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Analysis of the Post-chareidi Phenomenon

Analysis of the opinions and views of the new post-chareidi phenomenon such as R. Slifkin's "rationalist" blog

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Monday, January 17, 2011

The Slifkin-Solid-Dome Thesis

On this blog, R. Slifkin is well-known for making grandiose claims with a conviction that the evidence rarely warrants.

(* Examples include his belief that evolution's blind watchmaker thesis is compatible with Judaism (see [here](#)), his belief that there are detailed naturalistic pathways from dead chemicals to the machinery of the cell, and his claim that his approach to Genesis is based on the Rambam.

Recently, R. Slifkin published a monograph on the path of the sun at night that has already elicited some comment ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). It is, he writes, "probably one of the most important things that I have ever written. It is a comprehensive study of a very short section of Gemara, just five lines in Pesachim 94b, a passage which is so obscure that most people just skim through it with little comprehension".

Leaping from the particular to the general, R. Slifkin is then led to the conclusion that Chazal must also be in error whenever and wherever they are contradicted by current scientific dogma ("brain death" being the latest instance of this phenomenon).

Imputing large scale error to Chazal provides R. Slifkin with the cover he needs to reject Chazal's **meta-natural** understanding of the Creation Week – allowing him to substitute **naturalistic** interpretations (such as Darwin's theory of evolution). So we understand why he is so enthusiastic about his monograph, as he writes:

"If you ever find yourself confronting someone who insists that there was never a traditional view that Chazal's statements about the natural world were human and fallible, then this brief section of the Gemara, with all the sources in this monograph, is all that you need to demonstrate their error." (R. Slifkin)

A few lines in Pesachim 94b can, apparently, go so very very far! Now what is R. Slifkin's claim?

Based on his reading of Pesachim 94b we have the **Slifkin-Solid-**

Featured Post

Dinosaurs, Scientism and Propaganda

R. Slifkin has dinosaurs on his mind again (see [Strengthening Emunah: Via Denying Dinosaur Eras, etc . . .](#), July 31, 2106). He writes: Unli...

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Dome thesis which claims that the Talmudic consensus on the *rakiya* (“firmament” or “expanse”) is that it is literally a solid dome. Furthermore, the Slifkin thesis also claims that **all the Rishonim** testify that this is the **Talmudic consensus**, i.e. the consensus of Chazal.

Now I have asked R. Slifkin if he has explicit prooftexts from the Rishonim. Despite having made this request repeatedly, R. Slifkin has not answered this seemingly simple question. R. Slifkin has replied with a variety of statements including: “*stop with your silly diversions which make you sound like an obfuscating fundamentalist idiot.*” (see comments [here](#)).

It is possible that R. Slifkin was upset at my mentioning that his only post-Talmudic prooftexts appear to be from the 6th century monk Cosmas. But, I prefer to take his words as meaning that he does not have the requested prooftexts.

But, for the sake of clarity, I ask once again if he can kindly answer my simple request for explicit prooftexts from the Rishonim for his solid dome thesis. We can then move on (one way or another) and carefully examine the rest of his evidence. Of course, one can often make a good case without explicit prooftexts by analyzing and drawing appropriate inferences.

Now I do have some sources of interest that I did not see in R. Slifkin’s monograph. Today, I would like to take a few of them (ones close to R. Slifkin’s rationalist mind, or is it his heart?) and see if we can use them to help make an indirect case for his thesis.

On his “rationalist” blog, R. Slifkin writes that “This website is an exploration into the rationalist approach to Judaism that was most famously presented by Maimonides.” So I am hoping that we will be able to infer from the Rambam some indirect support for the Slifkin solid dome thesis.

In the MR 4:2-3 we have (very informal translation):

- (a) R. Shmuel b. Nachman: When Hashem said let there be a *rakiya* in the midst of the waters, the middle drop **solidified** (גלדה) and became the lower and higher heavens.
- (b) Rav said [Hashem’s] handiwork [the heavens] was in fluid form and on the second day it **congealed** (קרשו) ...
- (c) ... R. Tanchum said [about the *rakiya*] ... the upper waters are suspended by the word [of Hashem].

We can certainly see why these words (taken literally) might indicate that the *rakiya* is a solid dome.

But the Rishonim also inform us that while *Agada* can be taken literally, it is not always so. Sometimes it is not meant literally, but solely for a deeper message. For example, what are the “higher” heavens and how did they solidify?

So let us start with the Rambam to MN II:30 as understood by the commentaries

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(Ralbag, Rabbenu Crescas, Shem Tov, Efodi).

Concerning the rakiya, the Rambam quotes the Midrash of Chazal (a), following which he writes that there was a certain proto-water (a kind of common matter) that was divided into three different **forms** (all presumably relating to water in one way or another).

One part turned into the form of seas, one part turned into the form of a rakiya that we see today, and one part turned into a form that is **above the rakiya**.

Now “above the rakiya” sounds like a very familiar phrase to those whose ears are attuned to Pesachim 94b.

The substance above the rakiya, says the Rambam, is “water” in name only. This has been made known to us by R. Akiva (Chagiga 14b) who told his colleagues entering on metaphysical speculation that when they come up above to the stones of pure marble they should not say “Water, Water”. It would seem according to the commentaries that this means that they should not get confused – and call the esoteric water on high “water” as if it is just like our physical water. That would be false – a category error. The Rambam also suggests that we should reflect about cloud/rain formation discussed in *Meteorologica*.

