

# JUDAISM AND DARWIN

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“The death of Charles Darwin removes from the world one of the greatest minds it has ever possessed.”

So opined the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1882, continuing, “With regard to the attitude of Judaism towards the new truths brought to light by Mr Darwin, our religion has nothing to fear.”

Yet 120 years later, the paper’s former editor, William Frankel, posed this conflict: “The Pentateuch, I had been taught at home, in the synagogue and in cheder, was the actual word of God and therefore could not be challenged, but in school I had learned something about Darwin and evolution. Both could not be true.”

This year is the 200th anniversary of Darwin’s birth and the 150th of the first publication of his *On The Origin of Species*, and it has been impossible to avoid contact with the plethora of celebratory media attention to evolution. Perhaps uniquely, the very mention of evolution raises passionate responses, mostly from people who have never read Darwin’s book and have little knowledge of the theory’s scientific foundations. Even ‘theory’ of evolution needs explanation.

A scientific hypothesis that withstands rigorous testing acquires the status of a ‘theory’, for example, atomic theory or the theory of gravity. ‘Theory’ is not an indication of a weak idea but of a well-established and evidenced explanation of a natural process. Radioactive dating has shown that the age of the earth is around 4.5 billion years (enough for species to have evolved), geology has taught us that the continents have moved (explaining why the same species are found in different places), the fossil record has provided valuable supportive evidence, and studies on DNA have confirmed the relationships between different organisms and also provided an explanation of how evolution operates.

Overall, there is overwhelming and compelling scientific evidence that evolution

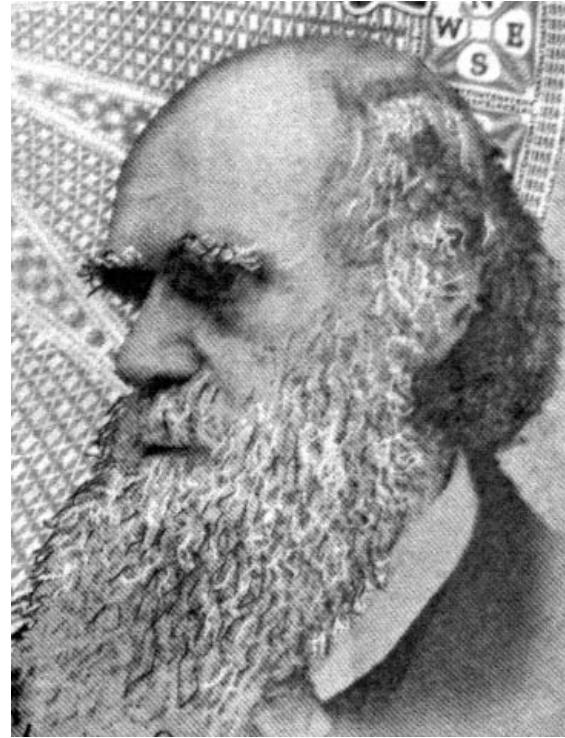
is essentially fact. Someone has quipped: “If as much clear evidence existed for God and for religion as exists for evolution, there would be no atheists.” What is still theory is whether natural selection is the only mechanism driving it. Those wishing to bone up on Darwin’s ideas and subsequent research would do well to read his own *The Origin of Species*, David Quammen’s *The Reluctant Mr Darwin* and Jerry Coyne’s *Why Evolution Is True*.

Darwin was not the first to propose evolution, but the first to provide a mechanism – ‘natural selection’ – by which genetic changes that gave an organism an advantage for surviving and reproducing in a particular environment would be selected and passed on to later generations. This isn’t a random process, as many people fear, but a selective device for adapting species to their habitats.

