

The Heresy of Nosson Slifkin

A young Orthodox rabbi is banned for his views on evolution



Jennie Rothenberg

It is a story that is making headlines nearly every day. Somewhere in the United States, at a school board meeting or in a state legislature, Christian fundamentalists are challenging Darwin's theory of evolution, be it by placing warning stickers on biology textbooks or insisting that counter-Darwinian theories be taught in science classes.

When asked by pollsters whether the first chapter of Genesis should be taken literally, some 50 percent of Christian Americans consistently answer "yes." Many in this group are vocal advocates of "intelligent design" theory, which posits that an intelligent Being intervened in the development of life on earth, creating irreducibly complex species that could not have evolved through natural means. This controversial movement wields enormous influence: As governor of Texas, George W. Bush favored teaching intelligent design in schools, and more recently as president, he endorsed students' being "exposed to different ideas" about the development of life.

Although the supporters of intelligent design are overwhelmingly Protestant, the movement has also made inroads in the Catholic Church. In a recent New York Times op-ed piece, Christoph Schönborn, the Archbishop of Vienna and an influential theologian, declared that evolution should be challenged in

schools, alarming the many American Catholic educators who see evolution as the only well-founded theory of how life developed on earth.

American Jewish organizations have traditionally championed Darwinism, but a small group of outspoken Jews, including scholar David Klinghoffer and Rabbi Daniel Lapin are now calling for their coreligionists to take a more serious look at intelligent design. At the same time, a debate over evolution is raging in the ultra-Orthodox world where Darwin's mid-19th century theory has taken center stage at the largest gatherings and become the focus of dozens of blogs.

In the eye of this storm is a popular 30-year-old Orthodox rabbi named Nosson Slifkin. Known to his admirers as the "Zoo Rabbi," he has a penchant for elucidating the fine points of Torah while wrestling with a crocodile or riding on the back of an African elephant. A serious Torah scholar, he is also the author of "The Torah Universe," a series of unusually lucid volumes about science and religion. His writings were on the shelves of yeshivas the world over until earlier this year, when observant Jews discovered that his books had been banned.

I. Lessons from the Lion

It's raining when I arrive at the Turtle Back Zoo in West Orange, New Jersey. But for a lone peacock, wailing like a cat, people and animals seem to be hiding from the midday shower. I find Rabbi Nosson Slifkin in the Science Center, waiting for a busload of teenagers who are enrolled in a Yeshiva University high school program.

Slifkin is a pale, slender man whose black hat and coat seem a size too large for his boyish frame. "Welcome to the Turtle Back Zoo!" he calls out in his lilt-ing northern English accent as the Science Center fills with teenagers. The students, clothed in long denim skirts and sporty T-shirts, smile at one another when they hear his inflection and sense his energy. "Zoology is the science of animals. Zoo Torah is the Torah of animals," he continues, radiating his love of the subject. "We can draw inspiration from the beauty, the wonder, of the animal kingdom."

In spite of his rabbinic attire and his ginger-colored beard, it is easy to imagine Slifkin as the incorrigible grade school science nerd he once was. As an Orthodox child growing up in Manchester, England, he devoured books on zoology and was allowed to keep any number of creeping and crawling pets. His father, a physicist, encouraged his youngest son's obsession until a giant lizard escaped into his wife's bed. By the end of high school, Slifkin had abandoned his childhood dream of becoming a zookeeper. Rather than following his four older siblings, all of whom chose careers in science, he moved to Israel and enrolled in a rabbinic program.

As a yeshiva student, his love of animals never waned, and after a few years, he stumbled upon his unique calling: teaching Torah in a zoo. He launched his first program at the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem, where it was an instant success with Orthodox families. He has

since toured the world as the Zoo Rabbi, edifying audiences at zoos and traveling to Kenya, where he fulfilled his lifelong Dr. Doolittle-ish dream of riding on the back of a giant tortoise.

Now, at the Turtle Back Zoo, Slifkin introduces his young audience to a skunk, an owl and a long lizard with a darting, forked tongue. He cradles a baby alligator in his arms and casually wraps a boa constrictor around his neck. He pauses to discuss a Talmudic teaching that each animal was put on earth to embody a certain primordial trait. "What are we meant to learn from the lion?" he asks. Someone offers, "Courage," and Slifkin shakes his head. "No, no. That's *The Wizard of Oz*. The Talmud says we should be as powerful as a lion to serve God." Wryly, he asks what this means. "Lift weights, build muscle?"

