

Letter to Daily Item, Fall '05, Rabbi Nina H. Mandel: Intelligent Design

I would like to take the liberty of writing on behalf of the many hundreds of thousands of people in the world who both believe in God and evolution. We may know God by different names: Jesus, Adonai, Allah, Yahweh and the multitude of other manifestations, but what we share is the certainty that God is not threatened, nor diminished, by science. This may seem presumptuous of me to write this with such certainty. I hardly claim to know each of these people and their thoughts individually, but I have no qualms about doing so. I realize that this is contrary to what many recent writers to this newspaper believe. That's why I feel compelled to write. I am just as certain that the vast majority of them have no designs on genocide or in any way following in Adolph Hitler's footsteps. To imply that is insulting to us all.

The question of the genesis of life and the universe is one that is profoundly important to all peoples and civilizations. It has been debated, written about, sung about, and talked about from perhaps the first moment of human consciousness. That is part of what makes us human. And for every century that this question has been pondered, there are thousands of different responses.

As a rabbi and a person of faith, I believe in the unending mystery of the universe and our inability as human beings to understand all there is to know about it. I believe in a Divine creative power that gave rise to all which we experience in the world. I believe, as the Psalmist, that "The earth is the Lord's and all that dwells therein."

I also believe that the ancients in my tradition wrote about their experience of that Divine creative power—God—and used the inadequate means of human speech and metaphor to try to describe that experience. We continued to be inspired by their endeavors each time we read the Holy Scriptures. The Jewish understanding of God does not include human attributes magnified to a supernatural degree. God is a transcendent force that makes for life, justice, healing, love, and yes, creation. To assume that we can apply human notions of intelligence to God would be outrageously presumptuous.

But it is inaccurate to say that Creationism and/or Intelligent Design are intrinsic to "Judeo-Christian" values. Jewish tradition does not, and never has, rejected scientific inquiry, nor does it preclude God from scientific discovery. It has always understood the Bible as a deeply compelling, divinely-inspired record of how humans understand God and God's works in our lives.

Just as I believe in God as the Divine Creator, I also can, and do, believe that life arises from a complex process of organisms changing and responding to their environments. I praise the scientists of our day for helping us to understand that the biological and scientific process that occur in the context of God's wonderful creation. When I am shown DNA evidence that suggests I share a long distant common ancestor with members of the animal kingdom, I see that as proof of the unity of God's majesty and think about the words echoed in the creation story in Genesis: "God saw and it was good." God the creator does not preclude scientific exploration. Human beings are part of

an elaborate, perhaps infinite, network of natural life. To this we can say: “Praised is the One who weaves the web of creation” without believing that God sits with knitting needles making it all.

Science does not dictate religion any more than religion should dictate science. I believe that issue was addressed with the trials of Magellan. But that does not mean that the two can not coexist. As my colleague Rabbi Alan LaPayover taught me, science can explain the system of tides that led to the Red Sea parting before Moses, but not the power of the rallying cry “Let my people go” which has stirred dreams of redemption and liberation for centuries. We know the difference between the two. We can read the story of Miriam’s skin turning leprous after gossiping about her brother Moses and know that it is a metaphor, not a threat or an alternative to Pasteur’s Germ Theory.

Finally, I must address the fear that supporters of an evolutionary approach, or supporters of not teaching creationism or intelligent design in secular schools, are a threat to humanity and our relationship with God.

Recently, it was suggested that we share the heinous agenda of Adolph Hitler. For over a century, leading thinkers and political leaders have ascribed to theories of evolution; none of them have turned to genocide to speed up the process. Hitler killed millions of Jews, Gypsies, Catholics, mentally ill and disabled people not because he believed in evolution. He capitalized on a history of fear, anti-Semitism, paranoia, as well as the economic insecurity and world status of his country to sell a program of evil and hate. He planned the killing but many people went along with his plan enthusiastically and many in the world turned a blind eye to what was happening to people who were universally thought of as expendable. (Consider the similar contemporary response to the situation in Darfur). Hitler also had very close associations with mainstream German clergy and thought of himself as a man of God, doing God’s work.

Fear, hate, and human evil are the threats. Working together to eradicate them is why we were created. As it says in Leviticus 11:44: “I the Lord am your God; you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy.”