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SHOULD WE CARE HOW LONG CREATION TOOK?

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Some people care a great deal about whether G-d created the earth and the heavens in literally seven days, meaning, 168 hours, or 10,080 minutes, etc.

By “some people”, I don’t mean specifically or primarily Orthodox Jews or members of other conservative religious denominations that venerate the Bible. The people who care most are generally those who dislike such religions. They believe very strongly that the “fundamentalism” they define themselves by opposing is utterly dependent on this belief. They believe that demonstrating that creation took longer or shorter, or didn’t follow the order laid out in the first chapter of Genesis, relieves them of the burden of taking traditional religion seriously.

Some people care a great deal about whether G-d created the earth and the heavens in literally seven days, meaning in seven more-or-less defined periods of indeterminate length that can be conceptualized as having sequential segments of darkness and lightness. These people will spend much time looking for electromagnetic wavelengths that could have functioned as timekeepers before the creation of the sun and planets, or for sub-sub-subatomic particles (tohu and bohu) that could be the building blocks of all matter.

These people may be brilliant, with superb scientific educations and scientific research experience. They may as often be innumerate who fall for crude hoaxes.

Some people wonder a great deal about why other people care so much about whether the first chapter of Genesis is literally or literarily true. After all, they reason, the mere fact that creation took place one way, or rather another way, has no moral significance. All that matters is what values we can learn from the fiction of G-d having created the world in seven days. We can learn those morals regardless of the story’s facticity, just as (*lebandil!*) we can learn about parenting from King Lear even though Shakespeare was not attempting to portray a historical character with historical accuracy.

Is Lear a fair analogy, even with all due disclaimers? It is easy to spot the flaw. Lear does not teach morality directly. It holds up an image of human nature, or of the nature of some human relationships, or of the consequences of certain kinds of decisions, that many of us find compelling. We make moral judgments under the influence of those images, but we do not derive our morality from them. Torah, however, is presumably intended to be a source of moral judgment, and not (just) a touchstone for evaluating the factual or causal claims of moral principles derived from other sources.

Unless one believes in some form of “Natural Law”. But natural law has long been in disrepute in Western circles. Hume wrote scathingly that “from is to ought there is no inference”, and this is now seen as common sensical.

There are lots of good moral and logical reasons to buy deeply into Hume, among them:

To paraphrase Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l, one can learn industry from ants, but also ruthless wars of extermination, or the insignificance of individual identity; modesty from cats, or how to play with prey.

We do not want to think that children born with profound medical challenges, or into awful social settings, deserve their suffering.

But we must understand that Hume is a deep problem religiously. Leibnitz had a good point when he argues that believers in G-d must conclude that we live in the best of all possible worlds – so we should be able to figure out why this world is better, and apply that principle. If the world is an expression of the Will of G-d, how can it not be an expression of His moral as well as His creative will?

Which brings us back to the first chapter of Genesis. One reason that so many of us resist putting any kind of factual content into that chapter is that we have bought fully into

Hume. Therefore, there is nothing that Genesis can teach us about the material world that **matters**, since the material world contains no moral instruction. “If they tell you there is Torah in nature – don’t believe them!

Yet it seems to me that there is no way to read that chapter in a way that generates direct moral instruction. Whether or not it teaches us science, it teaches us some way of conceptualizing the material world, and it teaches us that in significantly more detail than can be reasonably explained as just being intended to teach the fact of creation ex nihilo. Moreover, it doesn’t even do a good job of teaching that fact! Most rishonim understand the first word of the Torah as describing a process that took place after some things, such as *tohu*, *bohu*, and *mayim*, already existed. So the chapter must make more specific claims about the world. But what claims about the world can **matter**, if there are no legitimate inferences from is to ought?

One possibility is to modify Hume, and say that “there is not always an inference from is to ought, and there is no perfectly reliable way of knowing when such an inference is valid, and when invalid”. This seems to me a reasonably accurate account of much relevant rabbinic thought, and a productive avenue, although I’m not sure anyone today will find it psychologically satisfying.

It’s fair and necessary to note that there are specific issues where the is-to-ought movement has significant influence specifically in modernity. The clearest example is homosexuality, where many people find ascribe to a version of “G-d could not create a very significant percentage of the population with a sexual orientation that was morally wrong”.

Rabbinic literature has many poetic ways of capturing these difficulties. I like using the question of anesthesia during childbirth as an illustration. Clearly G-d intended women to experience childbirth as painful, and yet no one sees it as a violation of G-d’s will for us to ameliorate or eliminate that pain.

One further problem with using is-to-ought as a basis for religious interpretation of Scripture is that it makes the truth of our value claims depend on the truth of our fact claims. If we learn the superiority of humans over animals because humans are created last, what happens if it turns out that dolphins emerge later? And note that the argument seems to make a claim that goes beyond the text. If it doesn’t matter whether something was **really** created

later, then why does a text’s claim that something was created later have any values significance? It seems unsatisfying to say that the lessons of Torah depend on the temporary suspension not only of historical belief, but also of philosophic argument.

On reflection, though, it’s not clear why the possibility that our premise is wrong should constrain us specifically here. All values claims grounded in Torah are based on interpretations of the text, and interpretations are not infallible either (unless one resorts to radical pluralism, in which interpretations, or at least those offered by recognized scholars, are definitionally true). I may reach a wrong moral conclusion if I decide that the light of the first few days was actually a special form of gamma radiation. I may err just as greatly if I base my morals on the claim that night came before day (as opposed to Rashbam, who argues that day must come before night because *evening/erev* and *morning/boker* are gerunds, so that it “evens” after day and “morns” after night).

Perhaps what nonetheless bothers me about contemporary efforts to mesh Biblical interpretation with cutting-edge science is that they seem to want to put many of our eggs in a basket that preserves them only so long as both our science and our technical textual arguments are correct. Moreover, I think that the temptation to go from is-to-ought is properly omnipresent, and I don’t like making such improbabilities the basis for anything beyond themselves.

At the same time, I am not willing to cede the realm of facts to science, and be content to live exclusively in the House of the Values of Hashem all my days. Claims about morality and the good cannot be wholly separated from questions of human psychology, and such questions are more and more claimed as the province of science. And so much of halakhah depends on claims about human nature! If Torah can only talk about values, it will become a “Torah of the gaps”, forced back and back into narrower and narrower spaces by each advance in neuroscience and psychogenetics.

The underlying question is whether Torah scholars can participate openmindedly in an epistemically diverse conversation. Can we admit that we might be wrong, or acknowledge that we have in the past been wrong, and that someone else got it more right? Or does our authority depend on belief in our infallibility?