

**DRAFT as of December 9, 2005**

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**DRAFT**  
**Drosh for Shabbat VaYigash 5766**

by Yehuda Wiesen

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**Introduction and Statement of Problem**

Good Shabbos.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, and now Yoseph. With these 8 people, our parsha, and recent parshsiot, contain some bedrock material of our history. And very soon we will add Moses to this list.

But we are conflicted. Scholars and many of our rabbis suggest the Exodus never happened, implying all before it did not happen, and goodness knows what after did not happen. This is jarring.

But we are adults, and we know that much about the world is jarring. Perhaps we just need to learn to live with it. At least we still have the 10 Commandments.

But wait, the First Commandment reads, Anochi haShem Elokacha, asher hozaticha m-ertz mizriam, beit avodim. I am haShem your God who took you out of Egypt where you were slaves. Does that mean are 9 Commandment Jews?

Our tradition asks us to believe, but we find it hard to believe. We are creatures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, grounded in science and logic, dismissive of superstition. Yet we know our major institutions of truth seeking, our colleges and universities, have been hostile to religion for hundreds of years, and eschew belief in God.

Modern science, modern-critical scholarship, R Harold Kushner, and some of our own personal experiences make it hard for us to take our religion seriously, at least in a traditional sense.

My drash will suggest there are logical reasons to reinterpret some academic teachings. In short, I offer you this drosh today in support of belief.

My drosh is based in part on shiurim by Rabbi Dovid Gotleib of Ohr Sameach, available on the web.

**Common Troubling Thoughts**

Here is a little inventory of troubling thoughts that can sap our belief.

1. What if there was no Exodus, as Rabbi Wolpe suggests?
  - If we believe this, then much of the siddur and our tradition is problematic, since the exodus is so prevalent.

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2. What if God does not act in the world today, as Rabbi Kushner suggests?
  - If we believe this, then much of the rest of the siddur is problematic, since the siddur has us continually either thanking or asking God for something.
3. What if there is no reward and punishment, and What about Theodicy and evil?
  - These are questions about whether God acts in the world
4. Does evolution mean God did not create man?
  - Is man just an intelligent animal? Is there no such thing as a soul unique to man?
5. Was the Torah was written by multiple authors, and is it therefore not divine?
6. What should we think when our Torah is not PC?
  - Should we follow only those Torah laws that comport with modern thought and American ethics?

Perhaps the Torah embodies some lofty ideals, but the world today works without God, and the commandments of the Torah, as taught by the rabbis of the Talmud, are not really from God, at least not in any direct sense.

I think many people reach this conclusion, and it is one major reason we do not teach halacha of everyday life to students in our Talmud Torahs and Schechter schools nationwide, and we adults ignore much halacha, especially the inconvenient halacha, and we do not strive to learn more halacha.

Hang onto your hats and your yarmukas. This morning I want to provide other views on these topics.

Before considering evidence and logic, let me say this about standards of proof: If we will not accept anything but absolute certainty as proof, there is little we will accept in any aspect of our lives. Should I marry A or B? Should I take this job or that? We make many important decisions without perfect certainty. A standard we use more widely is the balance of probability, that is, which of competing views is more supported. Now on to the evidence and arguments.

### **Why Have We Not Found Archeological Evidence of the Exodus?**

Let's consider several points.

- A. There is a principle that lack of evidence is not evidence against.  
If there is no evidence of exodus, then we have no evidence. We do not have evidence against.
- B. New archeological finds are announced continually. For example, a few weeks ago 11/23/05 in Haaretz:  
Israel Antiquities Authority archaeologists conducting a salvage dig in Jaffa found the remains of 10 horses. The archaeologist heading the project said:  
"This is the last thing we expected to find here."

- C. Some experts estimate only 5% of archeological material has yet been recovered from Israel.

Now let's turn to a different type of logical argument concerning Exodus.

