

## Contra Rabbi Slifkin

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By: Jonathan Ostroff

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The owner of the bookstore took one look at the book I was purchasing and said, “Rabbi Slifkin has made quite the splash in our city.”

He then asked, “What do you say about the dinosaurs?” – referring to Rabbi Slifkin’s *Challenge of Creation* (2006), which has a stunning photo of a dinosaur skeleton on the front cover of the book.

“Well,” I said, “my question is, were dinosaurs created on day five, or day six?”

“You believe they existed?”

“Sure,” I said. “They may have been created with the mammals on day six, or perhaps with birds and fish on day five.” I explained that according to the Malbim, most species of birds and fish reproduce by laying eggs – the characteristic feature of day-five creatures – and dinosaurs lay eggs.

“Oh, you mean the ‘great creatures’ (*tanninim hagedolim*) of day five are dinosaurs?”

“Well, perhaps. Most commentaries understand that expression to refer to huge sea creatures, but *Chazal* indicate that it may refer to massive sea and land creatures as in the book of Job.”

I did not mention to my interlocutor some other surprising things about dinosaurs.

How old are dinosaurs? Everybody “knows” the answer to this question. As Rabbi Slifkin writes: “A live Tyrannosaurus Rex might be scary, but 65-million-year-old fossils need not be. The entire discussion concerning the age of the universe need not frighten the religious person. After all, God wrote the book of nature, so whatever it tells us about its origins must surely be His words.”

O.K. The universe can be as old as God wants. But what Rabbi Slifkin does not reveal to his readers is that under the right conditions, an animal the size of a dinosaur can become a fossil in a mere three weeks!

He also does not tell his readers that when Mary Schweitzer, of Montana State University’s Museum of the Rockies, was examining a thin section of Tyrannosaurus Rex bone under her light microscope, she noticed a series of peculiar structures. Round and tiny and nucleated, they were threaded through the bone like red blood cells in blood vessels. But blood cells in a dinosaur bone should have disappeared eons ago.

“I got goose bumps,” recalls Schweitzer. “It was exactly like looking at a slice of modern bone. But, of course, I couldn’t believe it. I said to the lab technician: ‘The bones, after all, are 65 million years old. How could blood cells survive that long?’”

A “good *kashya*,” but it drives Schweitzer crazy when creationists suggest that this may be evidence for a recent creation. This is because she believes that geologists have established that the Hell Creek Formation, where the dinosaur bones were found, is 68 million years old, and that therefore so are the bones buried in it.

But the discovery of soft elastic tissue and the appearance of fresh blood cells in dinosaurs is something else altogether, for such unusual preservation relies on “yet undetermined geochemical and environmental factors.”

As for all those dating methods, what about “anomalous” uranium-lead radiometric measurements showing that Jurassic and Triassic formations in the Colorado Plateau are several thousands of years old – rather short of the 60 to 200-million year age required by the evolutionary time scale? You will not see the many little (and not so little) anomalies mentioned, let alone discussed, in any of Rabbi Slifkin’s books.

Rabbi Slifkin and I have been debating such issues for many years. Rabbi Slifkin, who is undoubtedly well intentioned, considers the scientific evidence for naturalistic evolution to be incontrovertible fact. His belief is that Torah must be reconciled to the scientific consensus no matter what, and he has consistently refused to discuss the validity of the scientific evidence.

There is a reason that Rabbi Slifkin’s book, mentioned earlier, has no approbation from any *rosh yeshiva* or *posek*. It concerns a central issue that logically precedes any conflict about gaps in the fossil record or dinosaur bones. This issue is *not* about the duration of time during the six-day creation week, or whether it is permissible to allegorize a verse in the Torah, or *Chazal’s* knowledge of science. These are interesting topics, but they do not address the central issue in question, which frames a fundamental dispute about diametrically opposing worldviews.

While Rabbi Slifkin’s work does not carry the approbation of noted Torah authorities, it does carry an enthusiastic approbation from Darwinist Michael Ruse, who believes that “we humans are modified monkeys, not the favored Creation of a Benevolent God.”

Ruse, like Rabbi Slifkin, believes in Darwin’s “blind watchmaker” thesis – the thesis that the marvels of life (the human brain, for example) originate via naturalistic mechanisms such as accidental random mutation and natural selection.

