

In Defense of My Opponents

Rabbi Natan Slifkin

It is now four years since I received that fateful phone call from Bnei Brak. The subject of the call was three of my books – *The Science of Torah*, which reconciled the antiquity of the universe and evolution with Genesis; *Mysterious Creatures*, which dealt with Talmudic discussions of fantastic creatures such as mermaids and spontaneously-generating mice; and *The Camel, The Hare And The Hyrax*, which analyzed the laws of non-kosher animals in light of modern zoology. The polite gentleman from Bnei Brak informed me that these books had come to the attention of the Gedolim – the Torah leaders of the charedi community – and had been deemed utterly heretical. He warned me that I had until the end of the day to retract my books and issue a public apology, or else I would face scandal and humiliation: the books would be publicly banned with letters of condemnation. My attempts to meet the Gedolim and work out a constructive resolution were rejected, and within a short time, Jerusalem was plastered with posters declaring that it was forbidden to read, own or distribute my books, and advising that the books should be burned instead. This was followed by the Israeli edition of *Yated Ne’eman* announcing this verdict on their English website, thereby spreading the news globally.

The resultant backlash was immense. It turned out that the objections to my books were not due to any novelties in them, but rather to two basic positions adopted: that the account of six-day creation in Genesis was not literal and could be reconciled with modern cosmology, and, more significantly, that the Sages of the Talmud relied upon the scientific knowledge of their era, which was sometimes in error. Yet these were not my own novel approaches; they were the positions of great authorities such as Rambam and Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch! This was not just an attack on me, but upon the thousands in the Orthodox community who accepted modern science and followed approaches such as those of Rambam and Hirsch. In circles such as Yeshiva University, they were utterly perplexed as to what could be considered controversial in my books; there was nothing in them that had not been taught there for years. All these people were now deemed to be possessing heretical views. It was especially hurtful and confusing for outreach educators, who now wondered whether they had been teaching heresy for decades, or if they had been deluding themselves – and their students – about the nature of Orthodox society. There were many cries of protest, and the Internet was full of bitter and angry responses. The story was picked up by Jewish newspapers across the United States and soon made its way to the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. As Rav Aharon Feldman of Yeshivas Ner Israel observed, it was probably the public issue most damaging to the honor of Torah and to its scholars in recent memory.

Desperate to salvage the honor of the Gedolim, several people tried their hand at penning defenses of the ban. But in every single case, this merely made matters look worse. At first, the claim was that my sources were forgeries; that was soon clearly proven to be incorrect. Then the claim was that only one or two aberrant opinions in this vein ever existed, which had been summarily and unequivocally rejected from our tradition. But it turned out that there was a legacy of dozens of authorities throughout the ages who espoused such views, including some extremely prominent figures, from the Geonim, through Rambam and his son, through Rav Hirsch and Rav Herzog, the latter of whom explicitly described these views as normative. Others claimed that the problem was one of “tone,” but this claim ran into the difficulty that it was completely at odds with the statements of the Gedolim, which made it clear that the books could not be koshered by changing a few phrases. In any case, nobody ever presented any examples of the problematic tone; it became apparent that this was a more polite way of objecting to the basic approach of Rambam and others. The cry that I was “worshipping science and making Torah fit into it” was just a crude description of the rationalist approach of accepting truth from wherever it comes. Alongside all these were sweeping rejections of modern science, insisting that there was no Age of Dinosaurs, and that spontaneously generating creatures must either still exist in the Australian outback or have gone extinct, coincidentally around the time that the microscope was invented. Finally, there were claims that my own public defense of my views and *chutzpadik* defiance of the Gedolim was, *ipso facto*, a retroactive justification of the ban!

Several years have elapsed, and the defenders of the ban have not gotten over their embarrassment. At least two further written rejoinders are in the works, both of which are likely to fail in the impossible task of rewriting the history of Jewish scholarship. Since nobody is presenting a remotely reasonable defense of the ban, I have decided to pen one myself. For it is my belief that, properly understood, the ban on my books is eminently justifiable. Those who attempted to defend the ban failed because they attempted to justify its most extreme formulation. But the Gedolim who opposed my books are not all of the same view, and even those who mistakenly judged my books to be actually heretical were not necessarily wrong in strongly opposing them.

