



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

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OHR SOMAYACH אוהר שומאך
TANENBAUM COLLEGE

22 May 1999

Issue #238

Parshat Behaaloscha (in Israel) / Naso (outside Israel)

JURASSIC JUDAISM

The following question is one of many "Ask the Rabbi" has received regarding the Torah's attitude toward the existence of dinosaurs:

Dear Rabbi,

A friend recently asked me how Orthodox Judaism deals with the issue of scientific proof of dinosaurs' existence. Is there an explanation to be found in the Torah? Your answer or explanation would be greatly appreciated as we are both teachers in a Hebrew day school and the children argue amongst themselves about whether dinosaurs did or did not really exist.

The following essay, part of Ohr Somayach's forthcoming "Torah and Nature" series, deals with this issue:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, strange artifacts began to be discovered. They were bones, bones of gigantic and monstrous creatures the like of which had never before been heard of. Sir Richard Owen, the renowned British paleontologist, coined the collective term Dinosauria, Greek for "terrible lizards."

Even the plant-eating dinosaurs were awe-inspiring. Triceratops, larger than an elephant, had a fearsome array of horns on its armored skull. The large sauropods, Brachiosaurus and Ultrasaurus, weighed more than eighty tons and stood as tall as a five-story building. But the meat-eating dinosaurs were downright terrifying. And none more so than the greatest predator ever to walk the earth. Twenty feet tall and forty feet long, with a massive head boasting six-inch fangs, Tyrannosaurus Rex, the "king tyrant lizard," was a fearsome beast indeed.

Dinosaurs are terrifying creatures. Fortunately, there aren't too many of them around nowadays, so there is little to fear. But some Jews do still walk around in fear of dinosaurs. However, this has nothing to do with the dinosaurs' extreme size or their tendency to crush or eat anything in their way. It has more to do with their very

existence. Paleontologists assert that dinosaurs lived hundreds of millions of years ago, while the Jewish calendar sets the age of the universe at under 6000 years plus six creation days.

I remember a young student in yeshiva once drawing me aside in a conspiratorial manner.

"Do you believe in dinosaurs?" he asked me in a hushed tone.

"No," I replied, surprised. "I believe in G-d."

I wasn't sure as to exactly which religion he belonged to (The New Age Temple of the Dinosaur Worshippers, perhaps?), but as far as I'm concerned, it's only G-d, and religious affairs, that are matters of belief. (And even with those, we're not talking about blind faith, but rather acknowledgment based on firm evidence and reasoning.)

Dinosaurs aren't a matter of belief. The fossils really exist; I own one myself. How one *interprets* these fossils is a different matter.

It has been suggested that G-d placed fossils in the ground as a test of our faith. There are two main difficulties with this explanation.

The first objection is that it's not a particularly good test. As we shall see, there is more than plenty of room for accepting the former existence of dinosaurs and the Divinity of Torah.

The second objection is that, without being overly presumptuous about G-d's ways, everything that we know about Him tells us that He doesn't act that way. G-d does not create evidence against His Torah and ask us to blind ourselves to it with a leap of faith. Rather, He presents us with evidence for His existence, and preserves free will by implanting within us a powerful ability to ignore that which is inconvenient.

This point is powerfully presented by Rav Elchanan Wasserman, *zatzal*. He raises the question of how a twelve year old girl or a thirteen year old boy can be commanded in the mitzvah of *emunah*, faith, which the brilliant Aristotle didn't even manage. His answer is that *emunah* just

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requires one to draw the logical conclusions from the evidence that surrounds us; if great minds slip up, that is because of personal agendas.

Nature points *towards* G-d, not away from Him. We are told, "Lift your eyes upon high and perceive Who created these!" (*Yeshayah 40:26*); and that "The heavens speak of G-d's glory, and the sky tells of His handiwork!" (*Tehillim 19:2*). Contemplating nature is not only a means to affirm G-d's existence, but also, as Rambam explains, the fulfillment of another mitzvah:

This honored and awesome G-d — it is a mitzvah to love Him and to fear Him... And how does one come to love and fear Him? When man contemplates the great wonders of His deeds and creations, and he perceives from them His boundless and infinite wisdom, instantly he loves and praises and gives glory, and he has a great desire to know G-d... And when he contemplates these matters, he instantly recoils and is in awe, and he knows that he is a small, dismal, lowly creature, standing with a minuscule weakness of intellect before the Perfect Wisdom... (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 2:1–2*).

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, in his famous work the *Kuzari (1:67)*, writes that "Heaven forbid that there should be anything in the Torah to contradict that which is manifest or proved." Likewise, Heaven forbid that there should be anything manifest or proved which would contradict anything in the Torah. If one is convinced that G-d wrote the Torah and created the world, then one should fear no scientific discovery. Conversely, if one is afraid of what the scientists will discover, then one is clearly not fully aware that everything discoverable was created by G-d.