The big question I am left with is what happened to the middle division – the rakiya (i.e. the solid dome on R. Slifkin’s reading)? This would be a perfect opportunity for the Rambam (who is quoting Chazal) to say that they erred in thinking that the rakiya is a solid dome?

However, there is no such statement in the Rambam! On the contrary, the commentaries say that the opinion of the *Rav Hamoreh* (Rambam) is that the rakiya is the place of cloud/rain formation (המקום אשר יתהווה בו הענן, Ralbag, Gen. 1:6).

This seems to be quite close to the explanation of the Malbim who (basing himself on Chazal) also takes the rakiya to be the layer of the atmosphere involved in cloud/rain formation (although he rejects the idea of the Ptolemaic spheres in the sky).

It would seem, based on Chazal, that the proto-water transformed (“congealed/solidified”) into seas down below, amorphous esoteric water on high, and the regular rakiya that we see, i.e. the place or layer of cloud/rain formation in the sky.

This is really not a very promising scenario for R. Slifkin’s solid dome thesis, if I am understanding the Rambam correctly.

The Ralbag himself disagrees with the *Rav Hamoreh*. He quotes the MR 4:2-3 of Chazal in full and he says that the rakiya is the גרם השמימי, i.e. the heavenly bodies (sun, moon, stars, etc.) orbiting in the celestial sphere.

Like the Rambam, the “solidification” of the hyle into the “water” above the rakiya (see R. Tanchum) refers to esoteric water on high that has neither form or weight (at any rate, it is not solid).

Likewise, in one *peshat*, the Ramban (also quoting the MR) says that “let there be a firmament” involves the ethereal substance created on day one (the amorphous *hyle*) taking on the form or shape of the rakiya that we see today. The liquid state is the amorphous *hyle* which coagulated/solidifies into actual substance.

Here we have Rambam, Ralbag, Ramban quoting the famous MR 4:2-3 – apparently using the Midrashic terminology “congealed/solidified” to describe the rakiya, yet they conspicuously explain it not to mean “making it into a solid,” but transforming prime matter/hyle into actual matter.

I am, of course, open to different ways of interpreting these texts. But, given my understanding, I do wonder if R. Slifkin can provide us with explicit prooftexts from the Rishonim for his literal solid dome thesis? This is because our Rishonim discussed in this post, do not seem to me to be in support of his thesis.

(For more reading on this topic, please see R. Dovid Kornreich ([here](#)) as well as some of R. Zvi Lampel’s prior blog entries.)

Footnotes: (*) This phrase was originally “Examples include his belief in evolution’s blind watchmaker thesis (which he considers compatible with Torah)”. The change in this post has been made in accordance with discussion with R. Slifkin in the comments to this post.

Posted by YSO at 12:02 PM



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40 comments:



Avi January 17, 2011 at 4:10 PM

Please answer this simple question

The gemorah in pesachim concludes that the non-Jewish sages were right. This is the Jewish sages conclusion which is in our gemorah till this very day.

However today we know that the non-Jewish sages are completely wrong. So R Kornreich arguing that accepting this pshat does not go against the gedolim is nonsense to quote Rav Feldman

“It is therefore inconceivable, to these opinions, that G-d would have permitted falsities to have been transmitted as Torah She-be-al-peh and not have revealed His secrets to those who fear Him” well, indeed the gemorah in pesachim reveals falsities.

I would also like to know why none of you on this blog have the courage to attack those that came before R Slifkin who expressed similar views. You should really have a post entitled “what’s wrong with Rav Carmell’s theology”

You may argue that R Slifkin makes the most noise, but that is not the point, I know a lot of people that would think twice about there views if it was just R slifkin expressing them. It would make no difference to them (and me) if you finally proved that R Slifkin is a evil apikoras. All your immature attacking does is make it very hard for people to examine your views objectively.

[Reply](#)



משה רפאל January 17, 2011 at 4:44 PM

Chazal held that there is a Rakia that is such that the Sun can potentially hide behind it. They meant literally what they said, and they were wrong. This is the thesis. The solidness of the Rakia is irrelevant to the thesis.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 17, 2011 at 5:49 PM

Dear Avi, would you mind removing the part of your comment that has an occurrence of the following piece of text: "R. Slifkin is an evil apikoras". We are attempting to support vigorous but nevertheless civil discourse. I think that you might have to generate a revised comment and then delete the original. Thank you in advance for your help.

[Reply](#)



Freelance Kiruv Maniac January 17, 2011 at 5:53 PM

"It is therefore inconceivable, to these opinions, that G-d would have permitted falsities to have been transmitted as Torah She-be-al-peh and not have revealed His secrets to those who fear Him" well, indeed the gemorah in pesachim reveals falsities."

That's right. The rejected opinions of Chazal's speculations were certainly not transmitted as Torah Sheba'al Peh. These gemaras often clearly label them as non-Mesorah speculations.

And it is true that achronim today subscribe to the view that every word of Chazal recorded in the Talmud is a form of Torah sheba'al peh. But they are only able to maintain that view by appealing to a hidden meaning of these rejected opinions. They are not denying that the plain meaning is in fact describing a falsehood.