Before addressing the substantive issues, there are two minor aspects to be dealt with. First of all, it is necessary to address the popular sentiment that any sort of ban is primitive and unacceptable. This response may be consistent with the value system of liberal modern Western society, but it is not consistent with Judaism. The Torah does not believe in freedom of religious expression; it bans idolatry. There are some things that are considered absolutely evil and harmful, and which must be forcefully opposed, no matter what others might think of them. Suppose that Nazism were to return as a genuine, widespread threat, and that Neo-Nazi literature was being used to stir people up; would it not be reasonable to propose banning it? Whether bans are at all effective is a different matter – to be sure, there are vastly more people reading my books than ever before – but certainly the notion of banning books is not innately wrong. Likewise, even within Judaism, while it is true that there are “seventy facets of Torah,” that does not mean that everything offered as one of these facets of Torah is indeed such a legitimate component; it might be the seventy-first.

The second issue to move out of the way is the protest that the Gedolim did not read my books, and their opposition therefore has no validity. While it is true that they were only shown minor extracts by zealots (and in some cases, not even that), and this was certainly unprofessional and inappropriate, it is not especially relevant. Had they read the books in the entirety, and seen the context and sources in full, their objections might well have been toned down, but they would still have objected to them. Similarly, the fact that the Gedolim refused to meet with either myself or my rabbinic mentors is likewise not especially relevant, albeit disturbing. Such meetings might conceivably have convinced them that a ban would be counterproductive, and that my views are not as offensive as they were led to believe, but ultimately they would not have removed their opposition entirely.

The above are therefore just peripheral issues. The main question is, how can the positions that the account of six-day creation is not literal and that the Talmud is not scientifically infallible be denounced as heretical, when such positions were offered by towering Torah authorities throughout the ages?

I cannot defend the claim made by some of my distinguished opponents that there is no such legitimate approach in the Jewish tradition; they are simply unaware of the relevant literature, or in denial of it. It can be said, though, that with tens of thousands of works of Torah literature out there, even someone who spends eighteen hours a day in study for decades will not be familiar with every source. Furthermore, the Gedolim of the charedi world are the product of a particular *weltanschauung* which opposes the study of rationalist texts of theology such as *The Guide Of The Perplexed*. The charedi yeshivah curriculum, as intensive as it is, nevertheless does not include serious study of theology, and it firmly adopts the traditionalist approach that has become dominant in the last few centuries. It is an educational framework designed to produce great Talmudists and halachists, not rationalist theologians. The result of this is that even when rationalist statements of Rishonim and Acharonim are presented to these authorities, such sources are either denounced as forgeries or reinterpreted via an anti-rationalist lens. And the scientific problems posed by some Talmudic statements, such as those describing spontaneously generating creatures, simply do not bother them. As a Lakewood Rosh Yeshivah who publicly opposed me wrote quite correctly, “a Torah scholar who has made sacrifices for eighty years to learn Shas and Poskim countless times (with no knowledge of or interest in the goings-on of secular academia) will not be receptive to the idea that there are words in the Gemara that are not true!” But this lack of awareness of the precedent for this approach amongst the Rishonim and Acharonim does not entirely invalidate their opposition to my work.

The most knowledgeable of my opponents do not deny that such positions have been taken by Torah luminaries far greater than even them, let alone me. Rav Elyashiv, *shlita*, was a disciple of Rav Yitzchak Herzog *z”l*, and I cannot imagine that he is unaware that Rav Herzog took exactly the same position as myself regarding the non-literalness of Genesis and the scientific fallibility of the Sages. Nor do I believe that Rav Elyashiv considers Rav Herzog, who was described by Ridvaz as one of the world’s leading Talmudists, and who was eulogized by Rav Aharon Kotler as a “prince” of Torah, to have been espousing heresy. Proof

of this is that Rav Elyashiv privately stated that such an approach is permissible in outreach situations, something he could not have said were he to consider it genuinely heretical. What these leaders are saying is that they strongly oppose this approach, that they consider it dangerous, and that they wish to exclude it from the educational curriculum. And all of these positions can be legitimately defended.

