

The Evolution of Covenant

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By Rabbi Michael Shevack

The theory of evolution has been troubling to many Christian religionists, ostensibly because it's not the account presented in the book of *Genesis*. Yet curiously, for another biblically-based group, Jews, it has been far less troubling.

Certainly, there's been a general tendency amongst Jews to accept the *Genesis* account as accurate, because of the traditional doctrine that "Moses received the *Torah* from [God who revealed Himself at Mt.] Sinai..."(1)

Certainly, at times, such a view became ossified, and there were not a few rabbis who vehemently opposed evolutionary thought, such as the great Moshe Feinstein. For him, the reading of an evolutionary textbook was forbidden, heretical; if the book had some value, and could not be dispensed with, the offending pages were to be torn out and discarded.(2)

But, hardened as this opinion was, it was hardly the dominant opinion. To unearth a single, monolithic Jewish viewpoint about *anything* would be a rare fossil-find in the evolution of Jewish thought.

As a general Talmudic "wiggle" against excessive biblicism, Jews, throughout the centuries, have maintained that "*The Torah speaks in the language of men*", i.e. that the *Torah* is not always to be taken as fact or *Fiat*, but also figuratively.(3) As Abraham Ibn Ezra wrote in the 11th century:

If there appears something in the *Torah* which contradicts reason... then here one should seek for the solution in a figurative interpretation... the narrative of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for instance, can only be understood in a figurative sense.

In the words of 19th century scholar, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

Jewish scholarship has never regarded the Bible as a textbook for physical or even abstract doctrines. In this view the main emphasis of the Bible is always on the ethical and social structure and development of life on earth; that is, on the observance of laws through which the momentous events of our nation's histories are converted from abstract truths into concrete convictions. That is why Jewish scholarship regards the Bible as speaking consistently in "human language:" the Bible does not describe things in terms of objective truths known only to God, but in terms of human understanding, which is, after all, the basis for human language and expression.

For this reason, while not accepting the belief that Life originated from a single organism, Hirsch was undaunted should evolution prove true:

Even if this notion [evolution] were to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world... Judaism, in that case, would call upon its adherents to give even greater reverence than ever before to the one, sole God Who, in His boundless creative wisdom and eternal omnipotence, needed to bring into existence no more than one single, amorphous nucleus and one single law of "adaptation and heredity" in order to bring forth, from what seemed chaos but was in fact a very definite order, the infinite variety of species we know today, each with its unique characteristics that sets it apart from all creatures.

Then, there's the opinion of the illustrious Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British mandate for Palestine, who asserted an intimate congruity between evolutionary and *Kabbalistic* (Jewish mystical) viewpoints:

The theory of evolution (*hitpattehut*) is increasingly conquering the world at this time, and, more so than all other philosophical theories, conforms to the kabbalistic secrets of the world. Evolution, which proceeds on a path of ascendancy, provides an optimistic foundation for the world. How is it possible to despair at a time when we see that everything evolves and ascends? When we penetrate the inner meaning of ascending evolution, we find in it the divine element shining with absolute brilliance. It is precisely the Ein Sof *in actu* which manages to bring to realization that which is Ein Sof *in potentia*.
(4)

In this sense, evolution is *biological positivism*, increasingly reflecting through speciation, the *good* which Creation *is* according to *Genesis*. Whether intentionally evolutionary-in-thought or not, one cannot fail to notice that *Genesis*, like evolution, progresses from the inorganic— such as the hosts, sun, moon and the earth – to the organic – plants first, then, fishes, beasts and other animals, birthed from their ecological niches, in a phylogenetic order described as "after its kind." (5)

The culmination of this *prospective-positive-physical-progression* (*evolution* is certainly a cleaner word) is an animal with *conceptual* (i.e. spiritual) ability, possessing *dominion*. This animal is not restricted to unconscious, mere-natural impulses. This animal can project independent, conscious, materially-directed thought – the necessary evolutionary advance for creating technology and a civilization upon-and-over nature. Indeed, if God doesn't exist, such a *supra* or *super-natural* creature, would be forced to invent some alternate "Theory of Reality", just to explain its own self.

Whether viewed from a scientific or from a spiritual perspective, evolution is unavoidable. That's why, I think, Hirsch and Kook were both relatively unthreatened. In an untraditional way, evolution is, well, quite traditional.

If evolution does not threaten the integrity and value of the biblical narrative, then what, actually, *is* the threat of evolution? Evolution threatens the *belief* that the Bible is, or contains, *revelation*, the actual Voiced-Word of God.

