Religious perspectives on the science of human origins – Dr. Elliott Dorff
Ph.D. conservative Judaism

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Elliot Dorff: 00:00 Good afternoon. My name is Elliot Dorff. I'm a Conservative rabbi. The Conservative movement is in the middle of America's Jewish religious expressions, with Orthodox on the right and Reform on the left. So, despite the name, we're in the middle. I have a doctorate in philosophy from Columbia in moral theory. I'm a professor of philosophy at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. The Jewish tradition has never really had trouble with new scientific developments, and there are two reasons for that. One is because very early on, and some new scholarship and Bible indicates that it was already in the biblical period, and not just in the rabbinic period. The Jewish tradition has been very sophisticated about how a text means, and has been very clear that... Well, the rabbis will later say there are 70 faces to the Torah, seventy is just a big number. What it means is that any given text can be interpreted in a whole variety of different ways, and the Talmud is actually one page of argument after another about how text should be interpreted. (01:34) And that's true, not just for the legal parts of the Jewish tradition, but also for the stories and for the cosmologies. And for that matter, in the Bible itself, you have several different cosmologies. That of Genesis chapter one, beginning and ending in verse three of chapter two, the seven days, God creates by means of speaking. And then starting verse four of chapter two to the end of that chapter, which is a very different creation story. I mean, just think about how in the first creation story, for example, God creates the human being, male and female, God created them. So God creates the two gender simultaneously. In the second chapter, God creates Eve out of the side of Adam. In Psalm 104, you have a completely different creation story. So already in the Bible you have at least three different understandings of how creation took place. (02:32) Then later on in the Rabbinic Tradition, you get yet more. The rabbis will say that Yom, the word for day, in the first
chapter of Genesis doesn't mean day, namely a 24-hour period, it means because a day in God's sight is like a thousand years in human sight, the Talmud says. So it already has a sense that the periods in the first chapter of Genesis might be much longer than 24 hours, might be eons. A thousand, again, is just a big number for them, and could be eons, and you might say millions of years. And then the rabbis also tell a story that God created many worlds before God created this one, and chose this one because he liked this one best. It reminded me, as I said, I have a doctorate in philosophy, that the first time that I ever heard that story, that God may have created many worlds before this one, was actually in David Hume, who is trying to show that the argument from design for the existence of God doesn't work because he says, God could have created many worlds before this one and botched them all up. (03:48) That's the word he uses, and that's why I remember it so well. This one is God's last gasp as it were, right? Whereas the rabbis take the exact same idea and turn it on its head, God created many worlds before this one, but we have this one because it was his best accomplishment. In later Jewish history, Philo, a Jewish philosopher in the first century takes, Plato's Timaeus, which was the science at the time, and reads Genesis as if Plato had written it. About a thousand years later, Maimonides takes Aristotle's metaphysics, the 12th book of the metaphysics, and reads Aristotle into the Bible. And there are plenty of Jews who now read evolution into the Bible. And I think part of the reason for this is, again, this understanding that text can have many meanings, the use of Midrash of interpretation to understand texts. And along with it, another part of the Jewish tradition, which basically says that God revealed God's will and God's nature to us, not only through text, but also through creation itself. (05:04) And so consequently, if you have a disparity between how you understand the text and how you understand creation, then that's your problem, right? But God presumably is consistent, and therefore what we learned from creation needs to be in some way or another reconciled with our understanding of the text. And that would then lead, I think, also to a very strong emphasis, well, I should say there are Jews who take all three of the stances that Reverend Miller was just talking about. But
the one, namely, that religion and science are completely at odds with each other, that religion and science are not at odds with each other, they just talk about different things. And then the third one, which is the one I personally believe in, which is that religion and science are simply two different ways of understanding our world. Economics is another, history is another, literature is another, and music is another, and so on down the line. Even within some of these ways of looking at things, there is the particle way of looking at light, and there is the wave understanding of light, both within physics. (06:21) And I would suggest to you that, and here I'm talking, not so much as a Jew, but as a philosopher from an epistemological point of view, since none of us is omniscient, none of us knows everything, the best that we can do is to look at things from multiple viewpoints and to learn from all of those viewpoints what we can learn from them. And here I am talking as a Jew, the Jewish tradition much preferred truth to consistency. So even though a lot of these things don't sit well together, so be it for consistency. What we really want is to try to learn as much as we can from the various viewpoints that we have access to.

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