But doesn't the apparent age of the dinosaurs contradict the Torah? Well, to claim so, one would have to claim to understand what the Torah actually means with its account of Creation. But this raises many matters of interpretation; for example, how do you measure a "day" when the sun is only created on the fourth one? How do you determine the flow of time when it varies depending on how near you are to objects of large gravitational mass? Since we have so little understanding of these matters, how can dinosaurs frighten us?

Far from being frightened by dinosaurs, Rabbi Yisrael Lifshitz, author of the *Tiferet Yisrael* commentary on the Mishna, received the news of fossil discoveries in the nineteenth century with delight. As he had undoubtedly expected, they confirmed everything that we knew all along. He writes:

...As regards the past, Rabbi Abahu states at the beginning of *Bereishet Rabbah* that the words "and it was evening, and it was morning" (in the apparent absence of the sun) indicate that "there was a series of epochs before then; the Holy One created worlds

and destroyed them, approving some and not others."

The Kabbalists expanded upon this statement and revealed that this process is repeated seven times, each *Shemita* achieving greater perfection than the last...They also tell us that we are now in the midst of the fourth of these great cycles of perfection...[Editor's note: Interestingly, many paleontologists also consider there to have been four eras: the Precambrian, Paleozoic, Mesozoic and Cenozoic.]

We are enabled to appreciate to the full the wonderful accuracy of our Holy Torah when we see that this secret doctrine, handed down by word of mouth for so long, and revealed to us by the Sages of the Kabbalah many centuries ago, has been borne out in the clearest possible way by the science of our generation.

The questing spirit of man, probing and delving into the recesses of the earth, in the Pyrenees, the Carpathians, the Rocky Mountains in America, and the Himalayas, has found them to be formed of mighty layers of rock lying upon one another in amazing and chaotic formations, explicable only in terms of revolutionary transformations of the earth's surface.

Probing still further, deep below the earth's surface, geologists have found four distinct layers of rock, and between the layers fossilized remains of creatures. Those in the lower layers are of monstrous size and structure, while those in the higher layers are progressively smaller in size but incomparably more refined in structure and form.

Furthermore, they found in Siberia in 1807, under the eternal ice of those regions, a monstrous type of elephant, some three or four times larger than those found today...

Similarly, fossilized remains of sea creatures have been found within the recesses of the highest mountains, and scientists have calculated that of every 78 species found in the earth, 48 are species that are no longer found in our present epoch.

We also know of the remains of an enormous creature found deep in the earth near Baltimore, seventeen feet long and eleven feet high. These have also been found in Europe, and have been given the name "mammoth." Another gigantic creature whose fossilized remains have been found is that which is called "Iguanodon," which stood fifteen feet high and measured ninety feet in length; from its internal structure, scientists have determined that it was herbivorous. Another creature is that which is called "Megalosaurus," which was slightly smaller than the Iguanodon, but which was meat-eating.

From all this, we can see that all that the Kabbalists have told us for so many years about the repeated destruction and renewal of the earth has found clear confirmation in our time.

- (Tiferet Yisrael, in Derush Ohr HaChayyim, found in Mishnayot Nezikin after Masechet Sanhedrin)

Huge and fearsome creatures that they were, dinosaurs can't possibly be a threat to the religious Jew. As G-d's creations, they are another example of His wondrous might. There's nothing to be afraid of.

Yiddle Riddle

Shimon Goldstein from Neve Yaakov <e-mail@withheld> wrote with the following riddle:

My friend told me the following Yiddle Riddle: Rabbi Yehuda Hachassid, in his famous will writes that nowadays a person should not have a *mechuten* (someone whose son married his daughter or *vice versa*) with the same name as he. What three people in the *Chumash* had a *mechuten* who had the same name as they?

Answer next week....

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

*Comments, quibbles, and reactions
concerning previous "Ask-the-Rabbi" features*

Re: CyberBranch:

Great page! (<http://www.ohrnet.org>) You should open a branch of Ohr Somayach in Ashdod.
Akiva Kotler <akiva@barak-online.net>

King James Bible that they presumably used) and it seems that the Americans changed it into "all the land" in order to make it apply to America, and not just to the Land of Israel. *Biveracha*.

Prof. Vivian (Haim) Halpern,

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Re: Liberty Through ALL the Land (Torah Weekly, Behar):

Regarding Ohrnet's "Torah Weekly" for Parshat *Behar*: I should like to point out that the inscription on the Liberty Bell, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land," is in fact a deliberate misquotation from Parshat *Behar*, although nobody seems to point this out. The Torah actually states "Proclaim liberty throughout the land" (and this is the version in the

Re: Adobe Acrobat Format:

My brother came home from Yeshiva in Israel with a stack of Ohrnets. My entire family is in love with them and that's the reason that I am now subscribing.

Chaya from Canada <Chaya@Email.Withheld>

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