The theory of evolution appears threatening to religionists, Christian or Jew, because it appears to reduce God, “Super-Nature” (lit. *Beyond Nature*), to a mere-earthly natural force. This would render the sudden intrusion of God onto the human scene— actively revealing Knowledge or *Torah*, or Self-revealing in the “ultimate-speciation” of Incarnation, not merely questionable, but highly improbable, perhaps irrational, and worse, *unnecessary*: the philosophical *coup de grace* for any God of Revelation. With evolution, all that appears necessary for revealing higher knowledge or spiritual acumen— human relative to the beast, or the cephalized nematode relative to the amoeba— is the *living process* itself. Evolution, once set in motion as a process “in the beginning” doesn’t seem to require God to “step in.” God is reduced to a pre-creational something-or-other. Revelation becomes impossible. Threatening indeed!

For the Jew, the loss of revelation means the loss of the *Torah’s* divinely-conferred status, and with it, the God-gravity under such Jewish practices, laws, and concepts as *kashruth*, *mitzvooth*, *shatnez*. It is even more threatening to our Sinai-forged *covenant* as a nation. Evolution may threaten revelation, but a threat to revelation threatens our very *identity*— our *sacred* identity under God: our very Jewish *lives*.

Add to this, revelation-assaults from modern biblical criticism, revealing the *Torah* as a composite— with multiple mini-origins, composed, collated, edited and added to, until it gained its current form— and you can understand why we are having a fall from revelation innocence. Many other religious groups have fallen alongside us.(6)

Is there a way to solidly— *ground*— Jewish identity without shrinking from scientific understandings such as evolution or modern biblical criticism? Can we ground the *Torah* as a revelation without self-consciously, if not dogmatically, and desperately, propping-up, bolstering, and cement-walling belief in revelation against doubt? Is there, perhaps, another way to frame the *Torah* as revelation, so it can be considered more than religionist propaganda, but, perhaps, *real*: scientific fact, verifiable-truth, or, at the barest minimum, *rational*? Can such an approach help heal, educate, and inspire not just contemporary Jews, but also Christians and Muslims, who, in some fashion, root themselves upon our self-understanding?

Yes. Ironically, the answer is *evolution*.

Now, when Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species*, this son of a minister was not blind to a blind spot in his proposed theory.(7)

You see, the *theory* of evolution – not whether evolution exists or not— but the theoretical mechanism by which it takes place, had, at its core, that evolution worked through *natural selection*. Through natural selection, certain traits provide an *advantage* in terms of greater

survivability, greater tendency to procreate, and therefore greater tendency to transmit these traits to subsequent generations.

However, according to “classic” Darwinism, natural selection took place on the level of the *individual organism*. Natural selection *did not* take place on the level of the group. For instance, there was no natural selection of *species* in classic Darwinism.

It is this aspect of evolutionary theory that produced Darwin’s blind spot: *altruism*, or what Jews and other religious people might call *morality*. Classic Darwinism could not explain how altruism such as “love of neighbor”, could have arisen biologically through evolution. Darwin’s mechanism could not explain this as long as selection took place exclusively on the individual. After all, morality is not just an individual phenomenon; as Jews know intimately, morality is also a group phenomenon, that of a *people*. Sadly, Darwin died, unable to accommodate altruism into his theoretical mechanism.

This classic blind spot is what makes the theory of evolution blind to the classic religious perspective. That religious people might rise up militantly against such a theory can be seen, more precisely, not as blind-fear of losing revelation. It is, more deeply, a fear of losing *moral responsibility*, which the concept “revelation by God” has traditionally defined. In this sense, religious antagonism to classic Darwinism is a furiously waved and serious *red flag*. Such an incomplete theory of evolution, without accommodating morality, can be distorted into a lethal *World View*, as it was in the Darwinian Socialist experiment of the *Third Reich*. “Conscience is a Jewish invention. Like circumcision, it mutilates man”, Hitler proclaimed.(8)

Does conscience weaken the nature of man and the human species; is it de-evolutionary? Or, does conscience strengthen us and is evolutionary? Does conscience arise naturally, woven into God’s “Design” for nature? Or, does moral conscience require God’s revelatory intrusion into nature, which is non-moral, immoral or a-moral without it? Is conscience a religionist invention, an artificial “device” whose purpose is to inhibit and control people? Or, does moral conscience have a *real* foundation: verifiably-true, worthy of pursuit and attainment, because it is *necessary* not just for *human* life, but also, all Life and Creation.

Today, the evolutionary theory we adhere to, while deeply rooted in classic Darwinism, has undergone certain critical modifications and improvements. Through *macro evolutionary* theory, Darwin’s blind spot has been illuminated; so much so, that even his religious father might have seen the light.

Today, we know that natural selection takes place on the individual organism, but not merely on the individual organism. Natural selection also takes place on the level of the biological groupings, such as families, species, and even clades.

Because natural selection is now understood to work upon groups, macro evolutionary theory provides a very solid mechanism for explaining altruism, so human beings need not be considered anti-natural with their picky spiritual-requirements, but *fully natural*. Our morality

can now be viewed an integral part of “God’s Design in nature,” so-to-speak, and does not require a revelation, some God-intrusion, in the classic religious sense.

