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Not The Godol Hador

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Classic Mail Jewish 1994

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From: Marc Shapiro
Date: Sat, 22 Oct 1994 22:42:37 -0400 (EDT)
Subject: Science and Torah

I have read with interest the recent discussions re. Science and Torah. It is, however, somewhat unusual that people who appear to be so called modern-Orthodox are presenting Haredi-fundamentalist positions. I would therefore like to share with people what I believe is the Modern Orthodox approach on some of the issues being discussed. I am led to do so after a conversation I had with someone a few weeks ago who confessed that he could no longer be religious since he didn't believe. I asked what he meant when he said he didn't believe and he said that he didn't believe that the world was some 5000 years old and that the entire world was destroyed in the Flood. As he put it, there are hundreds of species of animals and insects in Australia, New Guinea and the rainforest. Did they just get on a boat and sail from Mt. Ararat to their current domiciles? Not to mention the fact that they could never have lived in Noah's area to begin with.

What I said to this man, and what I say now, is what I believe to be the proper response. It is also the one shared by all of the so called Modern Orthodox scholars and intellectuals I have spoken to concerning this question.

This approach is presented in their lectures on Bible and history at the various universities they teach at. If you go to the Association for Jewish Studies convention, where over half the attendees are now Orthodox, you will get the same answer from just about anyone you ask. I am not saying that everyone who is considered a Modern Orthodox philosopher, Bible Scholar or historian shares this view, but certainly the overwhelming number do and everyone I have spoken to agrees. I mention this only to point out that although Modern Orthodox people on this line seem to be advocating one position, the so-called intellectuals of this community have a different position. Understanding this

will both broaden the horizons of Modern Orthodox Jews and also allow many of them not to feel intellectually dishonest or consider the Bible simply a collection of fairy tales.

If you ask these Modern Orthodox scholars about the flood (and the Genesis story) you will be told that they are not to be taken literally. Obviously the world is more than five thousand years old and there was never a flood which destroyed the entire world, although this doesn't mean that there was never a localized flood. Of course, by now there is no dispute among Modern Orthodox that the world is billions of years old and I would say that to deny this would ipso facto mean that one can no longer be considered "modern". However, my major purpose here is to discuss the flood since this was not dealt with adequately on Mail Jewish. Most people are probably aware that a number of rishonim took the whole garden of Eden story allegorically and R. Kook writes that it makes no difference for us if in truth there was no Garden of Eden Can this insight be applied to the Flood?

Well the answer which is offered by Modern Orthodox scholars is that the Flood can only be understood by comparison with the Gilgamesh epic and it is in comparing the two that we see the real significance of the Torah's story, which is not trying to teach us history but important lessons about God and his relationship to man. Understood in this fashion, what is significant is the inner meaning of the Torah and not its outer texture which was never meant to be taken literally, and was able to be appreciated much better by the early Israelites who were aware of the Gilgamesh story. The exact point about the inner meaning being important, and not the so-called history, is made by all scholars who have discussed the allegory of the Garden of Eden.

When the flood story is understood in this light (and I cannot elaborate on all the details here) it is obvious that questions such as how the kangaroo got to Australia miss the point. (Although medieval scholars did not discuss the flood in this way, it is perhaps possible to see a precedent for the Modern Orthodox approach in the comments of Joseph ibn Caspi on the rabbinic phrase "The Torah speaks in the Language of Men." His comments are analyzed by Isadore Twersky in his article "Joseph Ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* vol. 2.

It is further interesting that in adopting this approach, Modern Orthodox scholars are doing something they usually don't do. Usually they argue that their insight into secular subjects allows them to have a better appreciation of the Torah than otherwise would be the case. However, with regard to the Flood story, they are saying that it is literally impossible to understand what the Torah is talking about with knowledge of Gilgamesh. Obviously, the

