

Rav Dessler on Evolution and Time II

A translation of several paragraphs of Rav Dessler's essay on evolution and time with an in-depth commentary

By: Simcha Coffey

The following is a translation of several paragraphs of Rabbi E.E. Dessler's *maamar* on evolution and time. The essay is entitled *Zman V'Hishtalshelus* and can be found in *Michtav MeEliyahu* Volume IV, pg. 113. Please note: Anytime brackets appear in the text, they have been introduced by the translator for purposes of clarification. If you are merely looking for a literal translation, simply skip over the insertions. The intention of this translation and subsequent comments is to make Rav Dessler's views on evolution and the age of the universe accessible to those who find his essays difficult to follow in the original. For a full length article delineating Rav Dessler's views on this subject please visit www.torih.org

Time and Evolution

Paragraph I

"Time - its existence¹ is only within our perception. [The true scope of] creation is far more profound than our ability to grasp and far greater than that which is represented in our physical universe. Consequently, "creation" [as a whole, encompassing all of its deeper, more profound levels] transcends any limitations of time. The concept of something being "beyond the limitations of time" cannot be fully grasped by the human intellect. Thus when considering [the idea of something being] "beyond the limitations of time", it is projected into our minds as endless periods of time [rather than timelessness]. And thus it seems to scientists as if the world evolved over millions of years."

Comment

This final passage is puzzling. What connection does our lack of ability to conceive timelessness have to do with scientists perceiving the unfolding of the universe in terms of millions of years? This question will be answered when we present the final chapter of R' Dessler's *maamar*.

¹ For a full treatment of this concept, please see *Michtav MeEliyahu* Vol. II pg. 150. Based on Rav Dessler's essay there, it appears that the word "exists" must be taken in a modified form. Furthermore, whereas the term *metzius* is normally used in an ontological sense, it is almost always used by Rav Dessler to denote cause, essence, substance or a variation of all three. In fact, in the very next paragraph, Rav Dessler uses the term *metzius* several times to denote value [c.f. footnote 3]. And in the paragraph after that he states openly that the definition of *metzius* is purpose. Consequently, there seems to be little doubt that in the context of this essay, the term *metzius* does not mean existence. A more accurate translation of the author's first passage would thus be as follows: "Time – the *purpose* of its existence, its *raison d'être*, is solely for the facilitation of human perception." Since the sole purpose of time is to accommodate our perception, it can be rightfully said that time exists only in our perception in the sense that without human perception the creation of time would no longer be necessary. More on this in the commentary section of this paper.

Paragraph II

“Question: If so [i.e. if the true nature of creation is so much more elevated than the mundane parameters that accompany our universe], why then does the Torah establish the description of creation in terms of six [physical] days?² [The answer is that] the Torah wanted to teach us that the existence [i.e. substance] of all things is only in proportion to the spiritual content it possesses. Something that contains much materialism and little spirituality – its value and true existence is small because the existence of everything [is determined solely] according to the measure of its spiritual content.”³ (And this is the meaning of the verse “[for] a thousand years in your eyes are as yesterday⁴ which passed...”⁵ The smallest component of time to us would be the “passing”, in our memories, of the experiences of one day in the past, and thus the terminology [in the above-mentioned verse] “which passed”.)⁶

At this point, we will be proceeding to the final paragraph in the essay. However, in order to put the translated portions of his essay into context, it would be helpful to outline, in general terms, the essence of Rav Dessler’s *maamar*. If one is merely looking for a translation of the essay, then one may simply skip to the final paragraph. However, if one is searching for clear understanding of Rav Dessler’s words within context, it is suggested that a few minutes be spent reviewing the following summary.

² In other words, why does the Torah describe *Maaseh Bereishis*, an essentially transcendental process, in terms of the *physical* time it took to create rather than portraying Hashem’s act within a more elevated, sublime context? Would not the latter description more accurately represent the true essence of Hashem’s creation?