Is covenant an evolutionary advance?

Today, we have every reason to believe – and minimally no reason to disbelieve– that the Asiatic subphylum we commonly call “Hebrew,” with its greater propensity for altruism, is not a religious fiction nor sentimental doctrine. We have every reason to believe that a subphylum, like the biblically-described Hebrews- could well have been a positive force of evolution not merely for itself, but for the entire human species, of which they are a part. A group though they are, they have *universal significance*.

After all, what *is* natural selection? It is the selection by “Nature” or, perhaps, the “Creator” , of certain favorable traits or qualities in an individual or group– including altruism– which pre-disposes them to greater survivability, greater ability to propagate and transmit these traits. Natural selection contributes to building a healthier, more vibrant, more altruistic (*righteous*) group, benefiting not merely the group, but, also the entire species, i.e. *humankind*.

The promise of real-earthly *salvation* and real-earthly *selection-advantage* are, in essence, one and the same! Think about it . . .

Is Israel’s *election*– our being *chosen* – natural *selection*? Might we have been selectively favored, chosen from amongst other groups at that time, for greater survivability, propagation and the transmission of such traits as altruism?

Unlike the Hittites, Amelkites, Canaanites, whose customs included baby-slaughter, bestiality, rapacious homosexuality– all of which are *de-generative* from a biological and evolutionary standpoint– were we selected, *chosen*? We were chosen because we didn’t violate biological integrity by milking mothers and boiling their newborn kids in it? Were we chosen because we didn’t consume both the mother bird and her eggs in one meal, which would certainly contribute to de-speciation?(9)

Were we differentially-selected by Nature or God, preferentially “chosen” (in the more God-Nature-personifying language of the Bible) over groups that feasted on disease-ridden carrion or trichina-infected pork, who tore living legs off of animals to snack on, and munched on insects and other animals that burrowed in filth?

Did the Hebrews possess group-traits that were more *generative* – conducive to greater survival, procreation and transmission of these traits? Were we therefore a force of human evolution or *salvation* within Creation?

Is it so far-fetched to believe that the Hebrews lived more harmoniously within the natural order – in *alignment* – in *covenant* – with the *Order* or *Commandment* of God-in-Nature, so we demonstrated propagative and evolutionary advantage over others, who, un-aligned to nature’s Order, eventually died from decay, were conquered, destroyed, or absorbed?

Is it stretching the bounds of reason to believe that the Hebrews came to understand, from experience, what would happen if they became de-generate, *abomination*, unaligned to God's laws-in-nature– that the land would “vomit them out”? Becoming retrogressive to the positive evolutionary thrust of Life, their eradication, or *extinction*, would be God's Will-in-nature– His “punishment” for their excess and un-alignment to His Order in the world?(10)

Might our ancestors have noticed that, as long as they maintained their covenantal-alignment to the generative boundaries within nature, that they were *favoured*– given selection advantage over other groups? Over time, might they have described this phenomenon in their peculiar One-God-based concepts such as “Providence”, “Grace”, *hisgacha klali* or *prati* (group or individual providence, quite non-classically Darwin)? Or, might they have viewed their favored-status as an attribute of God such as “loving-kindness” or “mercy”?(11) As the traditional blessing before the reading of the *Torah* goes:

*Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher
bachar banu m'kol ha-amim . . .*

Blessed art thou Lord [of nature] king of the world, who
chose us from amongst the other nations . . .

Are not Torah laws, such as *kashrut* or the injunction against intermingling species, designed to harmonize human life with nature? Aren't observances of nature's *Order* or God's *Commandment-in-nature*, continuously linked in the Bible to the flourishing of life and the advancement of this particular subphylum?(12) Is not the Hebrew incest taboo, different from those of other cultures, specifically formulated to create a propagative, prospective, generative force minimizing intra-breeding, let's say between brothers and sisters, as was the custom of other nations? (13)

Isn't the story of Abraham and Sarah– their lack-of-fertility, their seeking of a promising new “breeding ground”, the renewal of their generate (reproductive) natures, the promise of progeny as numerous as dust(14) – a *biocentric*, evolutionary promise, essentially the same as natural selection? Even if Abraham and Sarah did not exist, but, are mere legendary retrospective stories paradigmatic of Israel's origin, the story makes sense through the lens of macro evolutionary theory. And, if Abraham and Sarah *did* exist, it makes equal sense, since as Darwin originally instructed us, selection does takes place on the level of the individual organism. Individuals can be chosen too.

