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Darwin This

Jews clash over the intelligence of intelligent design

By Mariah Blake

On a recent Tuesday evening, Moshe Tendler, an influential Orthodox rabbi and Yeshiva University biology professor, ambled onto the stage at Kovens Conference Center in North Miami. A stately figure with a wispy white beard and heavy glasses, he surveyed the 300-strong crowd of scientists and intellectuals — most clad in yarmulkes and dark suits with tallith tassels dangling about their waists — and urged them to spread the word that Darwin was wrong. "It is our task to inform the world [about intelligent design]," he implored. "Or the child growing up will grow up with unintelligent design.... Unintelligent design is our ignorance, our stupidity."

This may seem an unlikely message from a prominent Jewish biologist. After all, intelligent design theory — which holds that life is too complex to be a fluke of evolution — has been crafted primarily by evangelical Christians and spurned by most scientists.

But some Jewish leaders, like Tendler, have begun to quietly embrace the theory. And several of them went public with their support during the Sixth Miami International Conference on Torah and Science, which ran from December 13 to 15 and was hosted by Florida International University's religious studies department, the Shul of Bal Harbour, and *B'Or Ha'Torah* journal of science. In an area with the second highest concentration of Jews after New York — there are 113,000 in Miami-Dade alone — the event attracted about 1000 Jewish researchers, intellectuals, teachers, and students. There was also one prominent evangelical: Intelligent design luminary William Dembski was among the event's featured speakers.

The conversation proved divisive. Tendler kicked off the conference by attacking the idea that complex life could flow from "random evolution." "That is irrational," he said.

As soon as Tendler finished speaking, biologist Sheldon Gottlieb rushed to one of two microphones perched in the aisles. "We all know evolution is not random," he grumbled. "It goes through the filter of natural selection.... You cannot use those arguments with this audience." Tendler and Gottlieb sparred for about five minutes. Meanwhile long lines began to form at the mikes. But the moderator cut the question-and-answer session short and sent the crowd home.

Dembski, a slender man in a tweed blazer and a forest green oxford shirt, spoke the following morning, and more than 400 people packed in to see him. Besides Jewish scientists and intellectuals, the crowd included students from the Hebrew Academy and the Lubavitch Educational Center, as well as a busload of girls from Orthodox Beis Chana School, who arrived with Pumas and Nikes tucked beneath their ankle-length skirts.

Much of Dembski's talk concentrated on the evidence of design in nature. He offered the classic example of the tiny flagella that bacteria use to propel themselves through their environment. "They can spin at 100,000 rpm," Dembski marveled. "And then in a quarter-turn, they're spinning the other direction. Imagine if a blender could do that.... Is it such a stretch to think a real engineer was involved?"

After about 45 minutes, Dembski wrapped up his talk, and dozens of attendees swarmed the microphones again, many of them eager to air their objections. "Our speaker has fuzzied the

main issue," complained Nathan Aviezar, who teaches physics at Bar Ilan University in Israel. "The whole enterprise of science is to explain life without invoking supernatural explanations. Intelligent design is not science, it's religion, and it shouldn't be taught in science class."

The contentious Q&A lasted 25 minutes. When it was done, dozens of scientists rushed to the front to pelt Dembski with questions. The hubbub lasted so long that Sholom Lipskar of the Shul was pushed off the agenda.

Lipskar, a soft-spoken man with a thick charcoal beard and wire-rim spectacles, ranks among Miami's most influential rabbis. And like Tandler, he believes Jews should back the intelligent design movement. "The fundamental question the theory answers is, accidental or intentional?" he explains. "If it's accidental, then what's the point? But if there's design, we're here for a reason." Lipskar also advocates bringing intelligent design into Jewish classrooms. "It should be taught together with chemistry and physics," he says.

In fact much of the debate at Torah and Science turned to whether intelligent design should be integrated into Jewish-school science classes; Miami's Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education even signed on as a sponsor. The organization's president, Chaim Botwinick, says the event is a harbinger. "Many Jewish schools are beginning to discuss making intelligent design an integral part of their curriculum," he explains. Among them, he adds, are a handful of schools in Miami, a city that has long been a stronghold of traditional Judaism.

What do the students think? Many of those who heard Dembski speak said they would like to study his ideas in class. "His words make sense," commented Annale Fleisher, a seventeen-year-old senior at Miami Beach's Hebrew Academy. "Saying life comes from evolution is like saying a library was made by someone spilling a bottle of ink."

Nathan Katz, who heads the Center for the Study of Spirituality at FIU and was one of the conference organizers, says the enthusiasm some Torah devotees express for intelligent design reflects a growing alliance between traditional Jews and evangelical Christians. The two groups have found themselves on the same side of many culture war battles. And evangelicals have funneled tens of millions of dollars into Israel. "The monstrous evangelical support for that country has led some Orthodox Jews to be willing to listen to evangelicals on other issues," Katz explains.

For his part, Dembski hopes the conversation that began at the Torah and Science conference will continue, and that some Jewish scientists will eventually lend their talents to the intelligent design movement. "It would be huge in terms of PR because it would give lie to this idea that this is just a conservative Christian thing," he explains. "It would also expand our talent pool immensely."

But critics in the audience at the conference chafed at the prospect of Jewish scientists contributing to a movement that has stated as its goal the "overthrow" of "scientific materialism." "We would be helping to eliminate science as a discipline," said Aviezar. "And that would put us back in the Fifteenth Century. It would be a disaster."