How do you understand the relationship(s) between science and your religious or secular tradition? – Dr. Elliot Dorff, Rabbi, Ph.D., Conservative Judaism

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From the very beginning, the Jewish tradition has described creation in a variety of different ways. The first two chapters of Genesis describe it in two different ways. Psalm 104 does it in yet another way. And Isaiah does it in yet another way. And by the time you get to the rabbis, you get other kinds of descriptions of creation, including one rabbinic statement that the days in the first chapter of Genesis, that God created in seven days, are not to be taken literally, they actually are eras. And another statement in rabbinic literature in [foreign language 00:00:53] that God actually created many worlds before God created this one. So that you have a variety of different views in our tradition as to how creation happened. (01:05) The presumption behind all of these is that God created the world, but how God created the world is something that is very much open to question and it's an issue that we try to understand as science and we've done that in differing ways over the course of the centuries. So it's not surprising that in the first century, Philo, a Jewish philosopher in Alexandria, understands the first chapter of Genesis according to Plato's Timaeus, because that was the science of the time. (01:38) In the 12th century, Maimonides understands the first chapter of Genesis according to Aristotle's Metaphysics, because that was the science of the time. And so it's not at all surprising that Jews now don't really have any problem whatsoever in terms of looking to science to try to figure out how it is that we evolved, how it is that the world came to be altogether, without any real threat to our religious beliefs. (02:05) As a matter of fact, there is a statement on the website of the Rabbinical Council of America, the modern Orthodox Rabbinical, Organization, that specifically endorses evolution and that talks about the fact that we, as Jews, always looked to science as simply another aspect of how we should understand the world. The Torah and the religious tradition being one, and science being
another. And since both come from God, we've presumed that they are both compatible and if we see them as being incompatible, that's our problem, not God's problem. (02:39) One other piece of this is that we always have looked to the tradition for religious meaning, which is different from scientific meaning, and consequently, when we look at these chapters, the opening chapters of Genesis, what we really are looking for is how they perceive the nature of human beings. What we should strive for in life. What are the primary values that we should have? Those are the kinds of religious meanings that we derive from these texts that describe creation, including the creation of human beings. (03:13) To see the opening chapters of Genesis as science is, Maimonides already says in the 12th century, is what the fools do. So we should, in our modern scientific understanding of things and in our modern religious understanding of things, understand them both to be aspects of God, the way that God reveals God's self to us, both in science and in religion, and we are lucky to be able to have both. (03:49) The only person that I know of within the Jewish tradition that actually had trouble with evolution was the Chabad Rabbi who died in 1993, I think, who claimed that fossils were put there to deceive us, that actually the world was only 5,700 some years old, but so the claims that it's much older than that based upon archeology and fossils and things like that, were there to deceive us. I must say that he is a lone voice. And as I quoted to you before, even the modern Orthodox do not agree with that. (04:31) The vast majority of the Jewish population today would say that evolution is modern science and that we have to use the scientific methods to the greatest degree possible to understand where we came from and what that means in terms of how we live our lives today. (04:50) I must say that I grew up in a tradition that had a lot of trouble with the Galileo story, because I couldn't understand why, just because grew up Jewish, I couldn't understand why religion and science would ever be at odds, let alone that religious authorities would suppress scientific developments and scientific information. In my tradition that's just not the way it is. And I don't know of a single other case in which religious authorities questioned the science. I think really Rabbi Schneerson was way off beat as a Jew, let alone as somebody who lives in the
modern world. (05:42) Some ask, "Well, what would that mean in terms of future evolution?" And actually I was just on a panel talking about what would happen if we live to 150, or we live to 200. Actually the most impressive source on this, it's not a Jewish source, it's Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, in which he imagines the Struddlebrugs, who live to 200 or beyond, and at first he thinks it's absolutely wonderful and then he finds out that they have lost their teeth, they've lost their eyesight, they've lost their hearing, all of those kinds of things, and then it realizes that it's actually rather miserable because if in fact we continue living as we do in old age, we will not have health. What we really want is to be, well, the next time around, I'm going to be an Olympic swimmer. That's what we really want. (06:34) Actually Maimonides talks about this. He talks about ways in which Jews imagine a world to come in which there would be resurrection. He mocks the notion of bodily resurrection, and part of the reason why he does so is because he says when you think about how you want to be resurrected, you don't think about the body in which you died. That didn't serve you very well in the end. The next time around you imagine yourself to be an Olympic swimmer or something like that. But you never were in this life, at least most of us, so, I mean, what is it that you're imagining in terms of this life after death or this future life of living to 150 or to 200? (07:19) There are real issues actually within the tradition about imagining that. If you had an indefinite lifespan, would that mean that you would procrastinate? Psalm 90 says, "Teach us to number our days so that we can have a heart of wisdom." In other words, if we know that there are some deadlines in life, that will force us to take each day of our lives much more seriously, and to do something with it. (07:46) Psalm 49 talks about the fact that you can't take it with you, and as a result what that should mean to us is that, yes, you want to have enough resources, enough money to be able to live your life, support your family and so on, but you need to know that that's not the ultimate good. The ultimate goods come in family and relationships, and trying to make this a better world. The fact that we do have a limited lifespan has some important values attached to it. (08:18) But in any case, yes. I mean, there are some imaginings in the Jewish tradition about what would happen if we evolve to a very different kind of
state. And for that matter, in many cases Jewish writers who have thought about what happens with artificial intelligence. In other words, are we going to become no longer bodies, but just simply intelligences in some form or another? There's nothing wrong with imagining those kinds of things. But to be very honest, I've got enough trouble trying to figure out the problems in this life then to worry about those kinds of future possibilities.

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