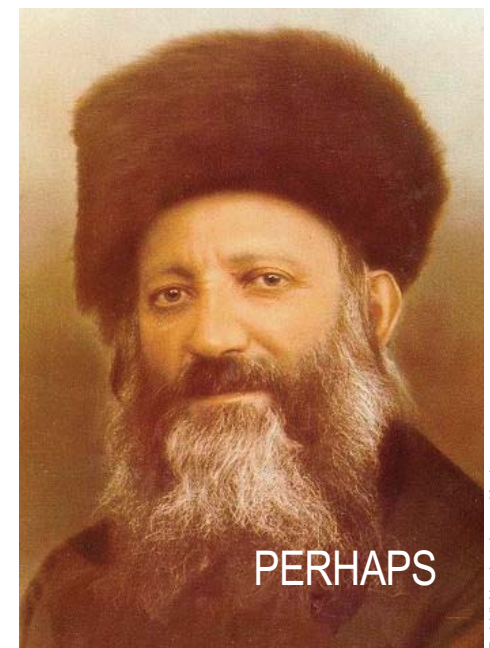
Darwin knew nothing of the mechanism by which traits were inherited. It was six years after publication of *The Origin* that Gregor Mendel published his work on inheritance in peas, but Darwin never read Mendel’s papers. Had he done so and had he realised their significance, he would have had a robust defence against many of the criticisms levelled at his natural selection proposals, and Mendel’s work would not have lain unknown until the beginning of the 20th century.

Darwin’s revolutionary contribution, which has been described as “the single best idea anyone has ever had”, shocked the Victorian world that largely believed our earth came into existence around 6,000 years ago and that man and all living creatures had been created in essentially the same forms as now exist. A much, much older earth and an evolutionary process leading gradually to mankind, rather than ‘special creation’, constituted an explosive cocktail to confront head-on the account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. While many people can accept that plants and animals have evolved, they balk at the idea that humans have arrived by evolutionary descent. The famous American Scopes (‘monkey’) trial in 1925 wasn’t about the teaching of evolution but the crime of teaching that humans have evolved.

Darwin never suggested that man has descended from the apes, but that man and apes share a common ancestor – a rather different scenario. What we now know as fact, however, are the remarkable similarities, even identities, between the anatomical, biochemical, embryological, genetic and physiological features of man and ape, features also shared to a greater or lesser extent across the entire living world. So even



Lubavitch Rabbi Shneurson



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a Creator would appear to have used much the same blueprint for man as for the apes, tweaking (evolving?) it just a little to produce the difference. If we're not related in a biological sense, we're certainly blueprint relatives. Does that make things easier?

For literal readers of the Bible, the source of the problem is the short Genesis sentence 'Let us make man in our image'. This is traditionally interpreted to mean that God took a special hand in making man. However, I have always favoured another interpretation – that man had already evolved and what God then did was transform him spiritually into 'our image'. Therein may be a let-out for evolution-friendly, literal Bible believers.

Opposition to evolution has not abated, and fundamentalism persists amongst the followers of Orthodox Judaism and Islam, 'creationism' and 'intelligent design'. Mainstream Christianity seems to have come to terms with Darwinism. As Sir David Attenborough recently wrote, "The Pope has. The Archbishop of Canterbury has. They all say, 'Yes, of course, the Book of Genesis is only a creation myth.' That's what civilised religious people say." If only!

The archives of the *Jewish Chronicle* (JC) provide an interesting barometer of changing Anglo-Jewish attitudes to evolution. Charles Darwin first appears in the JC in 1862, where his five guinea contribution to University College Hospital is recorded. In 1870, the JC writes: "his theory is utterly opposed by certain wise and learned men, and it has not obtained by any means even general acceptance." A year later: "Darwinism continues to be the leading topic of conversation. Yet we would prefer to adopt an anti-Darwinian view. More conclusive proof of the truthfulness of the Biblical account need not, we think, be asked for."

Later, conciliatory cracks appear: "There is nothing in Darwinism opposed to the doctrine of the existence of an Omnipotent Creator, and it is reasonable to suppose that the alleged discrepancy between the Darwinian theory and the Biblical record is due to inaccurate transcriptions and translations, or words having acquired a meaning widely different from that which they originally pursued."

Perhaps because of objections from clergy and others, opposition returns: "Darwin complacently believes in a self-acting evolution, though the evidence of our eyes and physical senses is diametrically contrary to his proclamations" and "How often does it happen that men, otherwise well educated and intelligent, become a prey to such baneful philosophies as those of Darwin."

By 1876, the tone softens: "For our part we do not feel called upon to take part in the controversy." Finally, Darwin's JC obituary was full of praise. We also witness a move to separate the combatants: "The Bible was never meant to be a scientific text-book...the Hebrew scriptures cannot be reconciled with science, and were never meant to be... Attempts at harmonising Genesis and science are unscientific and useless." Nearly half a century later, this palliative was restated: "The fact is clear to those who read the narrative in Genesis without prejudice that it is a poem... Let the two [Genesis and science] be kept apart." Wise advice, but largely unheeded.

