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Agudath Israel

To the Editor:

In the article by Rabbi Joseph Elias entitled, “Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Evolution – The View from His Commentary: Setting the Record Straight on a Widely-Publicized Misinterpretation” addresses what he claims to be my distortion of Rav Hirsch’s views on evolution. I must dispute Rabbi Elias’ misrepresentation of my views,¹ but I am more concerned with his misrepresentation of Rav Hirsch’s position. Rabbi Elias summarized Rav Hirsch’s position on evolution as follows:

Even though it may appear from parts of his essay that he might accept the general idea of evolution from a simple form of life, it is quite obvious that this accommodation is clearly predicated on two conditions that Rabbi Hirsch repeatedly stresses in his essay – one, the theory provides for the role of the Divine Creator, and two, it can be incontrovertibly demonstrated as true.

Both these points are simply incorrect. The accommodation of evolution (in terms of life’s descent with modification from a common ancestor via naturalistic mechanisms) with Torah does not, in Rav Hirsch’s view, require a scientifically-mandated provision for the role of the Creator; instead, his point is that we would perceive the handiwork of the Creator no matter what scientific explanations are advanced for the development of life. And evolution does not need to be incontrovertibly demonstrated as true in order not to conflict with Jewish theology; either the

¹ First, Rabbi Elias claims that I believe that “Evolution is an established fact.” In fact I specifically distinguish between the descent of creatures from a common ancestor and the mechanisms for this evolution, and stress that the latter is far from a settled issue. Rabbi Elias also writes that “The conviction, so readily put forward by Rabbi Slifkin, that by now, Rabbi Hirsch would have changed his opinion, is totally unwarranted.” In fact, I explicitly wrote that “it is unknown how he would rate it today” and merely wrote that I presumed that he would find it more convincing in light of what the general consensus of biologists and paleontologists see as a wealth of additional evidence that has arisen since the nineteenth century. This includes many fine Orthodox Jewish scientists who do not possess the secular bias of which Rabbi Elias speaks. Most of the “problems” with evolution that Rabbi Elias highlights, such as the origin of life and the Darwinian mechanisms of evolution, have nothing to do with the aspect of evolution that Rabbi Hirsch is discussing – the descent of all creatures from a common ancestor via naturalistic processes. But the truth is that all this is irrelevant, and I therefore removed it from the new edition of my book; Rav Hirsch was not a scientist, and what matters is not whether he would see evolution as scientifically valid, but instead whether he saw it as necessarily standing in conflict with the Torah.

concept of evolution does conflict with Torah, or it doesn't! (Incidentally, rather than speak of evolution being "incontrovertibly demonstrated as true," Rav Hirsch spoke instead of it achieving "complete acceptance by the scientific world" – which, at least in terms of life's descent with modification from a common ancestor, it has indeed achieved. While Rabbi Elias apparently has his own objections to common descent, he is not part of the scientific world.) The point of Rav Hirsch's essay was that even before such evolution is completely accepted, and even from his own perspective that it was entirely without basis, one can and should stress that there is, in theory, no conflict between evolution and Torah.

Furthermore, it is precisely with regard to this critical issue of whether Rav Hirsch saw evolution as being in opposition to Torah that Rabbi Elias has some puzzling omissions from Rav Hirsch's writings. For example, Rabbi Elias claims that Rav Hirsch's discussion of *le-mino* in his *Commentary to Bereishis* implicitly indicates that he believed this to negate evolution. But in the essay from *Collected Writings* that is under discussion, Rabbi Elias fails to quote Rav Hirsch's much more explicit statement concerning *le-mino* and evolution (p. 264 in *Collected Writings* vol. VII) that "[Evolution] would be nothing else but the actualization of the law of *le-mino*... This law of *le-mino*... can accommodate even this theory of the origin of species." Likewise, Rabbi Elias continues to claim that according to Rav Hirsch, the prohibition of *kilayim* precludes the possibility of evolution, whereas Rav Hirsch writes very clearly (*ibid.*) that the prohibition will remain in force even if evolution would be proven true. It is extraordinary that an article accusing others of having misunderstood and misquoted Rav Hirsch's views has such misrepresentations.

As another example, Rabbi Elias cites the following from Rav Hirsch:

Even if this notion were ever to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world, Jewish thought, unlike the reasoning of the high priest of that nation, would nonetheless never summon us to revere a still extant representative of this primal form (an ape—N.S.) as the supposed ancestor of us all.

Rabbi Elias adds a comment to this quote as follows:

Thus Rabbi Hirsch clearly rejects the ultimate crowning glory of evolution – man's descent from ape.

However, Rabbi Elias has cut off the citation at a crucial point, giving the false impression that Rav Hirsch would have categorically rejected man's common ancestry with apes. But if we examine the continuation of the quote, we see that this is not the case at all:

Rather, 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, from what seemed chaos but was in fact a very definite order, the infinite variety of species we know today, each with its unique characteristics that sets it apart from all other creatures.

Here we see that Rav Hirsch's point was that, if evolution were to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world, we would nevertheless not adjust our attitude towards apes, but instead

increase our reverence for God having ingeniously enabled a single nucleus to produce *all* living things. Rav Hirsch is not rejecting man's common ancestry with apes; he is rejecting the idea that this would cause us to see ourselves as nothing more than animals, and stressing that instead it would cause us to praise God for His ingenious method of creating life.

But even leaving aside the issue of the origins of man, it is astonishing that while Rabbi Elias quotes far and wide from Rav Hirsch's writings, he fails to quote the single sentence that is most central to this discussion; the above sentence in which Rav Hirsch clearly states that evolution does *not* present a conflict to Judaism and would, if accepted as proven, instead attest to the "creative wisdom" of God.

Finally, in response to Rabbi Elias' implication that Rav Hirsch did not consider this material suitable for Jewish audiences, or that he later regretted it, I would like to point out that Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman quotes it approvingly in his own commentary on the Torah. This is shortly after he writes that "there are also other ways to reconcile the Scriptural account with the conclusions of science, even if it cannot be done while maintaining a literal interpretation of the verses. One should recall that even in the *halachic* sections of Torah, we have a received tradition that sometimes the literal meaning of the verses should be set aside – how much more so that it is permissible to do so with the account of Creation..." – something that, in the previous issue of the *Jewish Observer*, Rav Chaim Keller deemed unthinkable. Rav Hoffman then points out that each day of Creation could have lasted billions of years. In his conclusion, Rav Hoffman writes that "Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch also agrees with our approach, and it is appropriate to bring his words as he presented them at the graduation ceremony of his school in Frankfurt." He then quotes the following paragraph from Rav Hirsch:

Judaism is not frightened even by the hundreds of thousands and millions of years which the geological theory of the earth's development bandies about so freely... Our Rabbis, the Sages of Judaism, discuss (*Midrash Rabbah* 9; Talmud *Chagigah* 16a) the possibility that earlier worlds were brought into existence and subsequently destroyed by the Creator before He made our own earth in its present form and order. However, the Rabbis have never made the acceptance or rejection of this and similar possibilities an article of faith binding on all Jews. They were willing to live with any theory that did not reject the basic truth that "every beginning is from God." (p. 265 in *Collected Writings* vol. VII)

Surely both of these Torah giants deserve to have their opinions cited, and cited properly.

Sincerely,

Natan Slifkin