

## HOUSES OF WORSHIP

### Is Darwin Kosher?

Did we come from monkeys? Ask the Zoo Rabbi.

**BY EVAN R. GOLDSTEIN**

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Last month, 600 people turned out for a Yeshiva University fund-raiser at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The museum, which stands as a monument to science, houses one of the world's most extensive collections of dinosaur fossils. The dinner itself was held in the dramatic Milstein Hall of Ocean Life, which features a massive blue whale that hangs suspended in midair; intricate dioramas modeled on the flora and fauna of the planet's oceans line the walls. Everything about the affair suggested that Yeshiva, the intellectual epicenter of Modern Orthodox Jewish life in America, is very much at ease in the world of secular science.

This impression is confirmed by Carl Feit, who is an ordained rabbi and Talmudic scholar as well as chairman of the science division at Yeshiva College. Prof. Feit says that in nearly a quarter-century of teaching introductory biology, he has always taught evolution--supported by traditional Jewish source material--and that "there has never been a blip on the radar here." His assessment echoes the official line of the Modern Orthodox rabbinical association, which states that evolution is entirely consistent with Judaism.

The seeming ease with which this branch of Judaism has embraced science can in large part be credited to the towering intellectual legacy of Moses Maimonides. In his 12th-century masterpiece, "Guide to the Perplexed," Maimonides opened the door to a Judaism unfettered by a literal reading of religious texts. For many Jews the persuasive case for evolution does indeed amount to a crisis of faith, but the Maimonidean precedent of figurative interpretation provides a framework within which conflicts arising between Torah and science can be argued away. To be sure, some arguments are more compelling than others (and a great many are not compelling at all). But in contrast to many observant Christians, there is a greater willingness of these believers to live with such inconsistencies.



This practice has long been on display even in the more rigid Orthodox precincts of the Jewish world, where many prominent rabbis were quick to reconcile the Torah with the truths of science. "It is the power of the Torah that all theories can be included," wrote one Montreal-based Orthodox rabbi in the summer of 1925, at the time of the Scopes trial. A few years earlier, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, chief rabbi of pre-state Palestine, assured his followers that evolution, "more so than all other

philosophical theories, conforms to the kabbalistic secrets of the world."

Yet there are important exceptions to this tradition of moderation, and in certain parts of the ultra-Orthodox world, Darwinism has always been denounced as subversive and dangerous. Take the case of Rabbi Natan Slifkin. A boyish-looking ultra-Orthodox Israeli scholar and science writer, Mr. Slifkin, who publishes his books in English, is popularly known as the "Zoo Rabbi" because of his consuming fascination with the animal kingdom and his Steve Irwin-esque pedagogical style. In recent years he has emerged as a central figure in the ultra-Orthodox struggle to define the proper place of science within Judaism.



Rabbi Slifkin's work has been publicly denounced by 23 prominent ultra-Orthodox rabbis who attacked his beliefs as "nonsense" and ordered that Rabbi Slifkin himself "burn all his writings." The basis for the rabbinical protest differs from that of most Christian fundamentalists who oppose Darwin. Whereas Christian creationism is based on a literal reading of the Bible, most Orthodox Jews who reject evolution tend to do so because they find it incompatible not only with the Torah, but with other Jewish texts and centuries of rabbinic commentary.

Rabbi Slifkin does not consider Darwin a threat to his faith. Relying heavily on Maimonides he argues not only that there is no incompatibility between traditional Jewish faith and the laws of nature, but that a full understanding of one depends on a full understanding of the other. "Appreciating the role and rule of natural law is an essential prerequisite to appreciating the role and rule of the spiritual law of Torah," Rabbi Slifkin writes in "The Science of Torah." "To be sure, we have scientific explanations for phenomena. But this does not paint G-d out of the picture. On the contrary--it presents a new picture, that of the body of scientific law, for Him to have painted."

To Rabbi Slifkin, God set the scientific process in motion. Yet he sharply dismisses the claims of intelligent-design advocates like Michael Behe as "wrong and dangerous." He thinks it "strange" that such people feel compelled to "find gaps in biology in order to give God something to do." After all, "Man's physical ancestry in the animal kingdom has no bearing on his unique spiritual nature. Whether our physical bodies originate from mud or monkey, our fundamental identity does not relate to either."



According to Marc Swetlitz, co-editor of "Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism," "the Slifkin affair has forced both Jews and non-Jews to remember that there are Jews who oppose evolution and they are not afraid to say so. I think there is more Jewish anti-evolution writing out there now than ever before."

Rabbi Slifkin has not given an inch to his critics despite the animus directed toward him by some neighbors and colleagues. He has taken to the Internet to mount an exhaustive defense of his writings, meticulously countering each and every argument made against him. And though he was dropped by his religious publisher and distributor as a result of the controversy, he has since signed with a new outfit that is planning to release a vastly expanded version of one of his banned books, "Sacred Monsters," in July.

The animating idea that runs through all of Rabbi Slifkin's work is his insistence that "science and monotheism go hand-in-hand." At a moment when our national debate tends to cast religion and science in adversarial roles, he reminds us that belief in the former needn't imply hostility to the latter.

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