

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5778

Rabbi Greg Kanter September 20, 2017

While we know that Jews around the world will be reading the story of Abraham and Isaac on Rosh HaShanah, a reminder that the Creation story is really what the holiday is about and will also be read at many congregations for Rosh HaShanah 5778 precisely because, according to traditional teaching, it has been 5778 years since the creation story began.

Can we still be religious Jews and believe that the story of Creation from the book of Genesis is neither science nor history? Yes.

Can we believe the Big Bang theory of creation of the universe and still be religious Jews? Yes.

Can there be value in both creation stories without one diminishing the other? Yes.

We know that there are plenty of people who insist that the Bible is both a science textbook and a history textbook and that anything taught in a science class or history class must match up with the Bible. Those of us here this evening also know that while we are Jews, none of us insist on the scientific and historic accuracy of the Bible to validate the value we find in being Jewish and living a meaningful Jewish life that includes studying Torah.

How do we harmonize our understandings of two different creation stories?

Rabbi Geoffrey Mittleman, founding director of a wonderful organization known as “Sinai and Synapses,” an organization dedicated to bridging the scientific and religious world, helps us find this harmony by laying out some basic principles of Reform Judaism.

“First we believe that the best (or perhaps the only) way we can accept factual claims about the world is through science. Second, we believe that the bible was written by human beings in a particular context in time, with a certain level of scientific knowledge, and that its literal meaning needs to be translated and interpreted for today. And third, even if the bible is not to be taken literally, it is still to be taken *seriously*. So, starting with those assumptions, we can examine some different ways to talk about the relationship between Genesis and the Big Bang.”

I realize that not everyone is necessarily on the same page as me, but I assure you I am reflecting core values of Reform Judaism and therefore, for Reform Jews to be religious might mean something very different from when other people call themselves very religious. And it's ok to be different. Not everyone will approve, but it's ok. I know. I have some expertise.

Additionally, despite differences in what each of us believes, or our appearance, any other number of differences, we are more alike than we will ever be different.

For us we can still be religious and be open to the idea that science may challenge some of what we originally began to believe because we read it in the bible.

We can still believe in a Higher Power that is intimately connected to the creation and ongoing existence of the universe without believing that a talking serpent and Eve led to the world as we know it and all our problems.

We can still believe in the possibility of a Messianic Age when human beings will come closer to perfecting the world without believing in a Messiah.

So, how do we embrace both scripture and science? First, we must reject the idea that either science is correct or religion is correct and understand

that even scientists or aspiring scientists or amateur scientists can embrace their spiritual/religious side. I would even argue that a person who embraces their spiritual/religious side is a more fulfilled person. Granted I have a bias when it comes to promoting the benefits of the spirit, but to be fair I am biased *towards both science and religion*.

Having said that, as a religious person, I am not necessarily making it my goal to make the Creation story of Genesis work perfectly with the Big Bang theory of the creation of the Universe. It does not help to argue that the way a day was measured back in the creation of the Universe was different than the way we measure a day today so that seven days of Biblical creation might be the equivalent of billions of years according to how we measure today. That having been said, it is also the case that fascinating stuff about the beginning of the Universe and matter and space and time can be found in Neil DeGrasse Tyson's new book, [Astrophysics for People in a Hurry](#). The book recently became a #1 New York Times Bestseller and is an easy read even for people who don't always love science.

Let's review. Genesis or the book of B'reisheet tells a creation story where the world was created in 6 days with lots of stuff happening on each day. First there was light. Later there was the sky and the seas. Later there was dry land and all sorts of plant life. Still later there was the sun, the moon and the stars. On day 5 there was the creation of living creatures in the water and the sky. On the 6th day were the many creatures that walk on dry land. Finally, after all that was complete, day 7 becomes Shabbat for all time.

There's a lot to like in that version, particularly the ending with Shabbat on the 7th day as a sacred day of rest.

This version unfolded 5777 years ago, according to this version.

And that version was very popular in the Western world where many of us descend from until, as Neil DeGrasse Tyson teaches in his book, "Until

Sir Isaac Newton wrote down the universal law of gravitation,” before which, nobody had any reason to presume the laws of physics at home were the same everywhere else in the universe.”

According to DeGrasse Tyson, “after the laws of physics, everything else is opinion.” In addition, according to DeGrasse Tyson, “Knowledge of physical laws can, in some cases, give you the confidence to confront surly people.”