traditional commentators are of very little help in this regard. Now why is it that Modern Orthodox scholars cannot take the story literally? The answer is very simple and I'm sure most people know what I'm going to say. To believe that the entire world was destroyed some four thousand years ago and that we and all the animals are descended from Noah and those in his ark (similarly to believe that we are all descended from a first man named Adam who lived 5000 years ago) is not merely to dispute a certain historical fact, or to deny the existence of say Alexander, Caesar or George Washington. On the contrary, it is this and much more. One who believes in the flood story literally (or in the five thousand year history of the world) rejects the entire historical enterprise. He denies history itself and places himself outside of time. It is pointless to even discuss, never mind argue; with someone who adopts this view since there can be no point of reference between the fundamentalist and the historically minded. Indeed, it makes no sense for the fundamentalist to even attempt to show the historical veracity of what he believes, since as I said above, his very position is a rejection of the validity of all historical meaning. As such any discussion is pointless.

Since Modern Orthodoxy has always accepted the value of history, it is no surprise that the flood story is seen very differently in its scholarly circles than in Haredi circles. If people ask the professors at Bar Ilan's Bible department or history or philosophy departments about the flood and other things the answers will obviously be very different than what is given at traditional yeshivot (I've spoken to a number of the former about this and other issues, primarily about how best to present this material about the flood when teaching undergraduates) Of course, this will not surprise anyone who has studied at this or similar institutions.

To give an illustration which might be helpful, At Bar Ilan's Bible department it is acceptable to engage in Higher Criticism of the Prophets and Hagiographa whereas this is considered heresy at the yeshivot. I think the average Modern Orthodox Jew would also regard this as heresy and Prof. Uriel Simon (currently at Harvard) recently recalled to me the controversy such study created in the early years of the University when members of other faculties wished to ban it as heretical.. I mention this only to point out that there is a difference between what the so called Modern Orthodox intellectuals are doing and what the so called Modern Orthodox laity believe. It seems to me that this needs to be brought more into line.

Marc Shapiro

From: harry.weiss@24stex.com (Harry Weiss)
Date: Thu, 27 Oct 94 11:39:12 -0700
Subject: Flood

I found Marc Shapiro's posting about the flood upsetting. If there was a legitimate basis to question whether the flood actually happened it would have been discussed thousands of years ago. This was the case regarding the book of Job.

It is not a question of being Modern Orthodox vs. non modern. Denying the truth to a part of the Torah is denying the Divinity of the Torah which is absolute K'firah (heresy). These views are not Orthodox in any way. Being Modern Orthodox means fully accepting 100% of the Torah and Ol Malchut Shamaim (the reign of Heaven), while living as a part of modern society.

That fact that Shapiro (or I) cannot fully understand all of the facts behind the flood does not in any way lessen their accuracy. It just indicates our lack of knowledge.

I also question whether denying the Truth of any part of the Torah belongs on this list.

Harry

From: Marc Shapiro
Date: Sat, 29 Oct 1994 22:42:45 -0400 (EDT)
Subject: Re: Flood

In response to a couple of private letters, I would like to clarify a few things I wrote in my posting re. the flood, and I hope this will obviate the need to deal with this further, unless there is a significant need.

First, I do not deny that God could, if he wanted, have created the world 5755 years ago, created the fossils, signs of civilization etc. For that matter, he could have created the world 30 years ago and put memories into our minds and created earlier books, buildings etc. However, the best of our religious thinkers have taught us that we need not think in this fashion. We need not adopt Tertullian's credo quia impossibile -- I believe because it is impossible. (Actually Tertullian really said certum est quia impossibile est -- It is certain because it is impossible).

It is precisely because of this that great sages interpreted the Garden of Eden story allegorically and refused to take literally aggadot. Judaism doesn't require us to leave our intellects at the door. E. g. Obviously it is possible for God to lift Mount Sinai over the head of the Israelites, but must we believe this literally? The whole endeavor to allegorize aggadot is based on the fact that God (and the world) do not behave in a completely outrageous fashion. We don't understand God, but we have an idea about how he interacts in this world, at least that's what Maimonides and his followers thought. Why else reject demons, astrology and other superstitions. Couldn't God have made the world this way? Obviously yes, but the real question is, is it likely that he did so and must we believe this. Maimonides answers no, and I think modern Orthodox Jews agree, although Haredim probably do not.