[Reply](#)



Freelance Kiruv Maniac January 17, 2011 at 5:57 PM

>>"You should really have a post entitled "what's wrong with Rav Carmell's theology"<<

Rav Carmell did not make it his mission in life to publicize his alleged view that Chazal followed the science of their times blindly without question in basic halachic and hashkafic matters.

The bulk of the evidence we have that this was Rav Carmell's own theology is Rabbi Slifkin's report.

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 18, 2011 at 12:40 AM

On this blog, Jonathan Ostroff is well-known for deliberately falsifying my position, which is why I do not engage him (or the Maniac) in debate as I do with the vastly different Rabbi Simcha Cofer.

An example in this post is Ostroff's claim that I believe in evolution's blind watchmaker thesis. There are two distortions here - one, that I necessarily believe in the validity of the scientific mechanism, and two, that I believe that if it is true, it shows the development of life to have been blind.

Ostroff has been challenged on these distortions on earlier comment threads, but did not respond.

With regard to his claims in this post about Rambam - he has simply not studied the Rambam thoroughly. In Rambam's view, CERTAIN accounts of the rakia refer to the atmosphere; but others refer to the spheres. Rambam's view is complicated, and I'm not going to discuss it here; those who are interested can see the discussion in Klein-Breslavy. One must also be careful to distinguish between Rambam explaining Chazal, Rambam presenting his own view, and Rambam presenting his own view but hanging it on to part of Chazal's words.

But in any case, none of this gets Ostroff anywhere. The words of Chazal in the Bavli, Yerushalmi, and Midrash about the nature of the rakia, in terms of it being a firm substance with a particular thickness, in turn based on pesukim such as that in Iyov and others which use the root עקר in other contexts, and the words of Chazal concerning the sun's passage on both sides of the rakia, are explicit. Nowhere in Chazal or the Rishonim is there anything to indicate that any of Chazal held differently. The prooftexts are all in my monograph and blog. But I don't expect Ostroff to actually address them. As with evolution, it's easier for him to toss out random objections than to actually deal with the evidence at hand.

[Reply](#)



Avi January 18, 2011 at 2:52 AM

Yso-

I don't understand what you upset about. I was not saying that rabbi Slifkin is an evil apikoras, and I was not saying that you think he is one, or that that it is your goal to prove this.

I am simply trying to stress the point that these issues are far bigger than Rabbi Slifkin. True Rabbi Slifkin did help in give clarity and inspiration to a lot of people struggling with these issues but my point is that these issues are not about him. I am trying to say that you people are your own worst enemy by making this controversy tied to R Slifkin.

I will even admit that I find it very difficult to examine your arguments objectively when you make it personal by placing this Hashkofa on the head of one man. I am saying that theoretically if Rabbi Slifkin went completely of the derech, it would not destroy the hashkofa. I am sorry if I don't sound civil but I don't see how my comment is any less civil than a sentence in a note on Rabbi Coffers website that says Rabbi Slifkin must burn his books.

Rabb Kornreich -

“ The rejected opinions of Chazal's speculations were certainly not transmitted as Torah Sheba'al Peh. These gemaras often clearly label them as non-Mesorah speculations”.

I am confused, my point is that the non-jewish sages were wrong even though the gemorah concludes that they are right.

Are you saying that this is not heretical because we see clearly that the above opinion in the gemorah was not from Sinai?

In other words when it come to medicine, we assume that chazal received these cures from Hashem therefore we have to say that nature has changed. And we can't entertain the notion that they did not get these cures from Sinai?

Are you perhaps saying that you can say that the cures don't work as long as you say that there is a hidden meaning? I don't think Rav Feldman is saying that.

Please explain, according to the ban what is heretical, I may be not grasping something so please explain.

"The bulk of the evidence we have that this was Rav Carmell's own theology is Rabbi Slifkin's report."

Actually Rav Carmell made me an "apikoros" long before I knew of Rabbi Slifkins existence.

Anyway here is what Rabbi Carmell had to say about Rabbi Slifkins books "After giving the matter further careful consideration, we find that the ideas expressed in the above book (and also in other books by the same author) are well within the bounds permissible according to the principles of our holy Torah."

I quote "Freedom to interpret (the unedited one)

"As the centuries progress we discover a curious fact. As modern science becomes more and more soundly established and more discrepancies appear between the words

of our Sages and modern science, one would have thought more and more recourse would be had to Rambam's principle — that the words of our Sages in aggada, are not

always expected to be in accord with the facts.

But in fact the contrary is true. Rambam's principle is ignored, for the most part it is not even known. A good deal of Orthodox education at the present time teaches that

whatever the Talmudical Sages assert, in halacha and in aggada, is literally and factually

true, and that it is part of our duty as Jews to believe this. There is no doubt that this viewpoint is attractive. It is simpler, and if discrepancies do appear, they can usually be

dealt with by assuming that "nature has changed."

The difficulty is that maintaining this viewpoint depends on the ability of the educators to isolate their students from all contact with modern science. In the world in

which we live, it seems less and less likely that this will be successful."

[Reply](#)



Avi January 18, 2011 at 2:56 AM

This comment has been removed by the author.

[Reply](#)



Avi January 18, 2011 at 2:58 AM

This comment has been removed by the author.

[Reply](#)



Avi January 18, 2011 at 2:59 AM

This comment has been removed by the author.

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 18, 2011 at 7:35 AM

What happened to the comment that I submitted?

