

Rosh Hashana morning

## **Creation and Evolution**

Today we turn to a new page in the Jewish calendar and change the dating on all of our letters and documents from the year 5765 to the New Year 5766. From time to time people ask “5766 years since what?” And they are often shocked by the reply: “since the creation of the world.” Then follows an uncomfortable pause bursting with the unspoken question: “do we believe the world is only 5766 years old?” Suddenly we are plunged into the thick of our country’s culture war, the split between religious and America...the proponents and the opponents of Darwin’s theory of evolution. And panic sets in: which side are we on?

I would like to speak a bit this morning about the debate between evolution and intelligent design, which is so much in the news these days. It’s a good topic for the morning of Rosh Hashanah, the day on which according to our ancient rabbis, God shaped a lump of clay into a human form and blew into its nostrils the breath of life. And the Adam, the human, being a living soul.

In the context of our public schools, in my opinion, the evolution-intelligent design controversy is both annoying and deeply disturbing. It is wrong that our children...not our children in Santa Barbara, not yet...but our

children in Pennsylvania and in Georgia and in Kansas, are being used as pawns in this culture war. But at least one good thing may come out of it, if we use this an occasion to speak clearly about the two profound questions at the heart of this controversy, which are; 1. is there a creative intelligence at work in the universe? And 2. is there such a thing as the human soul? These, I believe, are two deep and marvelous questions at the heart of this controversy.

The first thing that I think should be state loudly and clearly is that Jews prefer a good question to a good answer. These questions about the nature of God and the nature of the human soul have produced many different Jewish answers over the course of 4,000 years. That is what makes them good questions! No single Jewish answer is nearly as powerful or as significant as the questions. In this regard, I think, classical Judaism is radically different from classical Christianity. Fundamentally, there is no idea to which a Jew must swear loyalty. There are *mitzvoth*, actions which the Torah commands, but no ideas. Judaism is a religion of deed, not creed.

This holds true for a whole range of big religious questions. What happens to us after we die? Where did the Torah come from? Why is there suffering in the world? How did the universe begin? How will it end?

What is the origin of the human soul? Each of these questions has produced many wonderful Jewish responses.

New responses, by the way, have been generated throughout our history by new experiences, new information, new encounters. When Judaism encountered ancient Greece, that encounter produced Rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism of the Mishna and Talmud. Judaism has been shaped by encounters with Zoroastrianism, with Christianity, with Islam, with the European Enlightenment, and with the scientific revolution. This is a living religion; like all living organisms Judaism takes from and gives back to the world around it.

So, what about God...the idea, the being, the belief which appears at first to be threatened by the theory of evolution. Is it God the Creator of the universe that the School Board of Dover Pennsylvania and Kansas State Board of Education are fighting to defend? Does the creator of the universe need this kind of help?

We have hundreds of Jewish names for God. And we Jews are absolutely clear about the fact that they are just names. Human attempts to reach for the transcendent, the incomprehensible and unknowable. In one critical moment in the Torah, God says to Moses, “no man may see my face and live.” Maimonides in the 12<sup>th</sup> century taught that the only factual

statements we can make about God are negatives: God is not a person, God has no body, etc. And the Kabbalists, the Jewish mystics, referred to the ultimate reality of God as Ayin, which means “Nothing.” Yes, we have a hundred names for God, because we want to reach for the divine, to connect to God. But we have the humility to acknowledge that when it comes to the reality of God, we do not know anything.

The Biblical story of the creation of the world, therefore, is in our religion, just that: a story. A wonderful, beautiful, ancient story...full of truth and wisdom....but not a statement of fact about God. We do not know any facts about God, or about how God works.

So do we believe in Intelligent Design? Well, those are two honorable Jewish theological terms: intelligent? yes; we sometimes say to God, “*m’od amku machsh’votcha*. Your thoughts are very deep.” And design? Yes, we speak of God as artist, as planer, as designer of the universe. But these are our notions. Our names. Our attempts to touch the divine. And we never forget that there are moments in our life, and there have been times in our history, moments of unspeakable tragedy and loss, when to name God as intelligent, and to speak of God’s design, is impossible.

A true lover of nature, one who dedicates their life to watching animals living and dying, breeding and killing, or who spends months and years peering into the furthest and deepest reaches of the cosmos, is left standing in awe, in terror, transfixed by the sheer vastness of the universe. That lover may experience the divine presence, and in that moment of revelation, know that the puny human categories of “intelligent” and “design” fail miserably to describe the full grandeur of what they have beheld.)

