

How Hot Do You Like Your Evolutionary Soup?

- presentation for Shir Hadash Tikkun Leyl Shavuot
- May 14, 2013
- Scott Axelrod, axelrod@alumni.princeton.edu

The following lines are from the description [on Amazon] of the book “Judaism as a Civilization” by Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of reconstructionism:

... Kaplan offers his now famous concept of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization. For Judaism to survive and grow, Jews must continue to reconstruct their heritage in response to changes in social, political, and cultural conditions, producing new literature and liturgy, adding and eliminating customs and traditions. All Jews, traditional and liberal, religious and secular - can play a part in that reconstruction.

Life evolves. New species evolve and the properties of existing species evolve. Ideas evolve. Culture evolves. And religions evolve. The details of how evolution works vary from case to case, but a common principle is that evolution selects for entities that are best able to propagate themselves. Evolution is driven by the urge to live, to breed, and to pass the best on to future generations.

There is always an ongoing evolutionary soup. Sometimes it is a primordial soup, ripe with available ingredients for new recipes for life, or ideas, or what have you. When the soup is hot, evolution happens rapidly: Entire species come and go in competition with one in another. When the soup is colder, evolution happens gradually: Evolution happens bit by bit within each species, and there is semi-stable equilibrium between species.

The evolutionary soup is hot today. The world today is much more hyper-connected than it was even just one generation ago. The advent of virtual reality and social media have abetted, or at least brought out in the open, the polarization of society along many axes: faith vs. reason, modernism vs. traditionalism, progressivism vs. conservatism, and on and on. It is hard to shut our eyes to the divisive political manipulation of ideologies. We are, all of us, living in this hot soup. And we are not just passive observers. We have to actively decide how to engage. For example, Shir Hadash has decided to create a Facebook page. I guess the hope is by having a bigger footprint in the world of social media, we will be better able to survive as a group. But there are always tradeoffs. Once you are signed up for Facebook, you can be sure that Facebook is watching you, even if you may not be sure if God is as well.

Let us step back and look at evolution of religion historically.

In pre-historic times, mankind consisted of hunters and gatherers exposed to nature at all times. To gain some control over their fears and desires, people developed simple belief systems that personify nature. As culture developed and began to tame nature, more abstract religions began to appear.

Our forebears in the desert created a religion that has helped Jews survive as a people for thousands of years and maintain an identity which is both unified and diversified at the same time. The founding principal, enshrined in our most basic prayer, is a belief in one God: “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One”. The Torah is a sacred document that unifies us with a common narrative and rituals and provides us with a code of ethics. The story it tells is a story of blood relations. This week’s Parsha, Parsha Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1-4:20), even gives a detailed account of the census of the Jewish tribes.

It makes sense to look at the Jewish people as an evolving biological group. It also make sense to view Judaism as Kaplan does, as an evolving civilization.

Judaism is not about blind adherence to a dogma so that all of its followers can be good sheep or good warriors. A core of Jewish identity is the struggle with God, which is even built into the Hebrew meaning of the name Israel. We are allowed to question everything, including God. The very sacredness of Torah is what also calls us to constantly reinterpret it. It is a living document. That is how it has been a “tree of life” that has helped us survive for so long. And there have been many battles to survive, both ideological and physical.

One broad evolutionary trend is the steady encroachment of science on territory that was once religious dogma. For Judaism, the reverence for questioning and study has given a lineage of visionaries going from pre-scientific thinkers to some of the greatest scientists of all time. A snapshot of this lineage can be seen in Albert Einstein’s quote: “I believe in Spinoza’s God who reveals himself in the harmony of all that exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and actions of men.”

There are still some religious fundamentalist who try to dig their heels in against Darwin’s theory of biological evolution by natural selection. The resurgence of that kind of thinking is scary, but I think it will be on the losing side of history.

What are some other ways religion might evolve? Last year, I asked this question in the form: “What would it mean to ‘receive’ the Torah today?” I talked about bringing different ideologies together. That caused some discussion. Rabbi Audrey recommended to me the book “John Lennon and the Jews: A Philosophical Rampage” by Dr. Ze’ev Maghen. Maghen explains that he rejects a sort of vague universal love. He gives detailed examples to show entertaining specifics of how Judaism can be irrational to the point of insanity. He makes the case that the heart comes before the head and that it should. He rejects the evolution of

intellectualized religion based on the notion that rationality comes first. His love for Judaism is specific and personal. He loves Judaism *because* of the way in which it is crazy, not in spite of it.

Maghen is making a case, trying to advance a battle line between science and religion. A more subdued approach is to try to declare a truce, with armistice lines, to separate science and religion into separate domains of authority, what Stephen Jay Gould calls “non-overlapping magisteria”. Religion gets to be separate and holy. David Goodson presents his take on this separation in his d’var that he sent out in preparation for this Tikkun. As a scientist, he is an atheist. The “god hypothesis” doesn’t seem useful. But when it comes to the heart, he believes in God. He connects with scripture by a literary suspension of disbelief in God.

Galileo talked of God’s two books. The bible, written in human language, and the book of nature, written in the language of mathematics. The theory of evolution has done a lot to explain our biological circumstances. It can even be applied to gain insight into religion and culture. Perhaps it can even help explain why the laws of nature are the way they are: One leading physicist has a theory that universes give birth to baby universes in an evolutionary process. He claims that this explains why the constants of nature, like the strength of gravity, are finely tuned to produce many black holes, which is how he claims baby universes are formed. In turn, he claims this might explain something that modern physicists are struggling with: Why are the constants of nature so finely tuned to those values that permit the existence of intelligent life?

Scientists are trying to read from the book of nature that which could traditionally only be read about in God’s other book.

I look around the world today and see a hot evolutionary soup. Every year there are phenomenal new inventions and new approaches to age old questions like the mysteries of free will and of human consciousness. Serious scientists are even considering transcending human biology with the help of technology.

We are all finite beings connected with the infinite. We are guided by community, but must find our own balance between reason and faith, mind and heart, science and religion. We choose what to love and how to love.

We are all swimming in an evolutionary soup. It’s hotter in some places and colder in others. I’ll end by asking the question in the title of this presentation:

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