His playful tone gives way to seriousness as he settles into his moral lesson. "Big cats are aggressive by nature: tigers, leopards, jaguars, lynxes, pumas, cheetahs," he explains. "They can't even get along well with each other. Only the lion can control its inclinations and get along well with other lions in the pride. So the Torah shows us that the real test of power is not brute strength. It's self-control—controlling your emotions, your temper, your unnecessary fear."

It is a singular presentation, blending moral lessons from Jewish scripture with elements of cable television's Animal Planet. The students gasp and squeal at all the right places, and even the non-Jewish staff members are captivated. One zookeeper, a matronly African American woman, stands by my side, murmuring, "Isn't he wonderful?"

II. A Single, Amorphous Nucleus

When Nosson Slifkin looks at the animal kingdom, he sees what scientists see: a complex web of life and death governed by seemingly immutable laws. The



PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL ARON

Rabbi Nosson Slifkin, seen here during a "Zoo Torah" tour of the Los Angeles Zoo, defends evolution. "God works through nature," he says.

difference is that Slifkin peers into this world through the lens of religion. Animals, to him, are clues dropped onto earth by a wise Creator; it is up to human beings to uncover what the symbols actually mean.

His study of animals has forced him to confront a number of theological puzzles, not the least of which is the question of how life developed on earth. Persuaded by fossil records—which offer straightforward evidence that the world is millions of years old and that simple, primordial creatures evolved into increasingly complex life forms—he found evolution to be the most plausible explanation.

Slifkin knew that there were stringent Orthodox rabbis who found the theory unacceptable; it seemed to contradict the biblical pronouncement, “God created man in His image.” But the more Slifkin probed into science and Judaism, the more firmly he believed that there was no contradiction. “When God created man, he did not pull the design out of the hat,” Slifkin writes in *Nature’s Song*, the second book in his “Torah Universe” series. “He used all the elements that had been created so far as the palette. The spiritual essence of all the stars, plants and animals provided the material for the goal of creation.”

Looking into Jewish history, Slifkin found that two world-renowned Orthodox rabbis who had lived during Darwin’s time also found evolution unobjectionable. Abraham Isaac Kook, who would become the first chief rabbi of Israel, reminded Jews that the Torah was filled with mysteries. The prominent 19th-century rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch took this acceptance one step further. If natural selection were to prove correct, he wrote in 1873, “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, out of what seemed to be chaos but was in fact a very definite order, the infinite variety of species we know today.”



JULIUS SCHNOOR VON CAROLSFELD ORIGINALLY PRINTED IN DAS BUCH DER BÜCHER IN BILDEN

Day One: In these woodcuts, a 19th-century Lutheran artist depicts creation as many fundamentalist Christians envision it: a week-long process carried out by a Greek-robed, anthropomorphic God.

As Hirsch did, Slifkin sees evolution as an elegant theory for describing how the Divine operates in the world. “There’s always been a very strong idea in Judaism that God uses miracles as little as possible,” he says. “As much as possible He works through nature.” For this reason, Slifkin rejects intelligent design theory. He offers the analogy of a faulty computer program: “When Microsoft has to issue a patch for an upgrade to Windows, it’s because Windows is not good enough. Microsoft has to interfere.”

Slifkin began writing his “Torah Universe” series after meeting countless young Jews who had no idea that Hirsch, or any other respected Orthodox leader, had ever given his blessings to

Darwinism. Their rabbis had simply dismissed natural selection as a false doctrine, assuring their students that Elijah the Prophet would return with the Messiah to resolve all contradictions. Some sought to quiet their students’ restless minds with the Yiddish proverb, *Fun a kasha shtarbt man nisht*—no one ever starved to death from an unanswered question.

