

Response to Jewish Tribune Article of December 15, 2005

By: Simcha Coffe

On December 15, 2005, The Jewish Tribune published an article regarding Rabbi Shlomo Eliyahu Miller's letter condemning the works of Rabbi Nosson Slifkin on Creation and other topics. The article begins as follows:

Toronto's Orthodox community was in uproar this week following the circulation of a letter by one of the city's leading Rabbinic authorities, Rabbi Shlomoh Eliyahu Miller, head of the Kollel Avreichim (an advanced institute of Talmud study for married men).

It is unclear which community the Tribune was referring to but it certainly wasn't "Toronto's Orthodox community". There may have been some elements that were disturbed by Rabbi Miller's rejection of Rabbi Slifkin's views but for the most part the community was unaware of the protest. Certainly anyone who acknowledges Rabbi Miller's authority was not in an "uproar".

In view of the fact that Rabbi Miller is one of the leading *halachic* authorities in the world today, it would have seemed prudent for the staff at the Tribune to verify the facts associated with this issue before proceeding. For some inexplicable reason, Rabbi Miller was not contacted for his position on this matter before the article's release. Thus, it is not surprising to find several distortions and inaccuracies in the Tribune piece. We read as follows:

The letter condemned the books of Rabbi Nosson Slifkin, the 'Zoo Rabbi' as "words of heresy and denial...and ignorance," for apparently suggesting that scientific knowledge could ever take precedence over rabbinic lore in explaining the origin of the world, astronomy or the laws of nature.

First of all, the above quote is taken entirely out of context. Rabbi Slifkin maintains that the account of the six days of creation as presented in the first chapter of Genesis is not factual. It is this particular opinion which Rabbi Miller singles out as heretical. He quotes a specific Talmudic dictum to demonstrate that the laws of nature differed during the six days of creation. He therefore concludes that any inferences drawn from physical laws which exist today must remain, by necessity, inconclusive. Consequently, Rabbi Slifkin has erred egregiously by dismissing the accuracy of the Biblical account of Creation based on current scientific observation.

There have been several important works authored by leading scientists in their fields discussing the various possible circumstances that could have existed during the incipient stages of the universe which would differ from currently understood laws of physics. Consequently, it would seem that the Talmudic dictum quoted by Rabbi Miller falls squarely within the parameters of current scientific enterprise.

Second of all, even a cursory reading of Rabbi Miller's letter reveals several attempts by the author to reconcile certain ideas in Torah utilizing current scientific concepts. In fact, Rabbi Miller frequently brings his broad knowledge of science to bear in various *halachic* scenarios.

Rabbi Slifkin's books, which discuss various aspects of zoology, evolution and the animal kingdom in the light of rabbinic tradition, stress the rabbinic authorities through the ages who have welcomed scientific thought as illuminating – not contradicting – traditional Judaism. As such, he has been under sustained attack for more than a year by ultra-Orthodox leaders in Israel and the United States.

The above characterization regarding the “sustained attack...by ultra-Orthodox leaders” is self-serving at best. The Talmud is full of scientific concepts. Modern *halachic* compendiums are full of arbitration based on science and as mentioned before, Rabbi Miller is frequently in the habit of utilizing science to explain Torah. The issue the above-mentioned Orthodox leaders have with Rabbi Slifkin's works are not his usage of science but rather his aggrandizement of scientism above all else, an attitude that leads him to reinterpret passages in the Bible and casually dismiss much of the wisdom of the Talmudic sages.

The attempt to ban his books and ostracise him, further fanned by what have been identified as clumsy attempts to attack modern science, provoked a huge crisis of confidence in Orthodox circles. The attacks on Slifkin were criticized as attempted ‘thought control’ in the Orthodox community, aimed at enforcing one interpretation of tradition, and intimidating anyone holding – or approving – alternative views. The Internet, and particularly the ‘blogs,’ were major forums in publicizing and discussing the unfolding of events.