People are certainly entitled to strongly oppose the views of Rambam and any other Torah scholar. This need not be at all at odds with having great respect for Rambam himself. Ramban (Nachmanides) was full of admiration for Rambam, but this did not prevent him from condemning some of Rambam's ideas in the strongest terms. If a person is entitled to follow Maimonides in adopting his views, why is someone else not entitled to follow Nachmanides in rejecting them? The actual burning of Rambam's books was a tragedy, but it was not wrong for them to be opposed. It is certainly legitimate for today's luminaries of the yeshivah world to reject the view of Rambam and others that the Talmud contains errant scientific statements, and to insist upon the absolute infallibility of the Talmud. They may be mistaken in believing in the existence of spontaneously-generating creatures, but they are fully entitled to hold this belief.

Of no less concern to my opponents is that the rationalist approach is not only wrong, but dangerous. In this, they are displaying sensitivity to a very real concern. The zealots who engineered the campaign against my books attained signatures by telling the Gedolim about how my books were causing harm, and about the angelic yeshivah student who read the books, dropped out of yeshivah and went off the *derech*. As it happens, I investigated the case and discovered that the student in question dropped out of the yeshivah and went to YU! I certainly don't know of anyone who was harmed by my books, whereas I know of hundreds of people whose faith and Judaism was strengthened by them. But I definitely agree that there are potentially many people who *could* be harmed by my books. You don't go into Mea She'arim and start teaching them about dinosaurs and evolution – it will rock the foundations of their world. And if someone has spent his entire life in an insular community, was taught to revere absolutely everything in the Talmud as the word of God, and has no knowledge of science that would lead him to doubt this, it would shake his faith terribly to learn of great Rishonim who said otherwise. Now, I don't believe that such people ever read any of my books, at least not before they were banned. But I can certainly understand that books which are written by a graduate of mainstream yeshivos and published by a well-known Orthodox publisher, complete with prestigious rabbinic endorsements, can be perceived as targeting such an audience.

Furthermore, the rationalist approach innately involves dangers. It opens a Pandora's Box; while issues such as evolution and Talmudic science can be resolved, other challenges, such as those from archeology and academic Biblical scholarship, are vastly more problematic. And in the long run, rationalism can have disastrous consequences. As Paul Johnson notes in *A History of the Jews*, Rambam "laid dangerous eggs which hatched later... he brought a confidence in the compatibility of faith and reason which fitted his own calm and majestic mind but which was in due course to carry Spinoza outside Judaism completely." Of course,

the anti-rationalist approach carries its own dangers – people who have their questions stifled, or who discover that they are being fed false information, will be resentful and rebel – but communities are entitled to choose which risks they wish to deal with.

But even if the Gedolim personally oppose the views of the rationalist Rishonim, don't they have to respect their right to be taught? Absolutely not. Every community has the right to choose its own educational approach, and to select its own leaders who will make such decisions. The charedi community has the right to choose to submit to the directives of the rabbanim that they consider to be the Gedolim (albeit that there is no basis for asserting that the entire Jewish People is obligated to listen to them). And they have the right to say that they oppose the rationalist school of thought and that they wish to exclude it from the curriculum. When challenged with the question that Rambam's *Guide of the Perplexed* contains the same unacceptable views as my books, Rav Elyashiv replied that if someone were to publish a contemporary edition of the *Guide* that was actually readable, he would equally oppose it. This is a perfectly legitimate and understandable position. In the same way as Rambam had the right to oppose the mystical and superstitious approach that he disapproved of and which was harmful for his community in Egypt, his opponents had the right to oppose his rationalist approach that was unsettling for their communities in France.