³ In other words, true existence can only be determined by the proportion of spirituality that exists in the item being measured. If it is primarily spiritual, it is considered to have real existence, true worth. It is a genuine reflection of creation. If it is mostly material in nature, it is virtually valueless, possessing only an “imaginary”, fleeting existence. It is only a superficial representation of creation. This lesson can be gleaned from the fact that creation, an essentially transcendental formation, took only six physical days to fully materialize. See *Michtav MeEliyahu* in the *maamar* quoted above in which he further reconciles the Torah’s physical depiction of *Maaseh Bereishis* with the idea of transcendental creation. He quotes a Ramban in the beginning of *Bereishis* that states that when the Torah describes *Maaseh Bereishis* in physical terms, it is actually discussing the supernal nature of creation too. However, in order to incorporate both aspects of creation into its account, the Torah uses the word “*yom*” which can be alternatively used to modify the spiritual [“*kol maamar poel havaya tikahray ‘yom’*”] and the physical.

⁴ *Psalms* 90. Literally “a day of yesterday”. This verse is normally understood to portray the meaninglessness of time in G-d’s eyes due to his timeless “nature”. And although this explanation is certainly correct, Rav Dessler presents an even deeper interpretation to this verse. (c.f. footnotes 5 & 6)

⁵ The implied question is, why mention that yesterday “passed”? The present is also passing before us. What message is the *Psalmist* attempting to convey by presenting time bygone as “passed”?

⁶ Rav Dessler means as follows: the term “pass” used here does not denote the passage of time per se. Rather, it denotes the *impression* of the passage of time in our minds. The *mashal* in this verse is our low estimation of a fleeting time bygone, the *nimshal* is Hashem’s low estimation of vast amounts of time, and the lesson is that just as the memory of a single day bygone is merely a fleeting and insubstantial experience, making the weakest of impressions in our minds, so too, a thousand years i.e. vast amounts of time, are of no significance to G-d. Not because of his timeless nature (although this is also true as we stated above) because if so, the verse could have easily portrayed this meaning without adding the words “which passed”. The addition of these words comes to teach us that just as our memory of a day bygone make a relatively weak impression, vast amounts of time make an equally weak impression on high due to the fact that time is a corporeal entity and thus, has no real value other than its facility as a tool for revelation. A thousand years can pass by but if they were not employed in the function of revealing G-d’s presence, what real existence do they have, what value do they actually possess? This was the lesson *Dovid HaMelech* meant to impart with these words.

A summary of the main points in Rav Dessler's essay

Rav Dessler's primary focus in this *maamar* is not necessarily to discuss the age of the universe. Thus, after introducing his novel approach to the concept of time in the first two paragraphs, Rav Dessler launches into a dissertation regarding the significance time plays in our lives. He explains that all of the phenomena in the physical universe are actually manifestations of a greater more profound reality. This reality is embodied in the spiritual element that, along with its physical counterpart, comprises the entity as a whole. The spiritual component is synonymous with its purpose, and is referred to as *giluy* [revelation] whereas the physical part is simply the mechanism by which the purpose can be achieved and is referred to as *hester* [concealment].

Giluy relates to the various categories of awareness of Hashem that mankind is able to achieve. *Hester* relates to the various categories of concealment that Hashem established in His creation. The introduction of these various aspects of *hester* into the *beriah* was for the purpose of enabling the exercise of man's free will. By choosing to focus on the spirituality of any given phenomenon, mankind "reveals" the presence of Hashem that is "hidden" by the apparently physical nature of that item. There is no possibility of revelation without prior concealment and thus, from a Heavenly perspective, *giluy* and *hester* are united at their source and cannot be separated just as two sides of a coin cannot be separated although they may display diametrically opposed ideas. On the other hand, man's perspective can differ dramatically from that of the Heavenly one as is explained shortly.

The easiest and most direct method of attaining *giluy*, i.e. an awareness of the Creator, is by studying His creation. However, this study is enigmatic for in addition to its powers of revelation, it simultaneously possesses the ability to introduce the greatest levels of *hester* into the consciousness of mankind. How is this possible?

The answer is that when one considers the endless complexity apparent in all of the phenomena of our universe, the possibility of two distinct perspectives becomes available for adoption: one, a perspective of illusion, the other, a perspective of reality.