[Reply](#)



YSO January 18, 2011 at 8:22 AM

Some comments from Avi and R. Slifkin landed in the spam folder. I have re-enabled them and they should all be there now.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 18, 2011 at 9:20 AM

R. Slifkin's response to this post is notable for its lack of response.

R. Slifkin wrote that "**Darwin's blind-watchmaker-thesis need not be incompatible with Judaism. Theistic evolution fully agrees with the Darwinists, except that it claims that G-d is behind the whole process**". I analyze this further [here](#). I invite R. Slifkin to produce any one detailed Darwinian pathways for biological organs such as the eye, wings, the mammalian brain and of course the [Panda's thumb](#).

R. Slifkin has used the MR 4:2 to argue for his solid dome thesis. The Rambam, Ralbag and the Ramban quote this Midrash and explain that "solidified/congealed" means the transformation of potential substance (hyle) into actual substance such as the cloud/rain formation layers of the atmosphere or the heavenly bodies such as the sun, the moon etc. The MR (quoted by the Ralbag in full) analyzes all the relevant verses in Beraishis, Shemos, Iyov and Yeshayahu.

What is R. Slifkin's response. He writes that "In Rambam's view, CERTAIN accounts of the rakia refer to the atmosphere; but others refer to the spheres. Rambam's view is complicated, and I'm not going to discuss it here". Well we are discussing it here and now. And we are following all the classical commentaries including the Ralbag, Rabbenu Cresca, and Shem Tov. And if R. Slifkin wants to use Klein-Breslavy he is free to present her views right here and now.

Given that the Rishonim actually contradict R. Slifkin's solid dome thesis, he is now in great need of explicit prooftexts!

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 18, 2011 at 10:58 AM

Same old, same old. Ostroff claims that I believe in a certain evolutionary mechanism, and that it is one which functions blindly. I respond that nowhere did I

say that I believe in it, and that it does not function blindly. Instead of either backing up or retracting his charge, Ostroff brings a quote from me which actually proves his claim wrong (if God is behind it, then it is not blind!), and seeks to change the topic by asking for scientific evidence of the mechanism!

Dr. Ostroff, you opened your post with two falsifications of my views. I pointed this out, and yet you refuse to back up your charges or retract them; instead you tried to change the topic. This is why I don't engage you in discussion, as I sometimes do with Rabbi Coffer. You're plain dishonest and scurrilous.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 18, 2011 at 1:24 PM

R. Slifkin, on your blind watchmaker thesis I referred you [here](#). Don't create a straw man argument. You might want to respond to what is actually being said! For example, in the link, point #2 in the abstract is my description of your views. In particular, see Table 2, which compares your view to our mesorah and shows where it diverges. If there is any entry that you object to, let me know, but so far there is absolutely nothing to retract!

And I have yet to see you present the empirical evidence for even one detailed Darwinian pathway for biological organs such as the eye, wings, the mammalian brain and of course the Panda's thumb. What about naturalistic pathways from dead chemicals to the machinery of the cell? So yes, I consider your claims grandiose and unsupported by the evidence.

But this post is not about your statement that "the blind-watchmaker-thesis need not be incompatible with Judaism". It is about your solid dome thesis that now seems to be rapidly falling apart. I'll copy and paste what I wrote earlier.

R. Slifkin has used the Midrash Raba 4:2 to argue for his solid dome thesis. The Rambam, Ralbag and the Ramban quote this Midrash and explain that "solidified/congealed" means the transformation of potential substance (hyle) into actual substance such as the cloud/rain formation layers of the atmosphere or the heavenly bodies such as the sun, the moon etc. The MR (quoted by the Ralbag in full) analyzes all the relevant verses in Beraishis, Shemos, Iyov and Yeshayahu.

What is R. Slifkin's response. He writes that "In Rambam's view, CERTAIN accounts of the rakia refer to the atmosphere; but others refer to the spheres. Rambam's view is complicated, and I'm not going to discuss it here". Well we are discussing it here and now. And we are following all the classical commentaries including the Ralbag, Rabbenu Crescas, and Shem Tov.

Given that the Rishonim actually contradict R. Slifkin's solid dome thesis, he is now in great need of explicit prooftexts! These prooftexts have yet to materialize.

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 18, 2011 at 2:07 PM

The document to which you link has no evidence whatsoever to support your claim that I believe that that mechanism of evolution is correct. Nor does it have any evidence whatsoever to support your claim that I believe life to have unfolded blindly (unless you mean superficially blindly, in which case you must say so, or else you must describe yourself as believing modern history to unfold blindly). If you have any

prooftexts otherwise, please bring them, or retract your claims.

Incidentally, you can consult Rabbi Coffe or Rabbi Lampel on this. They are well aware that you are distorting my views.

[Reply](#)



Nachum Boehm January 18, 2011 at 2:19 PM

As Moshe Rafael wrote above,

Chazal held that there is a Rakia that is such that the Sun can potentially hide behind it. They meant literally what they said, and they were wrong. This is the thesis. The solidness of the Rakia is irrelevant to the thesis.

However, it would be interesting to try to understand the rishonim quoted in YSO's posting. In light of the gemaras in pesachim and chagiga, how do we explain what these rishonim wrote about the rakia? Were they arguing with Chazal? If so one would expect them to state so explicitly.

