

Parallel Thinking Part 38: The Emergence of Faith II – Teaching Complex Ideas in a Black and White World

by Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman, New West End United Synagogue



One afternoon, I walked into the living room to find my five-year old son blowing kisses to the air. When I asked him what he was doing, he told me that he was “kissing Hashem”.

“Hashem is everywhere!” he said innocently, “so I wanted to show how much I love Him!”

Besides being a very cute moment, this highlights the simplistic way young children view the spiritual concepts they learn about. Yet as inquisitive children mature and they seek to understand the world around them, they naturally ask deep and intelligent questions about God, the Torah and spirituality. Answering those questions is challenging because they often contain abstract concepts which are difficult even for adults to truly grasp.

One parent mentioned to me that they came into the kitchen one morning to find their seven-year old daughter sitting at the breakfast table in a flood of tears. She had been taught at her *shul cheder* that God had created the world and all of the animals. Yet at school, she had been taught that the animals came about through evolution and natural selection. She did not know which one to believe. How could the parents help their daughter understand that the two concepts are not necessarily mutually exclusive?

This issue is often compounded by a tendency for complex issues to be simplified into black and white concepts. Whether it is done to sensationalise, save time or dumb-down information, the effect is that we tend to eschew complex and nuanced discussion in favour of simplistic, alluring and persuasive sound bites.

We also naturally assume that questions require answers. Yet from a pedagogical perspective, if being inquisitive is the first stage in learning, giving answers to questions may be

counterproductive. If an answer is too definitive, it could inadvertently shut down the discussion and therefore stifle the educational process. This is especially true between an adult and a child. It may therefore be preferable to use the language of response and approach. This leaves the door open for a child to ask follow-up questions and extend the learning process, helping them to see that their question was intelligent and leaving them feeling empowered to be ever more inquisitive.

When considering how best to reconcile nuanced Jewish arguments and secular sources, it is helpful to remember that sometimes two ideas can seem to clash but that is because they are actually looking at the same thing from different angles. For example, imagine a circle. It has no corners and is completely round. Now imagine a rectangle. It has four corners and four edges. How could these two shapes be part of the same thing? Now imagine a cylinder. If you look at it edge on, it appears to be a circle but if you look at it sideways, it can appear to be a rectangle.

Just as both shapes are part of the cylinder, so too science and Torah can view reality from two valid but different perspectives. We can strive to appreciate the value of both.

