YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

by Rav Hillel Rachmani

LECTURE #10: SCIENCE AND RELIGION

This week's lesson focuses on Rav Kook's approach to the problems of religion and science. In Rav Kook's time, evolution was the central point of controversy between Judaism and science. Although evolution is not as relevant a problem for religious belief in our time as it once was, it can nonetheless serve as an example for our discussion.

Rav Kook does not consider things from the "world outside the beit midrash" to be dangerous to religion. To him, scientific progress is part of the process of divine revelation in the world. Therefore, he views conflicts between science and religion in a completely different light than those who view science as the enemy of religion.

In Igrot Ha-Reiyah, Letter #134, second to last paragraph, Rav Kook writes:

In general, this is the principle in the conflict of ideas: That any idea which comes to contradict anything from the Torah must not at first be dealt with by us with opposition. Rather, we must build upon it the palace of the Torah. Thus we are uplifted by it, and for the sake of this uplifting are these ideas revealed. Afterwards, when we are not pressured by anything, we may also object to it [the idea] with a heart full of confidence. There are examples which prove this...

Every scientific discovery which appears to contradict the Torah, in truth, comes to strengthen our religious understanding; "to build upon it the palace of the Torah." This is similar to the idea of the kodesh kodashim being built on top of the kodesh and chol. Scientific discoveries actually contribute to the enhancement of the world of the "beit midrash." Once we have reached the level of kodesh kodashim, and we are comfortable with this principle regarding science, we can then give an honest criticism of scientific ideas. They may not yet be sufficiently developed (as was the case with evolution in Rav Kook's day), they may be inaccurate or primitive or merely incorrect, but in any event our criticism must not stem from feeling attacked by science. As Alfred North Whitehead believed, science leads religious men to better religious understanding. For example, in the past people had a more literal understanding of the statement "God lives in the heavens." However, after scientific discovery revealed the nature of the heavens, the idea is understood in a spiritual sense. His presence is not geographically defined; He is everywhere, but is hidden as if He were "in the heavens."

Is it possible for a scientific theory to contradict the Torah?

Rav Kook and Rav Saadia Gaon are both of the opinion that ultimately it is impossible for there to be any scientific fact which contradicts the Torah. The Rambam deals with the Aristotelian idea of the eternity of the world along similar lines. While he does not accept Aristotle's static world, he does accept the possibility of the Platonic idea of eternal matter, which does not contradict the Torah (Moreh Nevukhim part 2, ch. 13-25). Rav Kook agrees with the Rambam's approach to science. Since both science and religion are part of God's world, they cannot be opposed to each other. Furthermore, nothing can attack the foundations of Torah.

Rav Nachman of Breslav posits that some "heretical" questions exist which are impossible to solve. The tzaddik may deal with these questions, but he will not find answers; only his great faith will overcome them. A person of lesser spiritual stature ought not deal with them, as they will pose a danger to him.

Rav Kook, in complete opposition to this view, believed in a world of harmony (unlike Rav Nachman's conflict-ridden, confusing, "post-modern" approach) but not in the same manner as Rav Saadia Gaon. Rav Saadia believed that religion was so complete and so perfect that no scientific data could possibly contradict it. Rav Kook, on the other hand, viewed religion "in motion", on a path towards discovering the "truth", and while there may appear to be areas of conflict, as we grow in understanding, reaching greater and greater levels, above the realm of the "kodesh" and the "chol", we will realize there is indeed no contradiction at all.

The more problematic questions today do not arise from natural science, so much as from the humanities and the like. There is no doubt that biblical criticism is more of a "danger" than Darwinism; science does not directly challenge the foundation of our faith. Rav Kook does not deal directly with this issue, but he believed that this sort of challenge can be dealt with similarly. As part of the "world of the beit midrash," we do not have to deny the validity of any scientist a priori.

The true reason that science appears dangerous to a religious person lies in the scientist's motivation. Science attempts to explain all phenomena in terms of cause and effect. Everything is perceived as running according to orderly laws of nature.

If a scientist must resort to a "deus ex machina" to explain phenomena, then he has failed. A religious person, however, believes that this is a wonderful way to "explain" things, arguing "God did it!" It would appear, therefore, that these two have completely contradictory motivations! For this reason Darwinism is so vehemently opposed by so many religious people. While the religious person would prefer to simply explain things as "God created..." and leave it at that, a scientist who comes to the conclusion that one theory of evolution is wrong will try to find a new theory to explain it.

If we accept a "minimalist" idea of the philosophy of science, that is, that there are no real physical laws, only "models" which we create to help us understand the way things work, then there is no contradiction between science and Torah. This argument, that science does not actually grasp the true essence of reality itself, is a classic response to the problem of religion and science. We do not live in a world of certainty, and cannot be sure of anything (Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle lends credence to this idea). This approach to science presents no difficulty to religious belief, as it does not make any claims to absolute correctness. For example, Newtonian physics was believed to have explained motion completely until Einstein discovered the more accurate laws of motion described by the Theory of Relativity. Similarly, at the end of the nineteenth century it was widely believed that science had reached a point where it could explain (almost) everything. The advances of the twentieth century in modern physics, however, showed that was far from true.

There are scientists, like Newton, whose search for the laws of nature stems from religious belief or the desire to understand Divine behavior in the world. Similarly, Einstein brought "religious" presuppositions to his scientific quest. He stated that he refused to believe that God simply "played dice" with the world, and therefore refused to accept the approach which explained laws of nature as simply statistical.

Regarding the question of evolution, the Rambam in general views the existence of order in the world as evidence of a Divine plan in the world. For him, it is miracles which are problematic; it "looks better" if God does not have to resort to "temporarily fixing" of the running of the world. The less He has to interfere with the running of the world, the more the world reflects His greatness and supreme intellect. (This brings to mind a disagreement between Newton and Leibniz. Newton said that God must occasionally add extra momentum to keep the world moving, while Leibniz maintained that God is a good enough "watchmaker" that He does not have to "wind the watch" anymore.) For the Rambam, therefore, the "problem" of evolution may be presented as a question of parshanut (exegesis), rather than one of faith; the question is how to understand verses of the Torah in a way that does not contradict reality as we perceive it. Law and order in nature do not contradict belief in God.

Rav Kook cites the same idea, not from the Rambam, but from Kabbala. The Kabbalists describe the process of emanation as a "process", in which one stage prepares for and results in a second; there is an inner causality. This stands in opposition to the impression given by a reading of the first chapter of Genesis. There, God appears over and over again and beginning a new stage, new beginning after new beginning. The second day is not presented as the "result" of the first day, rather, as a new beginning and creation unto itself. Rav Kook, therefore, is only prepared to accept a progressive position in the natural sciences, and is able to view the process of evolution as a gradual revelation of God, because this is exactly the way that the spiritual process of the emanations of the worlds is described by the Kabbala.

(This lecture summary was prepared by Alan Gersch.)