Here is where my history is weak. Is it possible that RMBM/RLBG/Malbim ALSO believed that there was a solid dome above the earth? If so, then we can learn their words quoted in YSO's post as not contradicting that notion.

OTOH, if they were aware that there was no dome, perhaps they can be seen as apologists for Chazal.

Again, none of this detracts from RNS's central thesis that Chazal held that there is a Rakia that is such that the Sun can potentially hide behind it. As RNS wrote above,

The words of Chazal in the Bavli, Yerushalmi, and Midrash about the nature of the rakia, in terms of it being a firm substance with a particular thickness, in turn based on pesukim such as that in lyov and others which use the root וקף in other contexts, and the words of Chazal concerning the sun's passage on both sides of the rakia, are explicit. Nowhere in Chazal or the Rishonim is there anything to indicate that any of Chazal held differently.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 18, 2011 at 4:38 PM

Dear R. Slifkin, you wrote: "Nor does it [[summary document under discussion](#)] have any evidence whatsoever to support your claim that I believe life to have unfolded blindly".

Why not just quote from my summary document and show me where I have misrepresented your position? Table 2 is a detailed comparison of your position with that of our *baalei mesorah*. Point #2 in the abstract is my summary of your position on the BWT. I circulated that document to R. Lampel and R. Coffe before posting it (and revised it to their suggestions). If they feel that there are still problems they are free to express them to me privately or in this forum (we often have disagreements among ourselves). It is to my advantage to have a summary of your position that is accurate! That is why the summary document was accompanied by a post on this blog. Since you have not responded to the actual text of the document, I conclude that you are making a straw man argument here.

Let me remind you that the topic of the post is your Solid Dome Thesis for the rakiya. Your argument now appears to be falling apart based on how Chazal are understood by the Rambam, Ralbag and Ramban (as explained in detail in this post).

But I am willing to listen to calm reasoned evidence for your thesis. *Ad hominem*s such as your comment that I am "*plain dishonest and scurrilous*" do not help me to see the justice of your arguments. It seems to me that you are avoiding the need to provide prooftexts and rational arguments.

So how about it Natan? Give it your best shot. Provide explicit prooftexts from the Rishonim if you have them. Be a man and own up if you don't. All is not lost. Perhaps a reasoned argument from the texts of the Rambam, Ralbag and Ramban might still be made.

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 18, 2011 at 11:18 PM

Why not just quote from my summary document and show me where I have misrepresented your position?

Eh? It's your misrepresentations here in this post that I am talking about.

You claim that I believe in the neo-Darwinian mechanisms of evolution. Nowhere have I said any such thing; in fact, I have made it very clear on many occasions that I don't know how evolution happened. Bring a single sentence of mine that shows that I believe otherwise, or retract your claim. (No quote from me appears in your linked document.)

You then claim that I believe this process to be blind. However, the fact is that I wrote an entire chapter to explain why I do not believe that it is blind; why in fact God is behind it, as you explicitly acknowledge in your linked document. It is no more blind than the events of modern history. Do you believe those to be blind, with no guidance?

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 18, 2011 at 11:42 PM

Nachum Boehm - Please do not trust Ostroff's citation of the Rishonim. Look it up yourself. As you will see, Ostroff has been extremely selective in his citation from Rambam. In that very chapter, Rambam is clear that both rakia and shamayim have **two** meanings - one referring to the atmosphere, and one referring to the spheres. RambaN is likewise clear that there is a solid firmament - just read his commentary to the Chumash. If you have further questions, please email me - as you can see from Ostroff's selective citation from Rambam, this blog is not a worthy forum for such a discussion.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 19, 2011 at 12:00 AM

Natan, here is my point #2 (Oct, 2010):

As a religious Jew, R. Slifkin's view of science is actually something quite different from the scientific consensus. His view is that G-d guides evolution—contradicting

the scientific consensus of accidental unguided evolution. Indeed, contra R. Slifkin, evolution's Blind Watchmaker Thesis is incompatible with Torah.

I clearly say that you believe G-d guides evolution. The problem, if anything, is your sloppy language when you write that "**the blind watchmaker thesis need not be incompatible with Judaism**".

The **blind** watchmaker thesis is literally blind. No G-d. No miracles. No design. No foresight. No planning. Why not concede that your language was sloppy and that what you should have written is the precise opposite, i.e. "*the blind watchmaker thesis is totally **incompatible** with Judaism and the scientists are wrong to assert it as fact*". You might lose Darwinist Michael Ruse's *haskama* to your book *Challenge*, but at least you would gain clarity.

You could go on to say that: *However a non-miraculous mechanism involving random variation, natural selection, vestigial organs, the poorly designed Panda's thumb etc. is not incompatible with Judaism on the understanding that G-d is behind it.*"

Make that clarification and I'll strikeout the part of my post that says that examples include "his belief in evolution's blind watchmaker thesis (which he considers compatible with Torah)".

It seems to me that you do not want to engage in the material of this post. Where does the Rambam say that the rakiya is solid? I explicitly quote the Ralbag who says differently. You say that the "RambaN is likewise clear that there is a solid firmament". Proof-text please?

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 19, 2011 at 12:17 AM

1. Regarding your first distortion - that I believe in neo-Darwinian mechanisms - you still have not backed up your false claim or retracted it. This is one reason why I describe you as scurrilous.