- D. Our tradition says our whole people, men, women, and children, left Egypt and experienced Sinai together.
- We can ask, if this tradition is not true, how did it become part of our collective history and memory?
  - How could such a belief start?
  - How could someone create such a story and have people believe it as history?
  - How can one go about convincing a people they had a whole people experience if they did not?
  - Is there any other religion or culture that has such a claim to a whole people experience that, in reality, did not exist? I have heard it claimed there is none.

### **Does God Act in the World Today?**

Perhaps belief worked for the ancients who experienced God. But we moderns have trouble seeing God acting in our world today. Let me present 3 ways it seems God **does** act in the world today.

- A. Unlike the ancients, who were scientifically unsophisticated and sought explanations of natural events, we know the world runs according to the laws of physics and chemistry. Modern medicine has learned much about the workings of the body. We know this knowledge is real, since it is used to help heal disease. So we need no deity to understand the rising of the sun and the workings of the human body. But is this so? Consider this.

Medical science is based on the assumption that the human body is a flesh and blood machine and works in a lawful fashion, and we can seek to discover the laws thru careful study. As a trained experimental psychologist, I view today's science of psychology that way. We search for the determinants of human behavior. We say nature and nurture determine all human behavior. We seek to quantify various aspects of nature and nurture, and even to change them, with interventions such as: Project Head Start, hot-meals programs, or other social programs.

All of this sounds logical but it is **completely at odds** with another view that we hold strongly: that of freewill. Freewill says that we can go beyond our heredity and our life experience. If we embezzle or steal, our courts hold us responsible. Our criminal justice system takes a view of freewill that is far from scientific determinism, and is closer to a religious view.

Since freewill does not act based on the laws of physics and chemistry, I have heard it argued that freewill must be due, in part, to God acting in our body every day to allow us to override those laws.

For those who might be thinking that quantum mechanics is not deterministic, let me say that it just adds a probabilistic aspect - no one claims quantum mechanics is influenced by, or is

the basis of, freewill.

- B. Even R. Harold Kushner's views assume providence, even if he does not realize it. R Kushner says God does not cause misfortune, but God gives us the inner strength to cope with adversity. But, as a psychologist, I have been taught that psychological traits like inner strength are in the brain. So R Kushner is saying God acts in our brain in providing strength. But acting in our brain is acting in the world.
- C. Finally, our own behavior tells us there is providence:
- We ask for forgiveness on yom kippur.
  - We pray for the health and well being of our loved ones, esp when they are ill.
  - There are no atheists in the foxholes.

In an existential sense, our actions tell us we believe that God acts in the world.

### **Is There Reward and Punishment, and What about Theodicy?**

I gave a drash a while ago on this topic, and you can read it on the Chapel Minyan web site ([www.mahadash.com/Emanuel](http://www.mahadash.com/Emanuel)). I presented 20 approaches to this problem. For example,

- Reward & Punishment are partly in this world and partly in the world to come.
- Reward and Punishment is Decided At the End of Our Days.

Even if you are not completely satisfied w the various reasons, and few are, don't throw the baby out w the bath.

### **Does Evolution Mean God Did Not Create Man?**

Evolutionists believe that the first living cell rose from the primordial goo, and all other life, plant and animal, descended from that cell, through natural selection.

Religious people suggest that evolution was at least guided by God. Some challenge the whole theory of evolution, and they have some solid evidence and logic to support their challenge.

As just one example, some of the evidence in favor of evolution was faked. If we want to be objective, we should present the evidence with the warts and imperfections, but that is not what is done.

This is worth an entire dvar some time. But now, On to the authorship of the Torah.

### **Was the Torah Written by Multiple Authors?**

It is widely accepted that the Torah was written by multiple authors. But the idea of multiple authorship has a suspect heritage, and it is a subject which is often approached by people with an agenda.

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One group of scholars who approached this topic with an agenda is at Bar Ilan University. Yehuda Raddy led a team of statisticians and linguists. This secular team planned to make a definitive, statistical statement on which parts of the Torah were written by P, E, etc.

In a multi-year effort, they developed a sophisticated mathematical model to quantify differences in grammar and syntax. They validated this model with written works of known authorship. They were able to identify material written by different authors as different, and identify material written by one author as such.