In my original posting I stated that believing in the truth of the flood (and a 5000 year old world) is more extreme than denying the existence of George Washington. Someone asked me if it isn't the case that we have more evidence for George Washington than for denying the flood. The answer is obviously no. We know about Washington because of one type of evidence, historical, and we have a great deal of this. However, the entire received body of knowledge in just about every field of human study is dependant on the fact that the world is not 5000 years old and that there was not a flood. These facts are the fundamentals of biology, physics, astronomy, history, anthropology, geology, paleontology, zoology, linguistics etc. etc. etc. Belief in a 5000 year old world and a flood which destroyed the world 4000 years ago is a denial of all human knowledge as we know it. It is a retreat into a world of belief, rather than one based on any sort of fact, and one who believes can believe anything he want to. The fundamentalist is not able to prove that Washington lived, only to say that he believes that Washington lives. It is because Modern Orthodox do not wish to live in a world in which the entire accumulated knowledge of all civilization is to be thrown out the window that they cannot take this literally. Pay attention to what I am saying, it is impossible to make sense of anything in this world, in any field of science and many of the social sciences by adopting fundamentalist position. If people wish to live this sort of existence, fine, but one can't pretend that there is any sort of compelling reason for anyone else to. They certainly shouldn't try to put forth all sorts of pseudo-science to convince people of the correctness of their view. I think that when it comes to science, history etc, people would prefer the stated views of the great scholars (and the not so great scholars) at every university in the world. Since none of these people are fundamentalists, doesn't it make sense for the fundamentalists not even to try and touch these areas?

It is worth noting, I think, that although fundamentalism in this country has always been accompanied by anti-intellectualism, this has not been the case in

the Jewish world. In fact, with the exception of some Hasidic trends, anti-intellectualism has no roots in recent Jewish history. The people advocating fundamentalist positions are the most intellectual we have. People often say that they can hold the positions they do because they are ignorant of science and history. This is incorrect. It is not that they are ignorant of all these fields; it is rather that they reject them. There is a difference. The proper word to describe this is obscurantism. And I for one don't think it will last forever. One can only go against the obvious facts of our day for so long. Rabbis could declare that Copernicus's views were heretical for only so long before the weight of evidence ran over them. That will happen with fundamentalism, because if they don't change, no one with any education will still be listening to them.

One final point which is also relevant, since every thing I have been saying touches on how one is to study the Torah. It appears to me that the traditional approach of Bible study is in many respects immature, at least in our day. What was adequate 50 years ago is now no longer so. I remember from my high school days that to study a text in more depth meant to read more commentators. That is, one increased the information intake, but the method of analysis and the forms of questions asked didn't change. When I got to college and studied the same sources again, I was amazed at how the text could come alive, and questions and issues were dealt with that never even entered my mind in high school. I remember speaking to a number of yeshiva students and they were so excited since in Yeshivah Bible was taught in such an immature, sometimes juvenile, fashion whereas Dostoevsky et al were critically analyzed by the new approaches in literature. It was only when they reached college and happened to take the course we did (offered by Reuven Kimelman) that they saw the depth and beauty of the Biblical stories. I realize that it is probably impossible to implement these approaches in high school but wouldn't it be great if we could apply the same rigor to the Torah (I am referring to the narratives) that we do to western literature? We need not be stuck holding onto only medieval forms of exegesis. The world of exegesis hasn't stood still, and the same insights which modern theories of literature and modern ways of reading text offer us about the great works, will assist us in understanding the Torah. I think in many respects this was Hirsch's message, that Torah, and everything about it, need not be considered shallow when compared to secular studies. This was also R. Hayyim's reason, or one of them, for his analytic method, to show that Talmud study is just as rigorous as secular study. Unfortunately, we need a new Hirsch and a new R. Hayyim, since traditional Bible study in our day does not have the rigor of academic disciplines and we will not be able to attract the best minds if we do not do something about it. Either they will prefer Talmud study, which remains rigorous, or they will choose to study Western literature (or other fields), and

Bible study will be left for the less skilled, who are only able to tell you about one more commentary and one more peshat, those who cannot see the forest because of the trees, that is, those who miss the big picture of the Torah.

Marc Shapiro

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