III. The Heretic

It was a September morning in 2004, midway between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when Slifkin’s phone rang. He was at home in Ramat Beit Shemesh, the mostly English-speaking Jerusalem suburb where he lived with his then-pregnant wife, Tali, their two-year-old daughter, Tikvah, and a backyard menagerie of fish, lizards, rabbits and exotic birds. The voice on the other end belonged to a rabbi from the religious enclave of Bnai Brak, and he was calling to deliver an ultimatum.

He informed Slifkin that four prestigious rabbis had opened his “Torah Universe” series and found three of its four books to contain heresy. Two of the volumes centered on animal-related issues: *The Camel, the Hare and the Hyrax* discussed the kosher traits of animals that do not appear in the Torah, while *Mysterious Creatures* debunked the existence of mythical beasts—including mermaids, phoenixes and unicorns—that are discussed in the Talmud. The rabbis were especially troubled by *The Science of Torah*, a book that focused on Darwinism and the age of the universe. The man on the phone informed Slifkin that he had until the end of the day to retract his books. If he didn’t, the charge would be made public and other prominent rabbis would join the campaign against him.

"I was astonished and shaken at all this," Slifkin later wrote. "First of all, as far as I was aware, none of these three books even contained any significant novel points—they are simply based on the writings of Rambam, Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam, Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Rav Dessler, etc. They were not, of course, the mainstream Torah viewpoints which are usually presented, but they were nevertheless fully 'kosher' views which were necessary for the intended audience of my books—people who have been dissatisfied with normative approaches, and many of whom experience crises of faith. Furthermore, everything I wrote was carefully checked by many distinguished Torah scholars, who approved it all."

Within the next few hours, Slifkin received four faxed letters. Their authors represented both the Israeli and American ultra-Orthodox communities: Rabbi Elya Ber Wachtfogel and Rabbi Yitzchok Sheiner were yeshiva leaders in New York, while the others, Rabbi Michael Lefkowitz and Rabbi Elya Weintraub, were among the leaders of the Bnai Brak community. Slifkin spent the rest of that day trying to arrange discussions with each of them, hoping to find out exactly which of his statements had caused such fury. None would agree to discuss the matter with him. Three days later, hours before Kol Nidre, the rabbis' condemnations were posted on synagogue walls in Slifkin's neighborhood.

After the High Holidays, the four rabbis launched a full-scale campaign against Slifkin's books, photocopying the pages they found most radical and distributing them to leading Orthodox figures around the world. Some of the recipients were not fluent in English; for their benefit, the Brooklyn-based Rabbi Sheiner wrote a

letter in Hebrew confirming that Slifkin's books were "hair-raising to read.... He believes that the world is millions of years old—all nonsense!—and many other things that should not be heard and certainly not believed."

By January, 23 rabbis had signed a full-fledged ban, which was pasted on walls throughout the ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood of Mea Shearim. "The books written by Nosson



JULIUS SCHNOOR VON CAROLSFELD ORIGINALLY PRINTED IN DAS BUCH DER BÜCHER IN BILDEN

Day Two: The sea is separated from the earth's atmosphere.

Slifkin present a great stumbling block to the reader," the ban declared. "They are full of heresy, twist and misrepresent the words of our sages and ridicule the foundations of our *emunah* [faith]. Heaven forbid!... I therefore declare that these books should be distanced and it is forbidden to read, own or distribute them."

Modern-day Judaism has no Temple, no High Court, no centralized authority with the power of the Vatican; theoretically, any rabbi in the world can place a ban on anyone else. But there are a few Torah scholars whose opinions are sought in virtually all crucial legal matters, and one of these, the Jerusalem rabbi Yosef Sholom Elyashiv, signed the Slifkin ban.

As a result of Elyashiv's influence, Slifkin faced serious repercussions. His

publisher, the religious Targum Press, halted publication of the books, and countless religious bookstores removed the copies that were still on their shelves. The ArtScroll book imprint, whose Jewish books are standard edition at most English speaking yeshivas, removed Slifkin's name from the second printing of a text that he had helped to translate. Many schools were afraid to ask him to speak and one of the seminaries where he taught asked him to resign.

