. We call that yellowish ball, the sun, and planet Earth, orbit this fiery star. The Copernican revolution radically altered our perception of the prominence of human beings within the larger universe. If planet Earth no longer stood at the midpoint of the universe, perhaps human beings weren't as central to creation as had been previously assumed. Humans were now reduced to a speck of cosmic dust occupying a minute orb, lost in an endless cosmos, containing billions of galaxies. What would become of Man and his lofty station as divine masterpiece? Everything changed.

In many ways, Darwin's discoveries in the 19th century were even more world-shattering. In 1859, Charles Darwin published his "Origin of Species" proving that diversity in Nature is driven by an evolutionary process known as natural selection. Genetic mutation creates both different species as well as variations within each specie. The stronger creatures are advantaged by a process known as survival of the fittest: only the fittest creatures survive and reproduce, while weaker forms of life are filtered out of the natural ecosystem.

Darwin's theories radically impacted human thought and severely challenged religious dogma. Here are five enduring Darwinian challenges to our Jewish value system.

Is Science the Enemy of Religion?

Darwin's theories directly challenged our belief that God created the world, or the doctrine of creationism. Some of Darwin's discoveries are more easily reconciled with religious tenets, while others appear to be more difficult to resolve. The concept of evolution per se, doesn't directly clash with creationism. Perhaps God

created an intelligent system with inherent creative capabilities. Perhaps evolutionary change, driven by an invisible hand, is part of God's intelligent design. Other Darwinian claims more directly clash with religious belief, such as his assertion that Man descends from primates, or the overall implication that the world is older than the Biblical timeline.

Despite the apparent conflict, most if not all of Darwin's actual discoveries can be squared with the Torah's description of creation. It is not necessarily his actual claims which counter religion, but, rather, the growing rift between science and religion which emerged in the aftermath of his discoveries. Unfortunately, many religious people harbor a perennial but false suspicion of science as the enemy of religion. Science empowers us to better understand the mechanics of God's world and should enhance our appreciation of God's handiwork. Of course, science and ration are only equipped to describe the "how" but never the "why". Science can reveal the process, but can never provide meaning. Sometimes scientific conclusions challenge religious dogma and force us to develop more profound understandings of our religious belief. Defaming the entire field science as anti-religious, is theologically fraudulent, and cripples human progress, which itself is part of the divine will. Darwin's discoveries added to the false illusion of science as the enemy of religion.

Social Darwinism

Darwin's ideas also caused a century of bloodshed. Social Darwinism extended Darwin's theories about Nature to the field of sociology: just as the selection of the strong from the weak is vital to natural evolution, it is similarly necessary for the sustainability of society. Society must be filtered of its impurities, else it will wilt. These poisonous ideas led to various programs aimed at cleansing society of undesirable elements, and, ultimately, to the Nazi program of genocide against non-Aryans. Hitler was deeply influenced by social Darwinism and quotes these theories in his book *Mein Kampf*.

A humane society or a jungle?

Even when it doesn't express itself in murder, social Darwinism is socially toxic. Nature may be driven by the harsh realities of competition, but society of Man should be more humane and compassionate. Judaism envisions a society of ethics and social welfare, in which the weakest members aren't exterminated, but

provided for. In the wake of Darwin, society has become less caring and more violent and is slowly resembling Darwin's jungle. Just because nature is morally indifferent does not mean that humans should follow suit.

Human will or genetic fate

Darwin's doctrine of evolution also constrained human freedom. Man is the only creature gifted with consciousness, creativity, and freedom of choice. Our freedom empowers us to make moral and religious decisions, but it also demands we take responsibility for our failures. Darwin's system implied a more deterministic view of Man who is nothing more than a 'gene capable of creating a gene'. We are just one small spoke of a larger evolutionary wheel, being spun by forces beyond our individual control.

Darwin was not alone in deflating human freedom. Marx asserted that human history was driven by class warfare over the distribution of wealth. Freud suggested that we are driven by dark psychological forces beyond our control, namely our hatred of our father and our desire for our mother. Taken together, Darwin, Marx and Freud relandscaped a world of free choice into an ironclad deterministic world where humans cannot determine their fate or their decisions.

Ironically, we have achieved unprecedented political and economic freedom, but we feel more trapped and less empowered. In a world of determinism, we are less likely to take responsibility for our failures, and more likely to blame others for our struggles. Judaism is predicated on an unconditional belief in unlimited human freedom, and once that belief is toppled the entire system collapses.

A divine masterpiece or a cosmic hiccup?

Finally, Darwin's theories of evolution blurred the distinctiveness of Man. By claiming that all living humans belong to a unitary species with a single origin, Darwin asserted equality between Man and the rest of the natural kingdom. If, as Darwin claimed, all species descend from a common evolutionary source, Man possess no lofty or distinctive status. Homo Sapiens are just a small part of a large evolutionary tree, and we don't even occupy our own branch, as we share ours with primates. Darwin reduced man from a Divine masterpiece into an amalgam of genes, positioned randomly on an evolutionary timeline of billions of years, commencing well before we arrived on this planet. In place of a Divine grand

mission, we are locked into an evolutionary survival of the fittest alongside the animals of the jungle. Formulating this implied Darwinian view of humanity, Stephen Hawking referred to the human race as “just a chemical-scum on a moderately sized planet, orbiting round a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a billion galaxies.” God compares us to stars, but to Hawking we are just scum.

Bereishit celebrates the dignity of Man by recording that God fashioned Man in His own divine Image and vested him with unlimited potential. Man was created noble and pure, and to underscore this primal virtue, his creation on the sixth day is marked by effusive divine praise: “God beheld all His creation, and it was surpassingly good”. Darwin and his comrades devalue human dignity, but Judaism heralds it.

Without respect for the dignity of the human condition we are more likely to dehumanize or objectify other humans. Without belief in our own inner nobility, we suffer lack of self-esteem and lose of belief in ourselves and in our potential. Without viewing ourselves as God’s masterpiece we forget that God chose us, spoke with us at Sinai, and handed us a historical mission. We are different and not just because we are better adapted at surviving Nature’s contest for survival.

It is not Darwin’s doctrine of evolution per se which is dangerous to Jewish belief and values. Instead, it is a range of implications about science, society, free will and human dignity. Every revolution creates cultural and religious upheaval. While we accept scientific findings, we cannot accept implied messages which erode basic religious values. Science should provide data, not values. It should provide information but not belief.

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