

## Point-by-Point Response to Rabbi Chaim Keller's article in *The Jewish Observer*, "Evolution Vs. Intelligent Design: A Torah Perspective"

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This is not a detailed response to Rabbi Keller's article. However my new book *The Challenge Of Creation* is a comprehensive presentation of this topic that counters all of Rabbi Keller's points. This article refers the reader to the relevant parts of my book and makes some other concise points.

In Part One, when Rav Keller sets up ID vs. Evolution as a battle between religion and atheism, it seems that this is based on a misunderstanding of the debate. Chapter 21 of my book *The Challenge Of Creation* explains the matter.

In Part Two, Rav Keller states that he will be quoting scientists and ultimately showing people that they don't have to feel stupid if they reject the evolutionist claim that all life evolved from a single-celled organism and that man descended from apes. However none of the scientists quoted by both Rabbi Keller and Jonathan Rosenblum dispute this point. They only dispute whether the neo-Darwinian explanation of evolutionary mechanisms can account for how one species changed into another – they do not dispute that the evidence shows that such changes indeed happened (and they likewise do not dispute that the universe is billions of years old).

In Part Three, Rabbi Keller cites the statement of the RCA regarding these issues. It includes the mention of Rabbi J. H. Hertz and finishes the quotation as follows:

Maimonides stated that "what the Torah writes about the Account of Creation is not all to be taken literally, as believed by the masses."

Rabbi Keller proceeds to argue that Rabbi Hertz is not an adequate source, and that Rambam has been misunderstood (a claim that I shall address later). However, contrary to the article's implication that the above sentence is the complete final sentence of the RCA's statement, Rabbi Keller has actually omitted the second half of the sentence! The sentence reads in its entirety as follows:

Maimonides stated that "what the Torah writes about the Account of Creation is not all to be taken literally, as believed by the masses" (*Guide to the Perplexed* II:29), and recent Rabbinic leaders who have discussed the topic of creation, such as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, saw no difficulty in explaining Genesis as a theological text rather than a scientific account.

Rabbi Keller may well disagree with the approach of Rav Kook, but how can he cut off the RCA statement and deny Rav Kook's role as their basis? And what of Rav Hirsch? Rabbi Keller himself cites from Rav Hirsch's most controversial letter where he repeated the view of

the Rishonim that Chazal could have relied on flawed information in scientific matters. So why here does Rabbi Keller cut out the citation of Rav Hirsch? Rav Hirsch wrote that the scientific age of the universe is of no relevance to *emunah*, and that while he personally did not accept evolution, it is in no way incompatible with Torah. It is deeply disturbing that Rav Keller cut out this part of the RCA statement and replaced it with a period.

Rav Keller then writes that reading evolution into Torah is not Torah because it flies in the face of *peshto shel mikra*. To this it must be pointed out that Rav Mordechai Gifter, late Rosh Yeshiva of Telz, wrote regarding reconciling Bereishis with science that “anyone with the slightest grasp of Torah has no place for that which is referred to as the literal point of view.” Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman wrote 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...” And Rav Yitzchak Herzog, a rebbe of Rav Elyashiv *shlita*, wrote that “When, again, our medieval thinkers felt that attempts at harmonization were absolutely necessary, they did not hesitate to explain the words of the Torah in a manner deviating from the literal sense... it is well to bear in mind that already our ancient sages, to say nothing of our medieval theologians, would not seem to have insisted upon literalness in such transcendental matters as the account of the Creation.” In the next paragraph I shall cited some of these sages and theologians.

Rabbi Keller later writes:

As a result, one of this school has “allegorized” Ma’ase Bereishis and written *Ein mukdam ume’uchar beTorah* – that the account of creation is not in chronological order. This is absurd when the Torah speaks of *yom echad, yom sheni* – in numbered sequence.

In my letter to the *Jewish Observer*, I pointed out that this very “absurd” idea is given by Rambam (as explained by *Moreh Ha-Moreh* 2:30:9, *Akeidas Yitzchak* to *Bereishis*, *Shaar* 3, and Abarbanel, Commentary to *Bereishis*, p. 10), Ralbag (*Milchamos HaShem* 6:8), and, more recently, Rav Dessler (see *Michtav Me-Eliyahu* vol. 5 p. 348 in conjunction with *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*, vol. II, p. 151).

Rabbi Keller then criticizes Rabbi Hertz. His criticisms have been more than adequately countered by Rabbi Gil Student at <http://hirhurim.blogspot.com/2006/08/in-defense-of-rabbi-hertz.html>. Most of Rabbi Keller’s criticisms are based on misunderstandings or misrepresentations of what Rabbi Hertz wrote; in response to the substantive issues, two points should be made:

- 1) Rabbi Hertz was certainly not the first to quote non-Jewish commentators; Abarbanel did so regularly. Furthermore, Rambam certainly incorporated Aristotle’s philosophy into his works.

- 2) Rabbi Hertz was certainly not the first to “naturalize” many of the miracles in the Torah. Rambam wrote that “we shall endeavor to integrate the Torah with rational thought, leading events according to the natural order wherever possible; only with something that is clarified to be a miracle and cannot be otherwise explained at all will we say that it is a miracle.” The recently published book by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, also takes this approach.

Rabbi Keller then attacks those who take the approach that each of the six days could have been billions of years. He does not mention that Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman endorsed this approach. Rabbi Keller’s arguments about *peshuto shel mikra* are countered above and in chapters seven and thirteen of *The Challenge Of Creation*. His objection that it would undermine Shabbos is answered by Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman and Rav Aryeh Carmell, as quoted on p. 182 of *The Challenge Of Creation*. His general objections that the *mesorah* prohibits such an approach is countered in chapters eight, twelve and thirteen of *The Challenge Of Creation*.

Rabbi Keller then turns to evolution, and claims that the concept of *lemino* rules against reconciling evolution with Torah. This is refuted by Rav Hirsch, who wrote 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.”

Rabbi Keller then turns to the RCA’s citation of Rambam, and describes the RCA’s assertion that Rambam allegorized the account of creation as “unthinkable.” According to Rabbi Keller, Rambam actually did intend it to be taken entirely literally, and was just saying that there are additional layers of understanding, too. However, as noted earlier, there are numerous Rishonim and Acharonim who explained Rambam’s view in the same way as the RCA. It thus cannot be characterized as “unthinkable.”

Rabbi Keller then says that any supposed scientific evidence for the antiquity of the earth is based on nothing other than extrapolation, that itself is based on the assumption that the laws of nature have remained constant, and Rabbi Keller argues that this assumption is unfounded. In chapters nine and ten of *The Challenge Of Creation* I counter these arguments.

Rabbi Keller then concludes this section by claiming that he is representing the view of our Chachomim, Gedolei HaRishonim and Acharonim in insisting that Maase Bereishis is entirely literal. But he has not represented the views of Rambam, Ralbag, Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman, Rav Yitzchak Herzog, Rav Kook, Rav Hirsch, Rav Gedalyah Nadel, and Rav Mordechai Gifter, amongst others.

Most astonishing of all is that Rabbi Keller concludes his article by citing at length from Rav Hirsch's skepticism of modern science – without mentioning that, despite this skepticism, Rav Hirsch still saw fit to stress that, were the antiquity of the universe and evolution to somehow be proven true, it would not conflict with Judaism at all, and that Chazal “were willing to live with any theory that did not reject the basic truth that every beginning is from God.”

I fully agree with Rav Keller's statement that “you do not adulterate Judaism in order to sell it.” One does not compromise on truth in order to promote Judaism. But is it truthful to claim that no Torah authorities ever legitimized a non-literalist approach to Bereishis?