But if the ban was intended to draw interest away from Slifkin's ideas, it had the opposite effect. Within a few days, his out-of-print book was selling at used book stores for four times its original price of \$24.95. Unprompted by the author, an international group calling itself Jews For A Re-Evaluation Of The Rabbi Nosson Slifkin Ban wrote a counter-petition, urging the 23 signatories to change their minds. Hundreds of outraged students protested the ban in long Internet postings, and

numerous ultra-Orthodox rabbis, including Rabbi Aryeh Carmell of the Jerusalem Academy, penned scholarly essays in Slifkin's defense. Rabbi Tzvi Hersch Weinreb, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, threw his support behind Slifkin, telling *The Forward* that Slifkin had used "impeccable traditional Jewish sources to back up his views."

Some of the rabbis who had written public endorsements for Slifkin's books saw the ban as an attack on their own judgment. "This author has his name on every one of the banned books," wrote Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein in a public statement. "I am as supportive of the thrust of those books as when I first wrote those approbations.... I am also proud to be in the company of many

talmidei chachamim [wise scholars] who did not sign the letter, and of more *chaverim* [friends] than I could count who think the same way.”

Slifkin himself was unsure how to handle this maelstrom of condemnation and praise. At first, he added a “Controversy” section to his web site hoping to dispel rumors and place the photocopied passages in context. After a few weeks, he removed it, then posted it again after several months. One prominent rabbi, Aharon Feldman of Baltimore’s Ner Israel Yeshiva, condemned Slifkin for defending himself. In a widely circulated email, Feldman lamented that Slifkin and his supporters had made the ban’s signers look like simple-minded fools.

“As a result,” wrote Feldman, who did not sign the ban, “many thoughtful, observant Jews were beset by a crisis of confidence in the judgment of the signatories. This was an extremely vital crisis since these authorities constitute some of the greatest Torah leaders of our generation, authorities upon whom all of the Jewish people rely for their most serious decisions. More important, it threatened to make any of their future signatures on public announcements questionable. The irony of it all is that the books, which had originally been written to defend the honor of Torah, became one of the most potent vehicles in our times for weakening the authority of Torah.”

None of the rabbis who signed the ban was willing to speak with me, but I reached Feldman this summer while he was vacationing in Israel. I asked him to explain how the ban’s signers differ from fundamentalist Christians: Both groups believe that Darwinism is heretical and that the world is 6,000 years old. Feldman, who speaks English with strong Yiddish inflections, replied that he was not familiar with Christian

ideas but was reasonably sure that they were nothing like Jewish ones. “We rarely can converge with Christians on anything,” he said, “so I doubt we agree with them on this matter.”

IV. The Dragon and the Crocodile

At Dinosaur Adventure Land—a museum and theme park built on two acres behind a row of auto repair shops in



JULIUS SCHNOOR VON CAROLSFELD ORIGINALLY PRINTED IN DAS BUCH DER BÜCHER IN BILDEN
Day Three: The earth is commanded to sprout plants and trees.

Pensacola, Florida—the differences between Jewish and Christian creationism become clear. Christian-themed rides are interspersed with large fiberglass dinosaur statues, and a roaring tyrannosaurus rex head hangs above the entrance of the indoor museum. But instead of exploring the Jurassic and Cretaceous eras, the museum depicts dinosaurs as coexisting with human beings.

“Nearly all of the museums in the country are teaching that dinosaurs lived millions of years ago,” says Dinosaur Adventure Land founder Kent Hovind, a former high school science teacher and one of America’s best-known creationists. “But the Bible teaches clearly, and I believe thoroughly, that the earth was created in six literal days, and nothing

died until Adam sinned.” To Hovind’s mind the fossil record, which places dinosaur extinction at 65,000,000 B.C.E., is “totally bogus and certainly contrary to scripture.”

The true story, he insists, is to be found right on the pages of the King James Bible. “The word dinosaur was not invented until 1841,” Hovind explains. “For most of human history, the same animals were called dragons, and dragons are mentioned in the Bible 34 times. Man has exterminated most of them, but there are probably a few still around, which is why there are so many things like the Loch Ness monster.”