Now, both stories, Genesis and DeGrasse Tyson, provide great inspiration - one for Shabbat, rest and spirit to make the world a little more spiritual and another to use knowledge to make the world a little less surly. What’s not to like?

What you may be noticing that Rabbi Mittleman points out in his article and DeGrasse Tyson hints at throughout his book is that one does not have to choose between science and religion. Feeling forced to choose one over the other is what Rabbi Mittleman calls, “a false dichotomy.”

As with so many other things in the world, extremists on both sides would like us to believe that you can only have one *or* the other. But, as with most things in the world, the truth lies literally somewhere in between. DeGrasse Tyson points out that science has limits. While we can trace the origins of the universe as we know it to the “Big Bang” when a giant explosion of everything led to the formation of matter and energy and stars and planets and solar systems and galaxies and nebulas and black holes, the Big Bang theory tells us nothing of what happened *before* the big bang. Even for the world’s greatest scientific minds, what happened before the Big Bang is just speculation, even for the world’s most brilliant scientists. I, for one, find this a tremendous source of relief, because when I first learned the Big Bang theory some decades ago I recall science taught that after a certain amount of the universe constantly expanding as it seems to be doing, eventually it might just all collapse in on itself and start all over again. As an adult, I am relieved to know that the Universe is not going to collapse in on itself any time soon.

Rabbi Mittleman reminds us that for science and religion to both be meaningful, we do not need to make them live together in the same world. We do not need to explain a difference in the two stories accounting of the precise length of a day during creation anymore than, as I remember fundamentalists in my grade school tried to claim, cavemen lived side by side with dinosaurs until lightning came from the sky and killed all the dinosaurs. Nope. These theories do not help us understand more about either one or the other. Instead they just create more confusion convincing some erroneously, that we have to explain away the differences to make them work together. We don't. Some of the truths of science can challenge what we believe (or believed) about religion. That's ok. Some of the truths about religion make our lives more meaningful still in a world with gravity, space and evolution. And that's ok.

Rabbi Mittleman calls the approach to trying to marry science and religion the "In Concert" model and teaches that in reality it does neither science or religion much good by over-simplifying each.

Yet another approach to science and religion co-existing is what Rabbi Mittleman calls the "In Contrast" mode. "Here," writes Rabbi Mittleman, "science and religion live in separate spheres. He explains this model with the refrain some well-meaning people utter, "I use science as my source of truth and knowledge. and I use religion as my source of ethics, meaning and purpose. They don't need to intermingle."

But, as Rabbi Mittleman goes on to point out, when we think truly deeply about the world we live in, this model can collapse in on itself too. So, when you try to claim that climate science teaches us that we need to be better stewards of the environment, but that really no one knows for sure, because "the bible" - it just doesn't work.

Similarly, when you claim that slavery and discrimination are evils we learn about in the Passover story, but - "Survival of the fittest!" it also falls apart. Nevertheless, I am content in the teaching that the ending of

the story of Noah teaches us that God will never destroy the world and most of humanity in a giant flood, but still leaves open the possibility that humanity might cause the next flood without God having anything to do with it, thanks to our reckless abuse and neglect of the environment.

Sometimes they work together. Sometimes they do not. We cannot force scientific and biblical approaches to co-exist. Neither can we separate them entirely. I believe that a complete human being has to learn science, but also has to study great art and literature and religion *and* nurture one's own spiritual side. My friends in the Lowcountry Secular Humanist League don't always agree with me. And yet some still do. Some secular Humanists find a way to be spiritual without being religious which, to me points to a couple important and related facts. First, when people say "I'm spiritual, but not religious," I think they mean religious as the right wing has usurped the meaning of the word "religious". We can be Reform Jews and be religious without believing or doing things the way our Orthodox brothers and sisters do. No one group owns religious or religion. As long as you claim religion at KKBE the way you want to do it, it belongs to you. period. And this even further backs up my premise that religion and science are not separate, nor are they incompatible. They inhabit the same world in harmony.

Rabbi Mittleman concludes that the best way religion (as represented on Rosh HaShanah by the Creation story) and science co-exist is what he calls, "In Contact." In this mode religion and science are a bit like circles in a Venn Diagram; circles that overlap in parts and exist separately in parts.

Sometimes, when they are in contact, they teach us stuff about the same stuff. Sometimes, they occupy separate roles and give separate answers to separate questions.

