

Parallel Thinking Part 23: Evolution III

by Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman, New West End United Synagogue



The last two articles focused on the challenges posed by Darwinian Evolution and neo-Darwinism to Jewish thought, as well as the responses that were given by leading Rabbinic scholars of the time to reconcile the seeming differences. However, an important question remains. A cursory glance at parashat Bereishit reveals that the order of Creation does not match the scientifically accepted chronological order of evolution. In Bereishit, God created light and dark; the sea and sky; the land and vegetation; the sun, moon and stars; the fish and birds and finally the land animals and mankind. From an evolutionary perspective, things were quite different. Once the Universe began, the Earth, moon and stars (including the sun) took form. Life began in the oceans, followed by land insects, flying insects, vegetation, reptiles, mammals and finally birds.

However, even without access to contemporary scientific methods, classic commentators such as Rashi (d. 1105) did not necessarily view the order presented in Bereishit as chronological (see Rashi to Bereishit 1:1). Furthermore, the Rambam (Maimonides d. 1204) notes, in accordance with the Talmud (Chagigah 60a), that all creations were made fully formed and then sequentially distinguished from one another.

This general approach - that Bereishit is not chronological - does beg a question: even if we can find a sound basis on which to reconcile the principles of Darwinian Evolution with the Torah's view of Creation, why did God choose to describe the Creation of life in Bereishit in such an order? Why did God describe the formation of life in a non-chronological way?

One fascinating approach was elucidated by Rabbi Yitzchak Arama (d. 1494) and Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel (d. 1508), who both

understood the Rambam to mean that the order described in Bereishit is not chronological, but hierarchical. It is especially perplexing, for example, that the sun, moon and stars were created on the fourth day, after the creation of the vegetation on the third day, as vegetation requires sunlight to exist. Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (d. 1344) explains that the description of the luminaries after the vegetation was intended to downplay their importance, so as to steer mankind away from worshipping them as gods.

This paradigm shift is remarkably liberating, as it allows us to view Bereishit as a theological text, rather than a scientific description of the formation of life.

There is also a broader pattern in Bereishit, which correlates the first set of three days with the last set of three days. In the first set of three days the fundamental elements were created. The next set of three days describes the creations that operate in and use these elements. Therefore, light and dark (day 1) become paired with the luminaries (day 4); the sea and the sky (day 2) pair with the fish and the birds (day 5) and the land and vegetation (day 3) pair with the animals and mankind (day 6).

With this in mind, the lessons of Bereishit become theological rather than biological, spiritual as well as physical, and focus on the larger theme of mankind's place in the Universe.