Of course, it would have been nice, from my perspective, if those of my opponents who took this view had made it all explicit. Instead, the tone was set by those with the most extreme views, resulting in the message that I had innovated a new perversion of Torah and that it is utterly heretical to posit that the Sages relied upon mistaken scientific views. Unfortunately, it seems that there is a weakness of leadership amongst moderates and/or a lack of professionalism. The zealots are the ones who are therefore able to dictate the tone of such campaigns.¹ Legitimate positions of opposition thereby become transformed into extreme declarations of heresy and resultant absolute bans.

The charedi community's highest ideals are immense dedication to Torah study, and zeal in the performance of many mitzvos. They achieve these goals with a success rate that is simply not matched by other communities. One factor in this success is their single-minded approach. The more open-minded approach of non-charedi communities, in which different outlooks amongst the Rishonim are all given voice and the rationalist approach is respected, certainly has its advantages, but it comes at the price of less fervor in the community as a whole. The charedi community achieves its success in part by transmitting an extreme reverence for the Gemara, which they do not wish to compromise by admitting that many Rishonim were of the view that such reverence occasionally goes too far. They cannot afford to tolerate the approach of evaluating conventional attitudes to Torah in light of science. And if those of us in the non-charedi community are to pride ourselves on being tolerant, then we have to be tolerant of intolerant people, too. They are protecting a value system and a way of life, and this is how they have to do it, even if sometimes they go a little too far.

¹ According to Rav Aharon Feldman, who met with Rav Elyashiv, the latter was "surprised" to see that the declaration to which his signature had been affixed described my books as heretical, although he later acquiesced to this formulation on the grounds that it was acceptable from a colloquial perspective.

So where do we go from here? I concede that the charedi world has a right to reject the rationalist approach, and therefore when my books rapidly sold out after the ban, I decided to republish them in such a way as to make it clear that they are not targeting that world. This involves switching publisher, removing the rabbinic endorsements, changing my name from Nossion to Natan (!), and even printing a warning in the books, stating that they are intended for those who are disturbed by the conflicts between Torah and science and who do not object to following Rambam's approach in resolving them. As for the people in the charedi world who have studied science and grapple with the conflicts, I am deeply sympathetic to their plight, but they will have to accept that if they want to be a part of charedi society and reap its benefits, they cannot expect their issues to be legitimized.

It is my hope that the charedi world will likewise respect the right of the Torah u'Madda community to adopt the rationalist approach. There is certainly no *halachic* or *hashkafic* basis for people in the Torah u'Madda community to be beholden to the directives of charedi leaders (the oft-cited verse of *Lo Sasur*, "Do not stray from their words," has no application here, for a variety of reasons that I list on the "controversy" section of my website). Unfortunately, many Torah u'Madda yeshivos and seminaries employ charedi educators who attempt to teach their students that the rationalist approach is wrong. Some such feeder institutions for YU even have teachers who prohibit their students from reading my books! But the Torah u'Madda community must shoulder some of the responsibility for this tragic situation, in their not producing a sufficient number of their own educators.

2004 marked the eight hundredth anniversary of Rambam's passing. The Torah u'Madda community commemorated this with lectures and papers analyzing Rambam's worldview. The charedi community commemorated it by banning this approach again. But the raging disputes of 800 years ago can be avoided, if people on both sides realize that everyone is entitled to choose the best approach for their own communities, given their own ideals and values. Only then will we attain peace amongst the Jewish People.

Dear Reader:

Since the ban, my book *The Science Of Torah* has been republished in a thoroughly revised and vastly expanded edition entitled *The Challenge Of Creation*, and *Mysterious Creatures* has been republished in a thoroughly revised and vastly expanded edition entitled *Sacred Monsters*. But I have not yet been able to republish my third banned book, *The Camel, The Hare And The Hyrax*, due to lack of funds. Likewise, my book on *Perek Shirah* entitled *Nature's Song* also needs to be republished, since my former publisher does not want to be further involved with me even for non-controversial books. It would also be very beneficial to have *Sacred Monsters* translated into Hebrew for the Israeli market. If you are able to assist in any of these projects, and would like to have a dedication printed in the books, please write to me at zoorabbi@zootorah.com.

Thank you,

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