This final sentence is the key to understanding the volumes of misinformation regarding the Orthodox leader's issues with some of Rabbi Slifkin's opinions. ‘Blogs’ by nature are unsupervised and comprise a one-sided and opinionated view of things. It is easy to alarm people by denigrating Rabbi Miller's supporters as “clumsy”, describing a “huge crisis of confidence” and invoking Orwellian imagery of ‘Big Brother’ control. However, anyone who is familiar with the Rabbis involved in this protest is aware of their uncompromising dedication to the Jewish people and their sincere efforts at defending Orthodox Judaism from its attackers, from without as well as from within.

Local orthodox leaders expressed concern regarding both the content and the tone of Rabbi Miller's letter. Rabbi Miller criticizes Rabbi Slifkin's views, defines him as a heretic, compares him to the ‘wicked son’ of the Pesach Haggadah, and explains that it is obligatory for Jews to believe in Rabbinic traditions, giving as an example the belief that Cain and Abel were born on the sixth day of creation, without any gestation period.

Once again the writer evinces a complete lack of knowledge regarding the contents of the letter. Rabbi Miller never once refers to Rabbi Slifkin as a heretic; it is his views and attitudes which are in question. In certain specific cases, such as Creation, Rabbi Miller feels that Rabbi Slifkin has crossed the *halachic* boundaries of heresy; as it happens, Rabbi Miller's view is echoed by dozens of leading Orthodox authorities. Although one who erroneously maintains certain heretical doctrines may not necessarily be considered a heretic, this in no way mitigates the severity of the issue. The opinion must be protested lest it become a universally accepted doctrine. As it happens, Rabbi Slifkin was approached with an offer to meet with Rabbi Miller and a local academic and was unresponsive.

As far as the alleged comparison to the wicked son of the *Hagadah*, Rabbi Miller's words are taken entirely out of context. Nowhere in the letter does Rabbi Miller compare Rabbi Slifkin to the 'wicked son'. There are obviously some differences in *Weltanschauung* between certain groups in Orthodox Jewry. Rabbi Miller is aware of this. He is also aware that unfortunately there are certain elements that will spare no effort in maligning Orthodox leadership in an attempt to undermine their words. Just as the teachings of the *Hagadah* are meant for us but are not directed towards the wicked due to their unwillingness to acknowledge them, so too, the comments in the letter are directed only towards people who are open-minded and are willing to listen as opposed to those who choose to maintain pre-conceived notions. The latter group invariably fall prey to spurious depictions of Orthodox dogma effectively eliminating their partiality and thus their ability to countenance the pronouncements made by leading Orthodox Rabbis. This is the extent of the comparison.

He then says that he will "strengthen the hearts of those who may have heard the words of denial (divrei kefirah)" by giving examples (apparently unrelated to Slifkin) of how the Torah has proven astronomy wrong, and how the Talmudic rabbis knew advanced science from biblical exegesis.

Rabbi Miller never claims that "Talmudic rabbis knew advanced science from biblical exegesis". He is merely attempting to demonstrate the immutable nature of the teachings of the Torah which is due to their source in an eternal and omnipotent Creator. Accordingly, he illustrates several examples where Biblical passages seem to imply advanced concepts in science long before the academic world ever discovered their meaning. Thus he accomplishes precisely what he sets out to do which is to fortify belief in the everlasting verities of the Torah and "strengthen the hearts of those who may have heard the words of denial".

He further points out that in discussing the nature of light, the rabbis define darkness not as the absence of light, but as a real substance, and that in this "scientists are wrong." In the letter he refers to Galileo, Quantum Mechanics, 'Non-local reality' and Bell's Theorem as perhaps offering confirmation of his views. A local Orthodox Jewish scientist termed the scientific content of the letter "perplexing."

Perhaps this anonymous “Orthodox Jewish scientist” would like to give Rabbi Miller a call. In addition to his recognized expertise in Talmud and the *halachic* codes, Rabbi Miller happens to have a remarkable grasp of physics and astronomy. I believe the scientist may find the exchange refreshing. A copy of Rabbi Miller’s letter, translated into English and fully annotated, is available at www.toriah.org