

**“Study Our Torah Like Your Life Depends on It”**  
**26 Tishri 5769**  
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I attended a meeting sponsored by the Southeastern Pennsylvania chapter of the American Red Cross not long ago. I went to this meeting so we could become part of a network of voluntary organizations prepared to respond in the case of national disaster. National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (National VOAD) is the forum where organizations share knowledge and resources throughout the disaster cycle. This organization addresses preparation, response, and recovery, to help disaster survivors and their communities.

This particular meeting was about emergency preparedness. In case of an epidemic, the Red Cross wanted major communal institutions to be ready and to have a plan for how we might work together to insure communal welfare and well being. It was a day-long workshop about contacts and emergency procedures. There were scenarios offered about potential outbreaks of disease and attack. Throughout the entire day, I kept coming back to the same three lists.

- First, there were ideas that were truly insightful, offering approaches that were clearly thought out and, in fact, they thought of situations that I didn't.
- Second, there were absurd ideas mentioned wherein more people might get hurt than if we had a full fledged epidemic of the Flu.
- Third, these were the ideas that I could have come up with on my own. I am sure each of you have attended a class, workshop, or seminar in which you could have made the same exact lists.

I know I should have been paying more attention rather than making my lists. Truthfully, when they suggested that if an epidemic were to break out, we should make sure we have Purell stocked in our kitchen. I became incredulous. I stayed with them when they suggested bottled water, blankets, canned foods, even a transistor radio with fresh batteries, but when they spent more than half an hour talking about declaring an event an emergency, I stopped listening. They started to read from a document that stated, “Defining an incident as an emergency and/or major disaster is based upon the impact of the incident on the community and the ability of the community to coordinate a response. It was then that my eyes glazed over and I started thinking about my days in grammar school, when they explained to us what we should do in case of a fire. I was transported back to my days of drop and roll. You remember the drills on how to get out during a fire, touch the door to see if it is warm. Smoke rises stay low to the ground.

All of this was common sense, but in moments of panic we lose our ability to think clearly and what may be obvious, we tend to forget. Unfortunately, the same is true of our religious lives. We tend to check our brains at the door ignoring all common sense and miss the point entirely. What is even worse, when the presentation starts to lose all connection with reality, we tend to shut off and stop listening.

Now, I'm sure there was some valuable information I missed because I tuned them out, but isn't this the same thing most Jews do while living in today's modern age when it comes to our interaction with the Torah. For the vast majority of Jews, there is a complete disconnect between the instruction of the Torah and their modern experience. The reason we have been told that either we must literally read every sentence and every word of Torah, or take the opposite view, which is the entire Torah, in every detail, must be read as an allegory. We don't take the time, energy, or effort to study the text thoroughly. We rush to an oversimplified perspective asking the two most famous questions of childhood, "Did this really happen?" and "Is this going to be on the test?" The first suggests that a specific story line is so implausible we can't possibly learn anything that can be applied to real life, and the second suggests that if there is no real application possible, why am I paying attention?

My answer to these two questions: "It doesn't matter," to the first, and, "Absolutely," to the second. I don't care if it really happened and, yes, the very tests of my life require me to study Torah like my life depends on it. As Pirkei Avot teaches, "*Hafoch ba v'hafoch ba,*" turn it over and over for everything is found within.

There's a raging debate going on right now between those who want only a literal reading of the text and those who would have the entire narrative be a myth. There are those, like the rabbis of the Talmud, and in no less than four different times state, "*Ein Mikrah Yotzei Midi Peshuto*" (Shabbat 63a; Yevamot 11b, Yevamot 24a and Yalkut Shimoni 247 on Isaiah chapter 2). This means you can only read the text according to the simple, plain meaning of the text. Even so, there are some on the opposite end of the spectrum like Rambam, Maimonides, who writes what the Torah is about in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides suggests that the account of creation is not to be taken literally, as believed by the masses. (Guide, 2:25, 30)

So the debate continues on even today. There are those who would have us believe the world came into being according to the exact description of the Torah. They believe evolution is a scientific fallacy with no basis in reality. They would suggest the Biblical account is truth and the theories put forth by science are driven by anti-religious sentiments. Therefore, in the classroom, the biblical account of Creation should be taught alongside evolution. On the other hand, we have those who reject the message of the Torah as having a modern application, asking that we apply more sophisticated thinking in our analysis of the world. Additionally, there are those who seek to hold both worlds together.

