

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



SHOULD WE CARE HOW LONG CREATION TOOK?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

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 than a week, 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 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 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 G-d telling us that He created the world in seven days. We can learn those morals regardless of the story’s facticity, just as (*lehavdil*) we can learn about parenting from King Lear even though Shakespeare was not attempting to portray a historical character with historical accuracy.

It is easy to challenge the analogy. Lear does not teach morality directly. It holds up images of human nature and human relationships and the consequences of human 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 commonsensical.

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

a. 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.

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

But we must be clear that Hume poses 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. 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?

One reason that many of us resist putting any kind of factual content into the first chapter of Genesis chapter is that we have bought fully into Hume. Therefore, there is nothing that Genesis can teach us about the material world that **matters**. “If they tell you there is Torah in nature – don’t believe them!”

Yet it seems to me that Genesis plainly teaches some way of conceptualizing the material world, and it does that in significantly more detail than can be reasonably explained as necessary to teach the fact of creation ex nihilo. Moreover, it doesn't even do a good job of teaching that fact! For example, 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 be making more specific claims about the world. But what claims about the world can **matter**, if there are no legitimate inferences from is to ought?

We might modify Hume by saying that “there is **not always** an inference from is to ought, and there is no 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 modern influence specifically in modernity. For example, many people subscribe to a version of “G-d could not create a very significant percentage of the population with a sexual orientation that was morally wrong to actualize”.

I like using anesthesia during childbirth to illustrate the problem with this sort of approach. Clearly G-d intended women to experience childbirth as painful, and Jewish tradition does not see efforts to ameliorate or eliminate that pain as a violation of G-d's will. Why would sexual orientation be different?

Moreover, is-to-ought arguments based on the “is” emerging from our interpretation of Scripture makes the truth of our value claims contingent on the truth of our fact claims. For example, if we learn the superiority of humans over animals from the fact that G-d creates humans last, what happens if it turns out that according to some achronim, dolphins were created after humans?

On reflection, though, it's not clear why the possibility of being wrong should constrain us specifically here. All values claims grounded in Torah are based on interpretations of the text, and interpretations of text are as error-prone as interpretations of nature. 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; but 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 efforts to mesh Biblical interpretation with cutting-edge science is that they put so many of our eggs in baskets that preserve them only so long as both our science and our technical textual arguments seem correct.

At the same time, I am not willing to cede the realm of facts to science. 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. Yet so much of halakhah rests 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 for me is whether Torah scholarship can participate open-mindedly in an epistemically diverse conversation about morality. Can we acknowledge our own fallibility without losing all our authority? Can we sustain our values in the face of arguments from is-to-ought without claiming infallibility about the is, or denying all meaning to it?

I like to think that we can seek meaning in Creation humbly, with the awareness that our thoughts are not His thoughts, and therefore arguments from is-to-ought are never proofs. But the humility needs to be genuine, and modelled powerfully.

Shabbat shalom!

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