

Parallel Thinking Part 20: The Vastness of the Cosmos – Could Alien Life Exist?

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As the English author Douglas Adams (d. 2001) noted in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: "Space is big. Really big. You just won't believe how vastly hugely mind bogglingly big it is. I mean you may think

it's a long way down the road to the chemist's, but that's just peanuts to space".

As one gazes up at the night sky into the deep dark cosmos, one may wonder whether there is an intelligent being in some far off planet gazing back at us and wondering the same thing. Many attempts have been made to detect intelligent life outside our own solar system. In the early 1970s, NASA funded a project to analyse radio signals from outer space in the hope of discovering alien radio signatures. Ohio State University became famous on 15 August 1977 for discovering a particularly strong irregular radio signal, which became known as the "Wow!" signal. The signal has not been found since and its source cannot be verified.

More recently, since 2009 the Kepler Observatory has been searching for Earth-like planets outside our solar system. By the middle of May 2016, NASA announced that the Kepler mission had verified 1,284 new planets. Around half could be rocky planets and nine of these had the potential to support life.

Some may assume that the notion of extra-terrestrial life is inconsistent with the Torah's account of Creation. Yet nobody claims that this account provides an exhaustive list of creatures or creations. Furthermore, the idea that mankind occupies a special place in the Universe, inevitably precluding the possibility of life on other planets, is also contested. The Rambam (Maimonides d. 1204) writes explicitly against this notion, while Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (d. 1411)

notes that the existence of extra-terrestrial life does not contradict any aspect of Jewish philosophy.

Rabbi Yosef Albo (d. 1444) disagrees and asserts that mankind is the only being that was endowed with free will and the ability to make moral choices. Since there would be no purpose to beings on other planets, God would not have created them.

A third position is that of Rabbi Pinchas Eliyahu Horowitz of Vilna (d. 1821), who writes that extra-terrestrial beings could still exist, even though they would not have free will. He notes that the sages of the Talmud hinted to the existence of aliens (Moed Katan 16a), but that creatures from other planets are unlikely to resemble mankind.

While many Rabbinic intellectual disputes about such philosophical matters can be settled, this one may be more difficult. The nearest Earth-like habitable planet found by the Kepler Observatory orbits a star called Gliese 581, around 20.4 light years (193 trillion kilometres) away, in the constellation of Libra. Sadly, in order to meet our potential alien neighbours, we would have to find a way of travelling at the speed of light for over 20 years!



Ignition of a Delta II 7925-10L rocket with the Kepler space telescope on board, 6 March 2009