I have often heard thinking, conscientious people remark that creation and evolution are compatible. God's days are longer than ours, therefore, it is possible to have creation described in the Torah, as six days, and those being "God days." If seven years in the life of a dog is equal to one year in the life of a human, then isn't it possible that a God year is equivalent to a million or so human years? You see, every day of Creation could have been a million years and, therefore, evolution could have happened just as creation is described in the Torah. If your eyes have glazed over by now, I completely understand, and that is exactly my point. Once these theories become this convoluted, it's time to step back and re-evaluate.

Now, I realize all of this may sound a little heretical. So let me be clear. I am not suggesting that the Exodus never occurred. That is worthy of Time magazine, though not really all that new. For

generations there have been sages that have asserted this claim. I am not offering anything so radical. I am merely suggesting that one approach or the other is equally damaging in that it drives people on one side of the argument, or of the other, to run screaming from the room. You are either a believer in Creation or a believer in Evolution and once the debate begins, blood boils, tempers rage and the discussion is over. For those of us watching from the side line, we are doing exactly that, watching from the sideline.

So let me invite you in. You don't have to pick a side. You can have your cake and eat it too. You must be engaged or the literalists will have defined the parameters of the discussion. You must insert yourself into the dialogue or those who would have us believe this is all one big myth will have set the rules for how we think. Today, the Torah offers you two stories of Genesis. Both chapter one and chapter two are there. Both chapters one and two are preserved. Both offer us implacable lessons about life. I beg you not to ask which one really happened because it doesn't matter – and yes, it will be on the test. So, let me offer you a few Cliffs Notes on the life lessons they offer.

1. There is order to the universe, God is the architect and general contractor, we, like Adam and Eve, are the subcontractors. Know this, there is a plan. Even though life seems chaotic and we can't always see the big picture, know someone is in charge and there is a plan.
2. If we read Genesis One carefully, we hear the refrain at the end of each day. There is wonder and beauty, symmetry and grandeur in this magnificent world – it is poetry in motion.
3. We all need a day off in order to appreciate what we have created with God.
4. We are all responsible for our actions and, if we aren't careful with our planet, it will expel us. Our world is bountiful, it is truly a garden of Eden, and if we aren't careful, we will destroy it.
5. Finally, Cain kills Abel because he loses perspective. We have to take care of each other. Tempers may rage but we must never let it overtake us. If we do, we will end up killing each other.

Number five is the biggy. It is the basis of so much hatred and anger in this world and it is what encourages people like Bill Maher to produce, *Religilous*, a movie that asserts the claim that the core of violence in the world is religion. As Stephen Holden writes in his review, "There is no arguing with faith. As the comedian and outspoken nonbeliever Bill Maher travels the world, interviewing Christians, Jews and Muslims in the facetiously funny documentary *Religilous*, you begin to wonder if there might be two subspecies of humans."

When we are forced to pick one side or the other we have lost already. So, one more comment from Ramban and his letter to the Jews of Yemen. He writes, "Rather we should endeavor to integrate the Torah with rationale thought, affirming the events that take place in accordance with the natural order wherever possible."

Sometimes the clarity of God's word is easy to understand, while other times the multiple layers of other rabbinic minds, have made it difficult to discern God's voice. I, too, long for the prophetic voice, bringing an unobstructed perspective of what God wants of me. So, I ask you to do the same thing and imagine what God wants of you. Don't worry, it won't lead to anarchy. Ask yourself this question seriously, "What does God want of me?" Then, do what a good friend of mine often does, imagine what God is doing while I am down here trying to figure it all out. Like her, I believe at times we are just giving God a good chuckle.

I would much prefer a good laugh than checking out, anytime. As I conclude my words this morning I ask you to make them your own by joining me in a reading we have on page 392 in the back of our prayer books. Edmund Fleg summarizes my sentiments so well this morning.

### **"I AM A JEW"**

I am a Jew because my faith demands no abdication of the mind.

I am a Jew because my faith demands all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew because wherever there is suffering, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because whenever there is despair, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the message of our faith is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew because the promise of our faith is a universal problem.

I am a Jew because for the Jew the world is not completed; we must complete it.

I am a Jew because for the Jew humanity is not fully created; we must be God's partners in creation.

I am a Jew because the faith of the people of Israel places humanity above nations – above Judaism itself.

I am a Jew because the faith of the people of Israel places above humanity – created in God's image – the Oneness of God."