Even in fundamentalist Christian circles, some of Hovind’s ideas are considered a tad extreme. A group called Answers in Genesis, for instance, has asked Hovind to stop claiming that if evolutionary theory were correct, apes would be having human babies today. Still, like virtually all Christians who identify as fundamentalists, Answers

in Genesis, the world’s largest creationist ministry, agrees with Hovind’s basic position. The group is in the process of launching its own Creation Museum in the Cincinnati area; one of its exhibits will show a tyrannosaurus rex invading the Garden of Eden in punishment for Adam’s sin. In April, meanwhile, an organization called the Creation Truth Foundation opened a high-tech museum in the Ozark Mountains: It, too, aims to “to present dinosaurs from a different perspective.”

To an Orthodox Jew, creationist or otherwise, Hovind’s claims about dragons cannot be taken seriously. Jews read Genesis in Hebrew, not in English translation. The Hebrew word *tanin*, which King James’s translators rendered as “dragon,” actually means “snake” or “crocodile”—a fact that would seem to explain why the Bible

shows them lurking in the rushes and swimming through Pharaoh's rivers.

There is a second, even more basic difference between Jewish and fundamentalist Christian traditions: Jews do not read the Torah literally; they filter its message through the Talmud, the Midrash and centuries of rabbinic commentary. This is because Orthodox Jews believe that Moses came down from Mount Sinai bearing both a written Torah and an oral law. Unlike the fundamentalist Christian debate, which is based on the Bible exclusively, the Jewish debate over evolution and the age of the universe is a whirlwind of ideas drawn from the Talmud and rabbinic tradition.

Rabbis who, for example, believe in a 6,000 year-old universe, do not make this claim based on the Torah alone. Instead, they point to a tractate in the fifth-century Babylonian Talmud that divides the history of time into three 2,000-year periods. "Our Sages have explicitly taught that the world is no more than 6,000 years old!" writes Moshe Sternbuch, head rabbi at Jerusalem's Rosh HaAyin Yeshiva, in an essay penned shortly after the Slifkin ban. "[Scientists] want to refute the words of our Sages, and undermine the faith that exists among the Jewish people."

Those who believe in evolution can point to equally compelling source material. Evolutionary biologists were not the first to conclude that the universe was older than the Bible might suggest. Even in Talmudic times, rabbis referred to the first chapter of Genesis as a storehouse of hidden mysteries, not a word-for-word account of how the universe began. Moses

Maimonides, the formidable 12th century Jewish scholar, alludes to this in his *Guide for the Perplexed* and encourages his worldly Sephardic readers to view Genesis in a more scientific light:

"It is impossible to give a full account of the Creation to man.... It has

take it in a different sense.... It is therefore right to abstain and refrain from examining this subject superficially and unscientifically."

In statements like these, Maimonides (whose own teachings were banned for several generations by French rabbis)

gave religious Jews the latitude to reconcile Genesis with the scientific findings of their own eras. In modern times, Slifkin and other Orthodox scholars have sought to bridge the 15 billion years of modern cosmology with the 6,000 years of the Torah. Gerald Schroeder, an MIT-trained nuclear physicist, used a complex formula involving relativity, quark confinement and gamma rays to develop the theory that time flowed differently during the six days of creation. The late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan took a different route and arrived at much the same conclusion: He drew on an ancient text called *Sefer HaTemunah*, which teaches that other creations preceded Adam.

Unlike Slifkin, neither Schroeder nor Kaplan was published by a stringently religious press, and largely for this reason, their work did not cause widespread upheaval. On the contrary, the Orthodox network Aish HaTorah promotes Schroeder's theory as a "rigorously intellectual means of testing the rational basis for belief in Judaism."

Slifkin is also a shade more radical than Kaplan or Schroeder, neither of whom questioned the actual sequence of Genesis.

In the Biblical account, plants sprout on the third day, before sun, moon and stars are created on the fourth. Birds and fish emerge on the fifth day, preceding the land animals that appear one day later.



JULIUS SCHNOOR VON CAROLSFELD ORIGINALLY PRINTED IN DAS BUCH DER BÜCHER IN BILDEN
Day Four: The sun, moon, planets and stars are brought forth.