We have no information on the general Jewish public's views about evolution. 'Two Jews, three opinions' aptly describes the diverse attitudes to evolution that have been put forward within Judaism, and these match those we have seen in the JC. They range from rejection of evolution as absolute heresy, through accommodation by assigning God a role in guiding evolution, to an essentially Darwinian view of evolution coupled to a belief that God created the very first living cell or, even further back, created matter with the physical properties that would themselves allow the assembly of living cells ('theistic evolution'). Some Jews have given up on God completely and have no problem accepting evolution.

Among the opposers is the last Lubavitch Rebbe, who insisted on a literal reading of Genesis and described evolution as "far-fetched". This remains the Lubavitch position, with a refusal to acknowledge the significance of the huge body of supporting scientific evidence. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a revered ultra-Orthodox 20th century rabbi, ruled that reading an evolutionary textbook is forbidden because belief in evolution is heresy. Book banning persists. Only four years ago, popular books by Rabbi Natan Slifkin were banned by charedi rabbis for their heretical statements about evolution.

Amongst others, Judah Halevi and Maimonides accepted the need to abandon literal reading of the Bible when there was a conflict with reason and observation, and this was the view of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, first Chief Rabbi of Palestine. He advocated the study of science to complement Torah study and endorsed the concept of evolution in mystical kabbalistic terms, seeing it as a means of progressing man's moral nature.

In the popular Soncino Hertz Chumash, first published in the 1930s, Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz wrote: "There is nothing inherently un-Jewish in the evolutionary

conception of the origin and growth of forms of existence from the simple to the complex... evolution is conceivable only as the activity of a creative Mind." Our present Chief Rabbi probably holds similar views, despite having deleted reference to evolution in the revised version of his *The Dignity of Difference*. Fundamentalist rabbinical pressures don't go away. Acceptance of evolution displaces Adam and Eve from their central position in the Genesis account, an issue pursued by Rabbi Louis Jacobs. If parts of the Genesis account are to be taken non-literally, he argued, why not accept that there is a human element in the Torah? The resulting 'Jacobs Affair' is now part of Anglo-Jewry's history. Once the barriers to a relaxed reading of Genesis are lifted, evolution ceases to pose problems – an attitude adopted by progressive Jewish authorities and their communities.

Many religious critics delight in finding gaps in the evidence for evolution, gaps they are pleased to fill with God. This is a high-risk strategy, for if and when such evidence gaps are filled, belief can only be weakened. Far better to leave evolution to science and focus religious faith on morality and ethics. Evolution offers no proof that there is or is not a God, and *The Origin of Species* does not replace the Bible.

But let's leave the last word to the apes. An orang-utan was found reading two books – the Bible and *The Origin of Species*. "What have you learned from them?" he was asked. His response: "From the Bible I've learned that I'm my brother's keeper, and from the other one, that I'm my keeper's brother."

David Weitzman has evolved from being a Professor of Biochemistry to a wannabe book author.

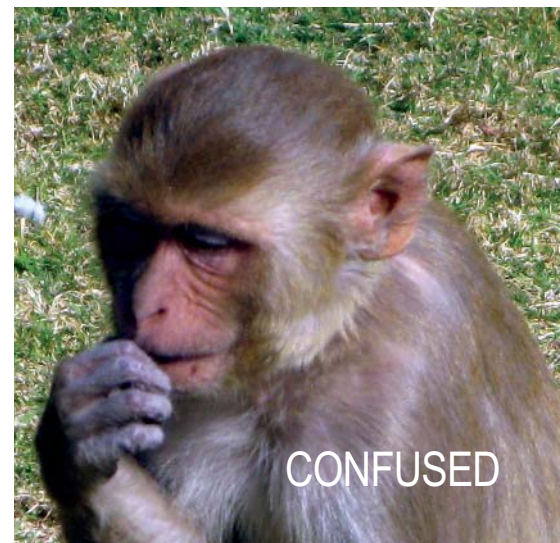


Photo: David Weitzman