The goal of Raddy and his colleagues was to use their model to analyze Genesis and identify the parts written by various authors.

*[Reference: Yehuda Raddy, Genesis, An authorship study in computer-assisted statistical linguistics 1985, Rome: Biblical Institute Press.]*

Raddy's group surprised themselves by their findings. They found no support for J, E, P or other multiple authorship of Genesis. Let me quote from their conclusion:

“...with all due respect [to the illustrious Documentarians past and present,] there is massive evidence that the pre-Biblical triplicity of Genesis ... is actually a unity.” Page 190

Since Raddy and colleagues they are secular, we can trust them; if they were religious, we might suspect their work.

Now, one study is not definitive, but it was a uniquely objective, scientific study, led by people who wanted to find multiple authorship, and they failed to find it.

Further, there is much disagreement among critical scholars as to who wrote what parts of the Torah. If there is much disagreement, the evidence cannot be all that clear cut.

### **What about the Parts of the Torah That Are Not PC?**

Some of the Torah seems out of step with today's morality.

The rabbis of old did reinterpret parts of the Torah, and were aware of and dealt with inaccuracies in transmission, but even beyond that, there is material left that is not modern.

But we may ask, Is modern thinking on morality the gold standard against which we judge our tradition?

- Or is it the other way around?

What is modern thinking?

- Aristotelean philosophy
- Natural science
- Transcendentalism
- Relativism
- Nihilism
- Post modernism

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- Deconstruction, which holds there is no absolute truth (Jacques Dierrot)

Do we think there are no absolute truths?

- Can we marry our siblings? Our parents?
- What if society allows it? Does Jewish morality then change?

What's wrong with scanty clothing, if it's in fashion. What's wrong with marrying your daughter?

- Think Woody Allen.
- What's wrong with group sex clubs, now legal in Canada per an article a recent Boston Globe [on 12/22/05. Pg A27]

Although we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, God is not from the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Although we live in America, God is not an American.

No matter our political leanings, God is not a democrat, and God is also not a republican.

We may ask, On what basis or authority do we say our view of morality is better than that of the leaders of Iran or the Nazis?

- Where do concepts of good and evil come from, if not from God?

### Conclusion

One goal of this drosh was to provide what Lawrence Kelemen calls "Permission to Believe." By talking about sources of doubt, I tried to legitimate doubt while also providing some intellectual support for greater acceptance of our religious heritage.

In short, despite our great respect for science and the scientific method, we clearly live in a world that is both part physical and part beyond the physical. Metaphysical is not a four letter word. As hard as it is for a person with a scientific background to say, it is becoming clear to me that the world is more than chemistry and physics, and what chemistry and physics can explain.

But what do we do with our remaining doubts? At best we have only some intellectual permission to believe. We will never have proof.

We humans are good at holding competing ideas, sequentially and even simultaneously. We can be people of faith in our religious lives, and people of science in our professional lives. We can simultaneously hold scientific theories of the world, and Jewish views of the world. We need NOT think of ourselves as 9 Commandment Jews. We can daven with faith, act each day in accordance with halacha, and still pursue and appreciate and benefit from scientific knowledge in our professional lives.

Further, as believing Jews, we might think about and strive to answer related questions such as:

Is Judaism more than a club?

Are our laws and rituals divine in origin? Or are they simply man-made?

How does our religion change the way we think and act?

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How do we act differently because we are Jews?  
How are we different from moral gentiles?

The traditional view is that our Torah was divinely given, in concrete ways. We are to be aware of our heritage, day in and day out. We are to live all aspects of our lives as Jews, true to our Torah, despite our doubts - and since we live in a complex, confusing world, we will always have doubts. It is legitimate for us to doubt. The serious risk is that we may fail to live fully as Jews because of our doubts, doubts that may be rebuttable. Waiting for absolute proof that the Torah is true is to wait forever. We don't require absolute proof in other parts of our lives. Our challenge is to continue to learn, and continue to live each day as Jews, despite the inevitable waxing and waning of our doubts and convictions.