Now then let me turn to the second big question at the heart of the controversy over evolution, which is something much closer to us than the ultimate nature of God, and that is the question of the human soul. Darwin’s theory raises a fundamental question about who we are, and where we come from.

Let me put it this way: I think of our soul as something we share with all human beings, everywhere on earth, and throughout time. This is one of the joys of travel...the delight of discovering kindred souls anywhere on earth. And it is one of the deep pleasures of reading, the gift of meeting another human mind, a fellow soul, hiding in the pages of an ancient text. That experience of recognition confirms the notion that we humans are all

fundamentally related to each other, and in our innermost core, we are all the same...one universal human soul.

But this notion is challenged by the story of evolution, which tells of our descent from the apes. In the evolution narrative, how did the soul enter the story? Was there a child born with a human soul to two parents without souls? It may be that single thought, of the human baby born to two inhuman parents, that is unbearable and utterly unacceptable to the opponents of the theory of evolution.

The mystery and the miracle of the human soul, of human consciousness, was expressed most beautifully and most memorably for our generation in Motl Kamzoil's song in Fiddler on the Roof, Wonder of Wonders. The song is mostly about love, but the line from that song that brings tears to my eyes is: "But of all God's miracles large and small, the most miraculous one of all, is that out of a worthless lump of clay, God has made a man today."

It is a miracle, an unspeakably wonderful miracle. And we need a new Jewish story to tell of that miracle, one that can co-exist in our minds together with the theory of evolution. Rosh Hashanah offers us that story.

This festival speaks to us of the real possibility of progress. Not scientific or technological progress, but of spiritual progress. On this day, at

this season, we declare that we as individuals are not trapped in the past. We are free to step forward. We are never going to be perfect. But we can become better. More mature. More ethical. More responsible. More conscious. In other words, our souls can grow. We see this happen every day with our children, as their bodies grow and develop, we also see their souls unfolding and growing at the same time. Rosh Hashanah teaches us that...however discouraged we may get with ourselves....the growth and development of our souls can continue throughout adulthood, until we die.

How does this relate to evolution? Many Jewish teachers throughout history have said that the animals have souls, in many ways not so different from ours. For example, Maimonides wrote in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, “there is no difference between a human’s concern and an animal’s concern for their young. The love of a mother for the child of her womb is not an intellectual function; rather, it proceeds from the consciousness which is found in animals just as in human beings.” Jewish law, is extremely strict, moreover, about forbidding causing an animal to suffer. For our Jewish sages, humans are unique...especially in the capacity to reason and to speak...but the emotions of love, and the capacity to suffer...which are surely elements of soul, are widespread in the animal kingdom.

If animals have should of some kind, then, and if a soul can grow and develop and become more conscious, is it then so difficult to imagine the slow development, over the course of many thousands of years, of the human soul out of the animal world?

In fact, if we look at the story of human history over the past four thousand years, as depressing as it is, there are signs of progress...of the evolution of our souls. Admittedly, the progress is often backward, and the last century was particularly bad, a century of death and destruction beyond anything we humans had ever brought into the world before. And yet....we betray ourselves and we betray God if we ignore the progress. Slavery is less accepted in the world than it was once. There has been a slow but undeniable progress in the status of women in the world. Even the story of the Binding of Isaac, which we read on this festival, may be understood as the record of a crucial step forward in the evolution of soul...from a world which allowed child sacrifice to a new world, in which a new divine voice cries out at the last moment and tells Abraham: stop! Do not send forth your hand against the child.

I readily admit that it is difficult to maintain a belief in the growth of the human soul at this moment in history. So many indicators all around us seems to be warning of a collapse of human society and human wisdom and

values. Our nation is at war, again, with little hope of success or even of an honorable way out. Right now, we yearn nostalgically for a simpler time, when people knew and cared about each other, and respected the earth, and honored the elderly. It feels like we are actually spiritually de-evolving.

And yet, on Rosh Hashanah, the shofar is God's bugle. Calling us to regroup. To take courage. And to believe again in the future. Each one of us can grow ...more ethical, more mature, more responsible. Not to become perfect, but to become better in some large or small way than we were before. And on this day of hope and courage, we allow ourselves to dream of a world, far in the future, when we human beings as a species will have evolved...both biologically and spiritually...into the human race that God first envisioned when he said: "*Naaseh et ha-adam, b'tsalmeinu ki-d'muteinu*. Let us make man in our image, after our own likeness."