JULIUS SCHNOOR VON CAROLSFELD ORIGINALLY PRINTED IN DAS BUCH DER BÜCHER IN BILDEN
Day Five: Flying and swimming creatures, including sea monsters, emerge on the fifth day.

been treated in metaphors in order that the uneducated may comprehend it according to the measure of their faculties and the feebleness of their apprehension, while educated persons may

A Leisurely Critic: Intelligent Design's David Berlinski

Unlike the majority of Jewish scientists, David Berlinski, a self-described non-observant Jew, refuses to accept the theory of evolution. Berlinski is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, a Seattle-based think tank that funds research, sponsors conferences and briefs members of Congress, all in the name of intelligent design, a counter-Darwinian theory positing that living species were intentionally and individually formed. The Center's rallying cry of "Teach the Controversy" has been taken up by the millions of fundamentalist Christians who use its resources to challenge Darwinism in schools across the United States.

Berlinski, a mathematician, began questioning evolution long before the Center for Science and Culture came into existence in 1996. "I was at Princeton in the 60s, and a few of us were talking about Darwin's theories," he says. "One day I just smacked my forehead and said, 'This stuff doesn't make any sense to me!'" According to Berlinski, his most famous mathematical critique of Darwinism, which was coauthored by the late French scientist Marcel Schützenberger, began with some "back-of-the-envelope" calculations based on the evolutionary claim that whales evolved from a cow-like land mammal. "I discovered that there are something like 50,000 separate changes that really would have to take place before a creature could live underwater," he says.

In scientific circles, Berlinski is known as a rather eccentric man who has on different occasions irked both evolutionary biologists and creationists. He has written six articles for the Jewish journal *Commentary*, each of which provoked a storm of letters. Responding to his 1996 article "The Deniable Darwin," Rabbi Daniel Lapin, founder of the conservative Jewish-Christian alliance Toward Tradition, thanked *Commentary* for promoting Berlinski's unorthodox ideas. "Publishing David Berlinski's 'The Deniable Darwin' was an act of great intellectual courage," Rabbi Lapin wrote. "You have fired a shot in what is becoming a great moral revolution, and it will be heard around the world."

Lapin was in the minority, however; the majority of the responses came from leading evolutionary biologists who had written in to refute Berlinski's theories. "In the end, I am afraid that Mr. Berlinski's criticisms do not fare any better than those of other anti-evolutionists," wrote H. Allen Orr of the University of Rochester. The preeminent mathematician Martin Gardner complained that Berlinski, in his eagerness to dismantle evolution, offered no alternative explanation for life on earth: "It is as if

someone wrote an article blasting evidence for the earth's roundness but refused to say what shape he thought it was."

Berlinski brushes aside these criticisms. "My goal as I see it is not to construct a new theory," he says. "I am not an active researcher. I don't have a laboratory. I do not teach at a university. I have the leisure of being a critic. Together with that leisure is what I hope most people will understand is a necessary degree of irresponsibility."

In 2002, Berlinski surprised many of his detractors by writing another article for *Commentary*, this time questioning the leading theorists of the intelligent design movement. He congratulated them for their "marvelous display of cheekiness," their self-promoting efforts to wedge their theories into public schools. But he went on to dismantle the work of Michael Behe and William Demski, the two most prominent intelligent design scientists. He called Behe's theory of irreducible complexity "clear but not conclusive" and challenged Demski's argument that a Shakespearean sonnet could not have been written by chance. Like Berlinski, both of these scientists are senior fellows at the Discovery Institute; unlike Berlinski, they are religious Christians who may ultimately hope to prove that the designer of the universe is the biblical God.

Berlinski is elusive when it comes to his own theological worldview. He speaks with pride of his father, the preeminent Jewish composer Herman Berlinski. "He wasn't a religious Jew either, but he was an extremely devoted Jew," the younger Berlinski says. He observes no Jewish holidays or rituals, but he praises the Bible as "one of the masterpieces of world literature." When asked whether intelligent design might just as easily validate the Native American Great Spirit as the God of Genesis, he scoffs at the suggestion. "I have no interest in Tonto," he says.

Berlinski is untroubled by the political marriage between fundamentalist Christianity and intelligent design. "In 10 million years, there's no chance the United States is going to become a fundamentalist Christian state," he explodes. "Even if this is true, my goodness, prayer and Bible reading in school amount to trivialities in our rich, free, prosperous society. If anything, the improvement would be considerable."