"How did the universe come into being?" and "Why did the world come into being?" are separate questions. Both are good questions. How is better suited for science. Why is for religion.

We know this in part from a story told by another thoughtful rabbi, Rabbi Rick Jacobs who tells about when a physics professor asked him to come talk to his class about how the universe came into being.

Rabbi Jacobs was suspicious at first ask, but accepted the invitation. “Why would a perfectly good physics professor have him come talk about the origin of the universe when he’s the real expert. His suspicions were confirmed when the professor introduced Rabbi Jacobs to his Physics class students and then proceeded to lean against the wall with a smug smile on his face before Rabbi Jacobs had even begun. So, Rabbi Jacobs told the story similar to the one told by Dr. DeGrasse Tyson that involved the big Bang, the hot fire-ball of stuff that exploded and eventually became the planets. He talked about Sir Isaac Newton’s theory and Albert Einstein’s contribution to the origins of the universe and added some science we’ve acquired since then then he concluded, bid the class, “Shalom,” and headed out the door. But the professor, grabbed him in the hallway right outside the class and seemed a bit angry. “All that stuff is the stuff “I” teach! Why did you take my lecture?” the professor demanded.

“Oh!” said Rabbi Jacobs, “Your class is a physics class. You asked me to teach “how” the universe came into being, not, ‘Why!’ I can come back.” They rescheduled.

In many ways, the way we Reform Jews understand the big bang theory is similar to the classic midrash that asks why the Torah starts with a Hebrew letter *bet* and not an *alef*. After all, *alef* is the first letter and starts everything, so why does *b'reishit* start with a *bet*?

The answer, Rabbi Levi says, is that "the *bet* is closed on three sides and open only on the fourth. This teaches that one should not question what is above or what is below, or what came before, but only what transpired from the day of the world 's creation forward" (*B'reishit Rabbah* 1:10). While the Rabbis might have viewed these as prescriptions, for us they

might be descriptions—the only thing we can currently understand is what has happened after all time, space, matter, and energy as we know it began.

And for us, our Judaism is about the ongoing effort to understand why. It's not one question or one answer. It's many questions and many answers which is much like the Talmud itself - many questions, even more answers. Each question and each answer getting at the heart of why. Why do we read these stories? Why were people created in God's image? Why are we here?

Toward that end, I'd like to finish with one more Creation story. This too is a traditional Jewish creation story, but it's not the one we always hear. It's not science, but it shares some stuff in common with the Big Bang. And it's not Torah with a capital "T", but it does teach us. At least it inspires me.

This story about the creation of the Universe comes to us from a part of Jewish tradition known as Kabbalah or Jewish Mysticism. While I'm not a kabbalah expert by any stretch, this story has inspired me for years.

In this creation story, the world began as pure light and that light was God. And God as light was contained in clay vessels. Something happened, were not sure exactly what (perhaps some kind of explosion), and these clay vessels were shattered and Divine light was no longer contained in vessels but shattered into sparks. The sparks were spread across the Universe and every living thing contains a spark of the Divine. You and me, we each contain a spark of the Divine.

And so if each of us has a spark of the Divine within us, deep in our souls (or maybe that spark is our soul), then we have an obligation to share that light with others, to use that light our light and combine it with her light and his light and their light until we are all working to bring more Divine light into the Universe.

And another obligation we all share based on this Creation story, based on the idea that we all have a spark of the Divine within us is to look into each others' eyes and see that spark, that your spark and my spark may be different, but that they still go together.

That's what it means to get it, to understand that we are different, but our differences are so minor compared to the things we have in common.

When you begin to understand this Creation story and get some of the why we are created, you look into another's eyes and see something beautiful, you see something that transcends human ideas about gender differences, race differences, religious differences. When you look into your sisters and your brothers' eyes, you see that we are here to build bridges and connect.

When you look into my eyes, do it with love and not with fear. See me and let me see you. Let us add up our sparks of the Divine, you and me, and bring more light into the universe, more reasons to love and then we begin to conquer fear, and self-loathing and we increase knowledge, understanding and human connections

When you see the light in me and you. When you begin to see the light, you begin to answer the many many "why's" of the Universe. In the year 5778 may we see each other in Divine light. May we build bridges and add light. May knowing how and understanding why make us better people. And let us say AMEN. Shanah Tovah!