2. Regarding your second distortion: If elsewhere you acknowledge that I believe in God, and that God guides the development of life, then how can you write in this post that I believe otherwise? This is another reason why I describe you as scurrilous.

3. Regarding your claim that neo-Darwinian evolution necessarily rules out God - this is something discussed at length in the comments to this post: <http://slifkin-opinions.blogspot.com/2010/10/darwins-blind-watchmaker-thesis-trips.html> You are not distinguishing between the theory, and some of its proponents. Those same proponents would say that history and meteorology are blind - do you dispute that they would say that? Do you believe that history and meteorology are blind?

4. Regarding the rakia - why did you not mention that Rambam says that rakia has two distinct meanings?

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 19, 2011 at 12:19 AM

And regarding your claim that "It seems to me that you do not want to engage in the

material of this post" - I do not want to engage in it with YOU, because as I have demonstrated, you are a dishonest, scurrilous person.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 19, 2011 at 6:14 AM

Natan, to answer your questions.

(1) You need to clean up your sloppy use of the "blind watchmaker thesis" phrase (see my earlier comment). Why not make the fixes I recommended? Then your intent will be clear. What you should be saying is that "the blind watchmaker thesis is totally **incompatible** with Judaism and the scientists are wrong to assert it as fact". There is nothing to retract until you concede that your language is sloppy.

(2) Where do I say that you do not believe in God? Please quote explicitly! As you admit, I explicitly write that you do believe in God!

(3) I really think you need to study evolution's blind watchmaker thesis in more depth. This might account for your sloppy use of the term. All the experts (e.g. Simpson, Gould, Dawkins, Lewontin etc.) agree that evolution's blind watchmaker thesis *a la* Darwin really is **blind**. Unlike your sloppy use of the term, they mean what they say and they say what they mean.

Even the Roman Catholic anti-ID biologist at Brown, Ken Miller, is co-author of a textbook that in all its editions has stated that: "**Evolution works without either plan or purpose — Evolution is random and undirected.**" (Biology, by Kenneth R. Miller & Joseph S. Levine (1st ed., Prentice Hall, 1991), pg. 658; (3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1995), pg. 658; (4th ed., Prentice Hall, 1998), pg. 658; emphasis in original.)

(4) I think you are missing the thrust of my argument. The Ralbag and other commentaries write that the Rambam in MNII:30 holds that the rakiya is the region of cloud cloud/rain formation. This is **based on the Chazal of the Midrash Raba** where the Midrash uses the congealed/solidified terminology. I am specifically interested in this Chazal because you use it as a proof that the rakiya is a solid dome. Ralbag quotes the same Chazal in full but says that the rakiya is the heavenly bodies (sun, moon, etc.) in the celestial sphere. So these Rishonim do not take this Chazal according to your meaning.

Now elsewhere, e.g. in Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah, the Rambam says that רַקִּיעַ and גַּלְגַּל have the same meaning. He does not refer to Chazal but it can be taken as a reference to Chagiga 12b so that the seven heavens in Chagiga are identical to the spheres of the sun, the moon. As the Artscroll Talmud says, this is odd because the Gemora states explicitly that the sun, moon and planets are all in the second "heaven". But this still is not a proof that the rakiya is a solid dome. In the same section the Rambam describes the celestial spheres as some kind of ethereal substance that is weightless, colourless etc. and the cause of the orbits of the sun, moon etc. [Today, we also need to account for the orbital acceleration of the moon for example. GR would say that the mass of the earth causes spacetime to curve and coerces the moon to follow its curved path. Of course, the Rambam did not know about GR]. Another point is that Chazal in Chagiga 12b are mainly describing esoteric heavens (see Peirush to the Rambam). The Chazal in Chagiga 12b do not mention the

solidified/congealed language of the Midrash Raba, which is the focus of my post.

Chagiga 12b is not mentioned at all in the text of the MN so far as I can see. The MN refers to R. Akiva (Chagiga 14) which is about the esoteric heavens

Of course, I am open to an argument from the Rambam in MN that he takes the Midrash Raba 4:2 as supportive of your solid dome thesis.

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 19, 2011 at 7:27 AM

Amazingly, you did not respond to a single one of my questions! Read my questions again.

[Reply](#)



Nachum Boehm January 19, 2011 at 9:24 AM

YSO:

I clearly say that you believe G-d guides evolution. The problem, if anything, is your sloppy language when you write that "the blind watchmaker thesis need not be incompatible with Judaism".

Since you agree that R. Slifkin does not believe in evolution's blind watchmaker thesis, and that the problem, if anything, is R. Slifkin's sloppy language, why don't you simply delete the false allegation ("On this blog, R. Slifkin is well-known for making grandiose claims with a conviction that the evidence rarely warrants. Examples include his belief in evolution's blind watchmaker thesis") from this posting?

I for one am genuinely interested in the topic of the rakiya. The personilizations and false allegations detract from everyone's ability to focus on and hash out the topic.

The issue comes to bear in this comment section. I posed a question, and R. Slifkin invites me to email him my questions, since he believes that this blog is not a place for finding truth. I would love to email R. Slifkin and get his responses. However, since R. Slifkin has strong detractors, I would also like to consider his detractors' responses, so I can judge for myself. I am hoping that this blog is a good forum for that.