As for his own involvement with the Discovery Institute, Berlinski says, "I cannot control, nor do I care, what people do with my research. I don't lose a minute's sleep over it."—*Jennie Rothenberg*

In *The Science of the Torah*, Slifkin points out, “Both of these sequences contradict scientific evidence concerning the history of the universe, which shows that the sun preceded plant life, and that animals preceded birds.”

Slifkin also rejects another popular religious explanation that has been put forth by both Christian and Jewish creationists in an effort to explain away evolution: God intended to test human faith by making the world look old, planting deceptive fossils in the ground. “Everything we have been told about God indicates that He doesn’t act that way,” Slifkin writes. “God does not create evidence against His Torah and ask us to blind ourselves to it with an absurd leap of faith.... Nature points towards God, not away from Him.”

Slifkin presents his own solution, one based on the writings of the 20th century Torah scholar Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler. The six “days,” he writes, represent a timeless spiritual hierarchy, not a series of chronological events. Fish and birds appear together because they have a similar essence: Both are able to glide in all directions through their respective media of water and air. Land animals emerge one step later in Genesis; they represent a less fluid, more limited state of existence. “In the higher worlds the dimension of time does not exist,” writes Slifkin. “We might speak of them as ‘eternal,’ but they are really outside of time altogether.”

V. Bully for Brontosaurus

On the gritty northern end of Manhattan’s Amsterdam Avenue, past a series of Dominican bodegas and discount clothing shops, clusters of kippah-wearing college boys stream in and out of the 18-story Belfer Hall. At its entrance,

alongside flags of Israel, New York and the United States, a fourth banner waves—it bears the Yeshiva University insignia, a shield inscribed with the motto *Torah U’Madda*: Torah and Science.

On this Modern Orthodox campus, Slifkin’s ideas are seen as well within the mainstream of Orthodox thought. Long before the controversy erupted, Yeshiva University was among the Zoo Rabbi’s most enthusiastic supporters, hosting his



JULIUS SCHNOOR VON CAROLSFELD ORIGINALLY PRINTED IN DAS BUCH DER BÜCHER IN BILDEN

Day Six: Land animals are created, and a distinctly European Adam and Eve are instructed to rule “over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

lectures and sending students to his tours at the Bronx Zoo. Since January, the University has carried on as though the ban had never been issued, hosting the presentation I attended at Turtle Back Zoo and teaching evolution in all of its first-year biology classes.

Professor Carl Feit, who heads Yeshiva’s biology department, first learned of the Slifkin ban when his students began coming to class with copies of *The Science of Torah*, asking him, “What do you think of the Zoo Rabbi?” Feit, who is both an immunologist and an Orthodox rabbi, has a great deal in common with Slifkin. He, too, has made it a personal mission to show questioning young Jews that Genesis does not preclude evolutionary

theory. At a certain point in each of his introductory biology classes, after the students have grasped the scientific foundation of evolution, he takes off his white lab coat and turns to theological matters. “I present a variety of Jewish sources I’ve culled over the years,” he says, “texts that are relevant to the issue of evolution. I don’t indoctrinate the students. I just give them this reading material, and we go through it in the original Hebrew.”

Under Feit’s guidance, all Yeshiva University freshmen are now taking part in a campus-wide program centered on *Bully for Brontosaurus*, a book by the late Jewish evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould. “I think it’s very important that rational and knowledgeable Jewish voices be part of any public debate, particularly those that set public policy in America,” says Feit. “In my experience, Christians find our perspective enlightening—not because it’s a Jewish point of view but because it’s another approach that comes from a tradition equally concerned with the sanctity of life.”

In Feit’s opinion, rabbis who take Genesis literally are misreading the Jewish texts. “For want of a better word, this kind of ‘Jewish creationism’ sprouted after World War II in the Western World. A large part of it is that the observant Jewish community couldn’t see itself as being less religious than the Christians. And if the Christians are opposed to evolution, then obviously religious Jews must be opposed to it as well. Therefore they constructed a Jewish creationism that is not in any way consistent with our tradition.”

