



Letters to the Editor, October 17, 2007

## The Dialogue Continues: Rabbi Slifkin Answers Critics

Last week's letter-writers pointed out that the scientific jargon quoted by reader Amnon Goldberg in support of the notion of a stationary Earth actually provides no such support. Mr. Goldberg was correct in noting that many *Acharonim* were strongly opposed to Copernicus, but he is mistaken in believing that modern science supports their geocentrism. Relativity, even according to Mr. Goldberg's mistaken understanding of it, does not lend any support to what these *Acharonim* were stating – they believed that the earth is absolutely stationary, not merely stationary from a relative perspective.

I explain this matter in greater detail in my book *The Challenge Of Creation*.

Reader Chaim Silver writes that he disagrees with my claims “that the concept of Divine Providence is limited to the chassidic movement and that God does not test our faith.”

I, too, strongly disagree with such claims, which is why I wrote no such thing. I am at a loss to account for why he characterized my views in this way.

In Dr. Yaakov Stern's latest letter, he (somewhat strangely) completely changes the topic that was the subject of my article and his first letter. Instead of discussing *Chazal's* scientific knowledge, he writes instead about the age of the universe. But he does not offer any arguments against my position in this matter either, and soon switches the line of discussion to one of authority.

Dr. Stern, citing Rashi on the *pasuk* of *Lo Sasur*, argues that it is incumbent upon us to follow the views of the *gedolim* about my books, even if their rulings appear to be in error.

Yet, according to the majority of opinions, that *pasuk* is referring to the *Beis Din HaGadol* in *Yerushalayim*, not to contemporary rabbinic authorities. *Sefer HaChinnuch* states that it applies to the Torah authorities of every generation, but this is a decidedly minority view amongst the *Rishonim*. Furthermore, even the *Sefer HaChinnuch's* view is limited to certain types of *piskei halachah* that would not include this case, for several reasons.

One reason is that most of the distinguished *rabbonim* who banned three of my books were condemning my position that *Chazal's* scientific statements were not based on *ruach haKodesh* or a *mesorah* from Sinai and were therefore in some cases mistaken. Now, of course these *rabbonim* have every right to vehemently oppose this position, and to warn those in their community against it, and I would even agree that it can be a dangerous approach for their community.

But is their prohibition applicable to people outside of their constituencies – to the entire Jewish People?

My *rabbanim* have told me that this is inconceivable, since this approach was presented by Rav Sherira Gaon, Rambam, Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam, *Tosafos*, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *Pri Chadash*, Rav Yitzchak Lampronti, Maharam Schick, Rav Hirsch, and many dozens of other Torah giants throughout the centuries, right through to our generation, where I heard it from Rav Aryeh Carmell, *zt”l*, and Rav Gedalyah Nadel, *zt”l*. It is adopted or legitimized today by scores of bona fide *poskim* and qualified *talmidei chachamim* (including, but by no means limited to, Rav Zalman Nechemiah Goldberg, Rav Shlomo Fisher, and Rav Herschel Schechter).

Thus, Rav Ovadiah Yosef, when presented with the case of a Sephardic rabbi who was making use of this approach, wrote in response that while he is personally opposed to it, one cannot deny the right of someone to adopt it, in light of its authentic roots in the *Rishonim*.

Switching to the topic of the age and development of the universe, Dr. Stern notes that Rav Moshe Feinstein was of the view that the Torah’s account of creation was to be interpreted literally. Indeed he was – but he was also of the view that one is not obligated to follow the opinion of a different *posek*, even if he is the *gadol hador*. In *Iggros Moshe* (*Yoreh De’ah* 3:88), he tells someone moving to Bnei Brak that he is fully entitled to dispute the positions of the Chazon Ish, although he must do so with respect.

And the Chazon Ish himself wrote (*Yoreh De’ah* 150) that one need not follow the majority of rabbinic opinion, past or present, in determining a ruling; only with the Sanhedrin was the ruling determined by majority vote. One need only follow one’s own rabbinic authority (if one is not competent to form an opinion oneself).

All of the above is stated with regard to halachic rulings; it is all the more true with regard to matters of *hashkafa* that are not related to *halacha*, since, as Rambam states (commentary to *Sanhedrin* 10:3), such matters are not subject to *psak*. One might perhaps make an exception for beliefs that relate to the fundamentals of faith, but the nature of creation (as opposed to the fact of creation) cannot be said to fall into that category – it does not relate to any of Rambam’s thirteen principles of faith. An opinion on these matters may be right or wrong, but it is not subject to being “*paskened*” that one may not believe it to be true.

Of course, not every rabbi is of sufficient stature to have credibility in forming opinions in such matters. A Torah scholar must be not only a great Talmudist, but also possess a thorough knowledge of the diverse approaches of the *Rishonim* on this obscure topic. This is not so easy to find; for example, notwithstanding the pre-eminent status of Rambam, it is hard to find someone who is truly knowledgeable of his positions, and open to his approach.

Credibility in these topics also requires experience in dealing with such issues, and an appreciation of the seriousness of the challenges posed by science. Without this, we face a situation such as that with the *Shevus Yaakov*, one of the greatest halachic authorities of the eighteenth century, who dismissed scientists on the grounds that they believe the world to be round, in contrast to his understanding of the Gemara.

There are some great Torah authorities of this and recent generations who fulfill these requirements. For example, there is Rav Yitzchak Herzog, who was eulogized by Rav Aharon Kotler, *zt”l*, as a “prince of Torah,” and who was a rebbe of Rav Elyashiv, *shlita*; he was thoroughly versed in the philosophical approaches of the *Rishonim* and noted that

they would not mandate a literalist interpretation of *Bereishis* (nor a belief that *Chaza*'s science was infallible). Rav Gedalyah Nadel, one of the foremost disciples of the Chazon Ish, also studied modern science; he accepted that the universe was billions of years old, and that life evolved.

Many other such qualified authorities have their positions quoted in full in my books, and my own mentor, Rav Aryeh Carmell, was certainly qualified to teach me my own approach in these matters.

Dr. Stern is fully entitled to follow his own rabbinic authorities; surely, however, is not entitled to deny others the right to follow theirs.

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