Gratuitous and false allegations are not helpful to my search for truth.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 19, 2011 at 1:15 PM

Natan, I want to make sure I understand your questions. Let's start with your first question: "1. Regarding your first distortion - that I believe in neo-Darwinian mechanisms - you still have not backed up your false claim or retracted it. This is one reason why I describe you as scurrilous."

Now in your book on p297 you write **"So far we have only discussed the argument that the blind-watchmaker thesis need not be incompatible with the concept of God."**

And just to be clear as to the what the definition of the **blind** watchmaker thesis is, I take it in the standard way as it is used in Dawkins' book and in the scientific literature. As I pointed out, even the religious Roman Catholic anti-ID biologist at Brown, Ken Miller (I believe you quote him at times in a different context), is co-author of a classic biology textbook that in all its editions has stated that: "**Evolution works without either plan or purpose — Evolution is random and undirected.**" (Biology, by Kenneth R. Miller & Joseph S. Levine (1st ed., Prentice Hall, 1991), pg. 658; (3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1995), pg. 658; (4th ed., Prentice Hall, 1998), pg. 658)

Here are two possibilities as to what you might mean (maybe there are more).

(1a) I Natan Slifkin believe that the blind watchmaker thesis is **compatible** with Judaism.

(1b) I Natan Slifkin believe that the blind watchmaker thesis is **incompatible** with Judaism.

Do you mean #1b? If not, what do you mean precisely?

I am still waiting for you to produce prooftexts to your your solid dome thesis from the Rambam and the Ralbag.

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 19, 2011 at 2:06 PM

I am beginning to wonder if you have a serious problem with reading comprehension.

Your first distortion has nothing to do with my religious beliefs. It is to do with my scientific beliefs. You assert that I believe that life evolved via neo-Darwinian mechanisms. I pointed out that nowhere have I asserted any such thing, and in fact I have repeatedly stated that I do not know how life evolved. I'm now beyond asking you to retract this false claim. I want to know why on earth you are not able to understand what I am objecting to.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 19, 2011 at 2:24 PM

Natan, you are attributing to me things that I did not say. Kindly respond to what I actually wrote.

I want to understand your precise use of the BWT terminology on p297 of your book. My specific question is does your use of the BWT term in your book mean #1b? Or if not, please provide your precise meaning of your use of this term in your book whether in terms of your scientific or religious beliefs. I think this is a simple clear question and I am waiting for a clear crisp answer.

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 19, 2011 at 3:15 PM

In the second sentence of this post, you stated that I believe in evolution's blind watchmaker thesis. I pointed out, several times already in this thread, that I have

never stated any such belief; that with regard to the scientific validity of this evolutionary mechanism, I have repeatedly stated that I have no idea if it is correct. In supposedly responding to this objection of mine, you keep bringing up other things. Why? Why can't you simply address my objection? Why do you keep bringing up other things, and yet claim that you are addressing my objection?

[Reply](#)



YSO January 19, 2011 at 11:51 PM

Dear Natan, I want to commend you for your civil style of response. No *ad hominem*s. Good, so you have no idea about the scientific validity of the BWT. I was sloppy and I will emend my post accordingly once we get clarity on the latter part of my sentence (that you consider the BWT to be compatible with Torah). That is the crucial part that I address in great detail in my summary document ([link](#)). I have asked you a very simple question -- yet you seem not to want to address it. So here goes again.

In your book on p297 you write **"So far we have only discussed the argument that the blind-watchmaker-thesis need not be incompatible with Judaism.**

And just to be clear as to what the definition of the **blind** watchmaker thesis is, I take it in the standard way as it is used in Dawkins' book and in the scientific literature. As I pointed out, even the religious Roman Catholic anti-ID biologist at Brown, Ken Miller (I believe you quote him at times in a different context), is co-author of a classic biology textbook that in all its editions has stated that: **"Evolution works without either plan or purpose — Evolution is random and undirected."** (Biology, by Kenneth R. Miller & Joseph S. Levine (1st ed., Prentice Hall, 1991), pg. 658; (3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1995), pg. 658; (4th ed., Prentice Hall, 1998), pg. 658)

Here are two possibilities as to what you might mean (maybe there are more).

(1a) I Natan Slifkin believe that the blind watchmaker thesis is **compatible** with Judaism.

(1b) I Natan Slifkin believe that the blind watchmaker thesis is **incompatible** with Judaism.

Do you mean #1b? If not, what do you mean precisely?

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 20, 2011 at 12:25 AM

Forget emending the post. I want to know what happened here. You now acknowledge that you made an assertion about my scientific beliefs which was incorrect. Can you explain why it took you so long to acknowledge that? Why did I have to point it out **EIGHT TIMES** before you acknowledged your error? Why did you claim all along you addressed my objection and yet now, by your own admission, you acknowledge that you had not done so at all? Why did you accuse me of attributing to you things that you did not say, when you had in fact done so to me?

Why on earth should I engage you in discussion, when you think/ act in such a way? I am posting a discussion on my blog about this.

[Reply](#)



משה רפאל January 20, 2011 at 1:02 AM

"Do you mean #1b? If not, what do you mean precisely? "

Rabbi Slifkin has answered this in several ways.

Firstly, in the quote that you yourself brought from his book: **Theistic evolution fully agrees with the Darwinists, except that it claims that G-d is behind the whole process.** That is, the difference between the blind-watchmaker-thesis and what occurred in Truth, may not be scientifically measurable.