What the Bible records is *self-aware* human evolution, on the order of the individual, as well as the group. It is a self-aware human understanding of natural-selection– God's “preference” for a Life-directed *Order* or *Commandment* in nature, built into the design of earthly-life. Such a self-awareness of individuals, and of groups, is unthinkable, unless there is some kind of *revelational experience*, where the human being is both *in* nature, participating as creatures within it, and at the same time, *observing* nature, consciously, as if “from above”, i.e. *objectively*. Such an awareness implies that the human being has a *personal* relationship with nature. Only if such

awareness exists, could scriptures that *record* these experiences of an evolving world be composed in such a personal style. Indeed, based upon their experience, they might even relate to “Nature” as their “Creator.”

From an ontogenic standpoint, such an awareness would require that there exist some “higher level” to nature – “above” or “more advanced” – than the mere animal-natural, or, it could never be embodied within/as the organism. Minimally, if such a level doesn’t pre-exist, the *potential* for such actuality must exist, or causal-process is unthinkable.

Again, if God doesn’t exist, such a *supra* or *super-natural* creature, would be forced to invent some alternate “Theory of Reality”, just to explain its own self. So, even if Jews and Christians lose the written Bible or *Torah as* revelation – we have not lost revelation. Evolution restores it to us. But, thankfully, without the excessive Biblicism and idealism which, in this age of fundamentalism, we must all guard against.

It is not the *Torah as* revelation, which is the foundation of Israel. Biblical laws are not, themselves, revelation. Biblical laws are not themselves fundamentally religious. Jews are not fundamentally a religion.

We are a *people*. We are a group within the species *human*.

Our laws, our customs, our life-principles, are essentially *principles* derived from their experiences of *natural law*,⁽¹⁵⁾ or perhaps *God’s Law*, if you believe nature is a Creation of God, and therefore God is its Creator, The Nature of all natures, *Divine Nature*.

The originating stock our people arose from, were selected or chosen because of certain advantageous traits such as *altruism*, for the purpose of breeding a lineage of generative-goodness, not just for us, but, all humankind.

We Jews – as all human beings – are an instrument of a Nature, bigger than us, and we are evolving, continuously, in knowledge of That. We are evolving our physical bodies and our mental capacities, to house, *corporealize* this knowledge.

Covenant is not a religious assertion. It is a *fact of nature*, for the self-aware human being.

Covenant is an evolutionary advance.

Footnotes

1. *Pirke Avot*, 1:1

2. Information regarding Feinstein, Ibn Ezra and Hirsch, and general background regarding Judaism and evolution were obtained conveniently from: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_views_on_evolution#Classical\)_rabbinic_teachings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_views_on_evolution#Classical)_rabbinic_teachings) .

3. *Sifra Kedodhim, Patrasha 10; Sifre Numbers Piska 112*. See also, *Guide 1:26*

4. Kook, *Orot Hakodesh 11:537*, as appearing in “Three Twentieth-Century Jewish Responses to Evolutionary Theory,” *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003.

5. *Genesis 1:21, 24-5*

6. Whether Christianity, which affirms both the Mosaic revelation as well as that of Jesus, or whether Islam, that in addition to these also affirms that the “seal of the prophets” was Muhammad– whenever a revelation of the Divine is considered so absolute that it competes with Divinity Itself, the same problems emerge. This is hardly unknown in so-called “Eastern” religions, where excessive deification of religious orders have created many schisms through the centuries.

7. I am not an evolutionary biologist, not even a rank amateur, though I do have some knowledge from undergrad and medical school. The information for the following paragraphs on Darwinism were taken from: Gould, Stephen Jay, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass and London, England, 2002.

Also, with great thanks to my cousin Dr. Daniel McShea, an evolutionary biologist at Duke University for his guidance.

8. *Rauschnig, Hitler Speaks*, p. 220

9. *Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14: 21. Deuteronomy 22:7*

10. *Leviticus 20:22 ff*

11. *Exodus 34:7*

12. *Leviticus 18:25, 28, Exodus 23:25-26*

13. *Leviticus 18*

14. I personally do not believe Abraham and Sarah are historical figures that actually existed. Nevertheless, I believe there is truth in their story.

15. I realize I may be using the term “natural law” differently than it is usually used. My use of the term is more biological, more organic. Indeed, it is truly more natural, than a “natural philosophy” based upon the device of transcendent “Reason” as a more rational substitute for religious revelation.

The debate on whether *God is Nature* or not, has raged especially since Spinoza. The great *Chacham Zvi*, Zvi Hirsch Ashkenazy rescued Sephardi Rabbi David Nieto from the accusation of heresy by his constituency upon giving a Spinozist-inspired sermon. *Nature was the Creator* was the life-preserver the *Chacham Zvi* threw him.

I agree, provided we distinguish between Nature (the Nature of all natures, inclusive), and earthly-nature, i.e. upon earth or its cosmic environs, such as “our” universe.

See: Freehof, Solomon B. *Treasury of Responsa*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1963.

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