The perspective of illusion – One can perceive the world merely as an endless chain of physical cause and effect processes. When one looks upon the world with this perspective, he has effectively adopted a materialistic outlook of the universe which in reality is only a perception of illusion.

The perspective of reality - However, if one allows his gaze to penetrate the corporeal nature of our world, to pierce the thick veil of *hester*, and see the hand of Hashem in all its myriad manifestations, than he has adopted the Heavenly perspective, which is a perception of the truth.

If one studies the physical components of the world and chooses to ignore or reject the spiritual element that infuses them with existence, then it is inconceivable to imagine that this vast universe which is designed with an apparently endless amount of complexity and wisdom could possibly have unfolded in a short period of time. Hence the eons of time mistakenly attributed to the evolution of the universe by material naturalists throughout the ages.

With this in mind, we are now ready to proceed to the final chapter of Rav Dessler's *maamar*.

Final Paragraph

“And according to what we have mentioned⁷, the fact that the universe appears to scientists to be millions of years old, the reason [for this] is that every object which is empirically observable to us on a superficial [read: physical] level, actually alludes, on a more profound level, to a deeper more qualitative aspect [of the object], that is, an aspect relating to the fundamental nature of creation and its spiritual purpose. Thus, what appears as differentiated stages in the chain of superficial cause and effect processes, is essentially nothing but spiritual aspects and levels in the fundamental nature of creation, except that it seems like this [i.e. to be differentiated points etc.] to one with a materialistic perspective, [when in truth] the entire cause and effect experience is simply a superficial shell which encompasses these fundamental and essential aspects of creation.”

The Answer:

In the comment immediately following the first paragraph, we asked “What connection does our lack of ability to conceive timelessness have to do with scientists perceiving the unfolding of the universe in terms of millions of years?”

The answer is now apparent.⁸ Let's imagine we are walking in the desert and we encountered an assortment of 100 various, seemingly disparate components. Now, if we had no explanation for this motley multitude of artefacts, we might be tempted to say that the natural workings of cause and effect [the wind happened to randomly blow these materials together] was responsible for causing all these items to arrive together in one place over a long period of time. We would probably not say that all hundred pieces were uniformly blown together instantly because our instinct would tell us that the probability of such an event occurring was small.

However, if a skilled watchmaker came along, picked up all the pieces and reconstructed a perfectly functioning watch, it would become clear to us that these components were not blown together randomly via the forces of blind cause and effect. These components are not disparate at all. They are unified by their purpose which is to be components of one cohesive unit that measures the passage of time. In addition, we would have no problem asserting that these components, although varied and numerous, appeared suddenly in one spot. The reason is because since these seemingly disparate items, when assembled, perform a unified function, our instincts would tell us that they must have been put together by a designer. Thus, we would probably postulate that someone dropped the watch from a high distance and the watch cracked apart into its component pieces or some such theory.

Precisely the same approach applies to the universe. If we view the endless phenomena of the universe as disparate, entirely unrelated components that happen to come together via

⁷ In relation to the perception of illusion versus the perception of truth. See commentary section above.

⁸ In the following *mashal* I have introduced some elements of William Paley's argument from design although Rav Dessler's final paragraph is not limited to teleology per se.

the forces of cause and effect, it is impossible to understand how the universe could have evolved to the point where it is today, so complex, so purposeful in appearance, if not over millions of years. However, if we understand that all of the components of the universe are united in a single purpose, that purpose being to reveal the presence of the creator, than quite the opposite would apply. Our instincts would tell us that these components came together instantly by the Master Designer. The first assumption is the one made by the blind materialist, the second by the enlightened spiritualist.

Final Synopsis:

The purpose of creation is to attain *giluy* i.e. ultimate awareness of the creator by exercising our free will, by penetrating the thick veil of *hester* in order to see the truth of creation i.e. the Creator. The attainment of this *giluy* is considered qualitatively greater than one achieved without the overcoming of obstacles that are intrinsic to *hester*, and is the purpose of our lives. A person who manages to elevate himself to this higher more spiritual vantage point, no longer has any trouble with conceptualizing a six day creation.