I ask Rabbi Avi Shafran to explain how this aversion to science has crept into a religion that prides itself on endless inquiry. Shafran is the American

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public relations director for Agudath Israel, the world's largest ultra-Orthodox coalition. If the vastly divergent ultra-Orthodox community has a spokesperson, Shafran comes closest to filling that role. Shafran responds thoughtfully. In the past, he acknowledges, it was perfectly acceptable for a great rabbi like Samson Raphael Hirsch to embrace science. This approach, he adds, "has generally fallen into disfavor—largely, I think, because science in recent times has become a religion of its own, a secular one."

Shafran's words allude to the fact that some of the most visible contemporary scientists, most notably the leading evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, have openly denounced religion. Dawkins has published articles entitled "Religion's Misguided Missiles" and "The Improbability of God."

Adds Shafran, "For better or for worse—worse, I'd say—society has set science up as the enemy of religious thought. And so many Orthodox Jewish leaders have deemphasized, if not outright rejected, the study of the sciences as a means of religious devotion."

VI. The Center of the World

The students at the Turtle Back Zoo cannot resist luring their lecture onto dangerous terrain as soon as he opens the floor to questions. As Internet-savvy teenagers, they are more than aware that their lecturer is shrouded in controversy. "What do you think about Darwin's theory of evolution?" one girl inquires, even though Slifkin has never mentioned the subject during his presentation.

The rabbi looks a bit startled but

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So what exactly does it take to qualify for "The Axis of Evil?"



For over two years, Sudanese government forces and Arab militias have been committing atrocity crimes against the black-African population of Darfur. To date more than 200,000 civilians have died from violence, disease and malnutrition, and at least 5000 more are still dying each month.

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answers the question swiftly. "There's no real issue with evolution," he explains. "What sets us apart from apes is our spiritual component, our ability to make moral choices, to form a relationship with God. Where our bodies came from? That's pretty much irrelevant."

A boy in an orange kippah picks up where his classmate left off. "So...during the six days of creation, each day was more than just a day, right?"

This time, Slifkin deflects the question altogether. "All of these answers are in my book *The Science of Torah*, which," he adds drily, "can be found on eBay for about \$200."

Slifkin, who continues to respectfully defy the ban, does not mention that he is planning to release an expanded edition of *The Science of Torah*. It will be available within the next year from Yashar Books, an American publisher that is already featuring his two other banned books on its web site.

I ask Yashar's director, Rabbi Gil Student, about his decision to carry Slifkin's work. "When he approached me, I contacted a number of rabbis and asked them whether they wanted the books to be available to their communities," Student says. "With full knowledge of the ban, very many of them said yes. That pretty much prompted my decision. After that, I spoke with many, many more rabbis, ultra-Orthodox as well as Modern Orthodox. While nobody wants to go on the record, they gave their full approval to what I was doing."

In the end, a number of observers agree that the Slifkin controversy has very little to do with science, evolution or the age of the universe. The ban represents a rift between two different factions of ultra-Orthodox Jewry. One looks backward to the days when fatherly rabbis in European shtetls could steer their followers away from troubling foreign ideas. The other resigns itself to a

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world where floods of information from television and the Internet might seep into even the most insular Orthodox communities. Slifkin's books were written for disoriented Jews who are seeking a new center in an increasingly decentralized world; the rabbis who signed the ban are holding fast to an old center that they believe science and secular society are threatening to pull apart.

One New York rabbi who has inside knowledge of the Slifkin ban tells me that it represents a major "breaking point" within ultra-Orthodox society. "Over the past 15 years, the rabbis of Bnai Brak and the more open American ultra-Orthodox rabbis have been split on a number of important policy decisions," says the rabbi, who asks to remain unnamed. "The Slifkin ban is a huge break. It's a kind of power struggle, and those who didn't sign the ban are outraged right now. I'm talking about rabbis with long white beards who are furious about it." Slifkin's views, according to this rabbi, are shared by countless figures within the ultra-Orthodox community. "He's saying out loud what a lot of people have been talking about quietly all along. To those people, he's a kind of figurehead."

This rabbi expects the debate within the ultra-Orthodox community to rage on for many years. The ultra-Orthodox leaders who support Slifkin will continue voicing their opinions—forcefully and articulately, but always in private. "They'll say nothing out loud," the rabbi tells me. "They'll speak and they'll argue, they'll talk to a lot of people everywhere they go. But they won't discuss these things in public." He hesitates and then adds, "They don't want their world to fall apart." ●

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