Rabbi Slifkin believes that currently operating natural processes (albeit guided by God) produced vestigial organs having little or no utility and “poorly designed” organs such as the panda’s thumb. When he wrote about the panda’s thumb in 2006, Rabbi Slifkin was unaware of an in-depth study of the matter by Japanese scientists. The scientists described the panda’s thumb as an engineering marvel, calling it an “extraordinary manipulation system.”

The Torah, in contrast to Rabbi Slifkin’s chance naturalistic approach, describes a purposeful meta-natural creation process that is entirely removed from the currently operating laws of nature. It is Rabbi Slifkin’s insistence on evolutionary naturalism that is fundamentally at odds with core principles of Torah, and this is the central issue that Rabbi Slifkin has consistently failed to address in our discussions.

Charles Darwin wrote: “If I were convinced that I required such [miraculous] additions to the theory of natural selection, I would reject it as rubbish ... I would give nothing for the theory of natural selection, if it requires miraculous additions at any one stage of descent.”

Richard Dawkins writes (in *The Blind Watchmaker*) that in Darwin’s view the whole point of the theory of evolution by natural selection was that it provided a non-miraculous account of the existence of complex adaptations.

For Darwin, any evolution that required God’s help was not evolution at all. Rabbi Slifkin in essence concedes to the atheists that if anyone could have witnessed the origin of the cosmos and of life itself, he would not have detected any role played by God – thus allowing leading intellectuals to teach our unwitting students that “Darwin made it possible to be a fulfilled atheist” (in the words of Richard Dawkins).

Can the meta-natural account of creation in the Torah be reconciled with Darwin’s blind watchmaker thesis? When one puts it like that, the answer is clearly no. After all, Darwin said we may never appeal to miracles. But the concept of a miraculous meta-natural Creation Week permeates the first few chapters of the Torah and has always

been understood to be at the heart of all the fundamental beliefs of Torah, and of our very awareness of the Creator.

Indeed, Rabbi Slifkin freely admits that his Darwinian interpretation flies in the face of every classical Talmudic and Rishonic source discussing the topic.

When we make *Kiddush* on *Shabbos* we recite the words of the fourth commandment stating that God rested (*vayonach*) on the seventh day. *Chazal* say that this means that creation came to halt on that day. The Rambam, in *Moreh Nevuchim*, explains this as follows: “On each day of the six day creation week, novel entities were formed outside of the system of nature currently in operation and, on the seventh day (*Shabbos*), the state of the world became lasting and established just as it is at present.”

The Maharal writes (*Be'er Hagolah*): “Know that He, Himself, may His name be blessed, in all His Glory (*b'chvodo u'veatzmo*) caused all of reality to materialize into existence during the six days of creation. He did not cause it through the agency of nature, as opposed to the period which ensues after the six days of creation, in which Hashem, may His name be blessed, governs his creation via the intermediary of nature.”

This is the concept of Creation we have as our *mesorah*. And this means, as Rav Shlomo Miller *shlita* explains, that Hashem is not just the Guide (*manhig*) of the universe but also its Creator (*boreh*).

The very laws of nature, the imperatives that govern the cosmos, space, time, mass, energy, and life were only able to come into existence via God exercising his role as the Creator over the entire six-day creation period of *asarah ma'maros*, ten declarations.

*Shabbos* teaches that the natural processes we see at work today were not the ones responsible for bringing the world and its inhabitants into existence. Our cessation of work on *Shabbos* testifies to the fact that God *meta-naturally* created his universe in six days and *ceased this process* on the seventh day.

As *Chazal* say, Hashem said to His world “*dai*” – stop! – at which point the laws of nature became fixed and stable. Those who attempt to explain creation as an ongoing natural process empty our cessation from work on *Shabbos* of all meaning. They cannot help but stumble in the fundamentals of Torah. They thereby undermine the very essence of *Shabbos* which is fundamental to our awareness of the Creator (see Rashi to *Chulin* 5a, as quoted by Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach in *Mevakshei Torah*).

It is the *post-creation* stable order that scientists legitimately study today. Contra Rabbi Slifkin, the pseudo-scientific naturalistic account of origins is at loggerheads with the principle God presented to us in the Torah – the principle of a purposeful meta-natural creation by a transcendent Creator.

There is no way to reconcile or eliminate this conflict in worldview. Nor is it a question for concern because, on this issue, evolutionary naturalists have overstepped the legitimate bounds of science. We refer the reader to [toriah.com/wiki](http://toriah.com/wiki) for further details.

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