Secondly, in one of the comments here, rabbi Slifkin writes:

Nor does it have any evidence whatsoever to support your claim that I believe life to have unfolded blindly (unless you mean superficially blindly, in which case you must say so, or else you must describe yourself as believing modern history to unfold blindly).

This tells you that in Rabbi Slifkin's view evolution of life was **superficially** blind. The blindness of the evolutionary process is like the blindness of modern history. Just as we see the Hand of HaShem in modern history, so do we see the Hand of HaShem in the evolution of life.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 20, 2011 at 2:44 PM

Natan, I have asked you more than eight times if you have explicit prooftexts from the Rishonim for your solid dome hypothesis. My requests to you for clarification was initiated long before the present thread, and you have consistently refused to answer the question and have attempted to displace the attention elsewhere. There appear to be significant problems of scholarship with your work and it seems that your thesis is not robust. I have much more to say on your monograph, so your refusal to respond to the simplest of questions and the invective is most puzzling.

What happened? Simple. When you finally were able to respond in a civil fashion and you actually provided the explicit sentence that was bothering you, I realized that you were not objecting to my complete sentence, but only to the first part of it. I will revise the sentence to be consistent with my summary of your position ([here](#)). But at least I responded to your question and to your earlier question for a yes/no answer on the Rishonim -- I am puzzled by the lack of such response from you in kind.

Now I still do not know if you agree with my summary of your position, so in my next comment I will ask you to clarify your use of the BWT terminology once again.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 20, 2011 at 2:48 PM

Natan I am asking you to clarify your use of the BWT terminology for the third time. I'll gladly clarify if you do not understand the question, but I think it is simple enough.

In your book on p297 you write **"So far we have only discussed the argument that the blind-watchmaker-thesis need not be incompatible with Judaism.**

And just to be clear as to the what the definition of the **blind** watchmaker thesis is, I take it in the standard way as it is used in Dawkins' book and in the scientific literature. As I pointed out, even the religious Roman Catholic anti-ID biologist at Brown, Ken Miller (I believe you quote him at times in a different context), is co-author of a classic biology textbook that in all its editions has stated that: "**Evolution works without either plan or purpose — Evolution is random and undirected.**" (Biology, by Kenneth R. Miller & Joseph S. Levine (1st ed., Prentice Hall, 1991), pg. 658; (3rd ed., Prentice Hall, 1995), pg. 658; (4th ed., Prentice Hall, 1998), pg. 658)

Here are two possibilities as to what you might mean (maybe there are more).

(1a) I Natan Slifkin believe that the blind watchmaker thesis is **compatible** with Judaism.

(1b) I Natan Slifkin believe that the blind watchmaker thesis is **incompatible** with Judaism.

Do you mean #1b? If not, what do you mean precisely?

If you refuse to respond to this very simple question then you must expect that I and others will have to interpret your views without the input and clarity that only you can provide. You will thus have little cause to complain that your views are being distorted.

[Reply](#)



Natan Slifkin January 20, 2011 at 3:03 PM

What happened? Simple. When you finally were able to respond in a civil fashion and you actually provided the explicit sentence that was bothering you, I realized that you were not objecting to my complete sentence, but only to the first part of it.

Actually I was very clear all along as to your distortion. Yet you completely ignored what I was saying. Likewise, your question about the blind watchmaker theory is one that has been answered literally dozens of times in various comment threads on this blog, and yet you act completely oblivious to all this, as though you've never noticed any of these responses. So I give up with you. Goodbye.

[Reply](#)



YSO January 20, 2011 at 5:40 PM

Natan, I have responded to all your questions either immediately or once the issue was cleared up. You have responded to none of the very simple questions I have posed to you.

It seems to me that you realize that your statement in your book (quoted earlier) about the compatibility of the BWT with Torah is highly problematic for you. Otherwise, why not just answer the very simple question I have posed.

Using the BWT term in the standard way that it used by Dawkins and others is it (1a) your belief that the blind watchmaker thesis is **compatible** with the concept of G-d or (1b) is it your belief that the blind watchmaker thesis is **incompatible** with the the concept of G-d?

It would not take more than a few keystrokes to assert your ownership over either (1a) or (1b).

I understand the dilemma. Either option is problematic for you as it will either indicate incoherence or something a little more than sloppiness.

[Reply](#)



משה רפאל January 21, 2011 at 2:48 AM

YSO, in our time we are witnessing the return of Am Yisrael to Eretz Yisrael. Do you see the Hand of HaShem behind it? Rabbi Slifkin does.

[Reply](#)



SC January 21, 2011 at 4:22 PM

Hi Moshe Rafael,

My name is Simcha Cofer. Shalom Aleichem.

I'm putting my two cents in...

You wrote: *"YSO, in our time we are witnessing the return of Am Yisrael to Eretz Yisrael. Do you see the Hand of HaShem behind it? Rabbi Slifkin does."*

Everything which occurs in the world is rightly attributed to the Yad Hashem. As Chazal say, *ein adam nokef etzba'o limata ela im kein machrizin alav milma'la*"

What's your point?

[Reply](#)



משה רפאל January 23, 2011 at 2:48 AM

Of course you are right, Simcha, but I was asking YSO, who did not want to relate to my comment explaining how Rabbi Slifkin did in fact answer the question that he keeps repeating. Please check the discussion, and you will understand.

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