

The Origin of Mankind— A Torah Perspective

By: NATHAN AVIEZER

Our Holy Torah begins with the creation of the world, culminating in the creation of mankind:

Chapter 1, Verse 27: *Elokim created man in His image; in the image of Elokim, He created him; male and female, He created them.*

However, the origin of mankind is described again in the second chapter of Bereshit:

Chapter 2, Verse 7 – *HaShem Elokim formed man from the dust of the earth, and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living being.*

What does the second chapter contribute to our understanding of mankind's origin beyond what is written in the first chapter?

Verse 2:7 also raises another question. Unlike every other item that was created or formed by G-d, the Torah tells us what materials were used to form Man, namely, “*the dust of the earth.*” What is the purpose of including this information?

The beginning of verse 2:7 describes the physical nature of Man (“*formed from the dust of the earth*”). The second part of verse 2:7 describes the spiritual nature of Man (“*He [G-d] blew the soul of life into his nostrils*”). Thus, this verse expresses the dual nature of Man – the physical (“*dust*”)

Nathan Aviezer is Professor of Physics and former Chairman of the Physics Department of Bar-Ilan University. He is the author of more than 140 scientific articles on solid state physics, was elected as a Fellow of the American Physical Society and is a Research Professor of the Royal Society of London.

Prof. Aviezer has a long-standing interest in the relationship between Torah and science and is the author of three books: *In the Beginning* (translated into nine languages), *Fossils and Faith* and *Modern Science and Ancient Faith*. He teaches a course at Bar-Ilan University on “Torah and Science,” which was awarded the prestigious Templeton Prize. In addition he organizes an annual Torah and Science Conference which attracts hundreds of participants from all over Israel.

and the spiritual (“*soul*”). It is this *combination*—physical *and* spiritual— that constitutes the essence of Man.

We learn from verse 2:7 that Man was formed by adding spirituality (“*soul*”) to a physical creature (“*formed from the dust*”). The origin of the *physical* creature, mentioned first, is of minor interest. From the Torah perspective, the essential qualities of Man lie in his *spirituality*, which was infused into the already existing physical creature (“*He [G-d] blew the soul of life into his nostrils*”). Therefore, it is not surprising that all Torah commentators define Man in terms of his spiritual characteristics.

Rashi: “*The soul of Man is highly developed because Man was granted understanding and speech.*”

Ramban: “*With his soul, Man reasons and speaks.*”

Sforno: “*When Man was created in G-d’s likeness, he became able to speak... Upon receiving G-d’s image, Man had the power of intellectual reasoning.*”

Onkeles: “*Man is the speaking being.*”

“*Created*” (First Chapter) and “*Formed*” (Second Chapter)

There is yet another question. Why are two different verbs used to describe the origin of Man? In the first chapter, the Torah states that G-d *created* Man (*vayivrah*), whereas in the second chapter, the Torah states that G-d *formed* Man (*vayitzer*).

The use of these two very different verbs can be understood in the following way. The first chapter deals with the *spiritual* aspects of Man (*created in the image of G-d*). Man is a creature endowed by G-d with completely new and unique features that are unlike those of any other creature. A fundamentally new creature deserves the verb *created*. By contrast, the beginning of verse 2:7 deals with the *physical* aspects of Man (*formed from the dust of the earth*). The physical aspects of Man are not fundamentally different from those of many other creatures. Therefore, the verb *created* would be inappropriate and the verb *formed* is used.

This distinction between the verbs “*created*” and “*formed*” to describe divine activity was proposed by the Malbim, but in a very different context. When relating to the Fifth-Day animals, the Torah states (1:21) that G-d “*created*” them (*vayivrah*). However, in relating to the Sixth-Day animals, the Torah states (1:25) that G-d “*made*” them (*vaya’as*). The Malbim explains (commentary on verse 1:25) why the Torah uses two very different verbs to describe the divine origin of different groups of animals:

“Here [on the Sixth Day], Bereshit does not say ‘G-d *created*,’ because the formation of living animals had already occurred on the Fifth Day. Rather [on the Sixth Day], G-d ‘*made*’ the mammals, by infusing them with properties and capabilities that were not previously present. This process cannot be called ‘*creation ex nihilo*’ but is only ‘*making*,’ by which is meant the completion of an object and its improvement.”

In summary, the verb *create* relates to the formation of something fundamentally new. In the case of the animal kingdom, the Malbim states that the fundamentally new feature is living creatures (Fifth Day animals). In the case of mankind, we propose that the fundamentally new feature is spirituality (*created in the image of G-d*).

Humans and Chimpanzees

Are there any signs that human beings possess spiritual features that are different from those of all other creatures? In fact, this notion has been vigorously contested by atheists who claim that human beings do not possess any spiritual uniqueness. They consider *Homo sapiens* to be just another of the two million species of animals thus far identified. Atheists do admit that we are different from other species, but every species possesses some special properties that set it aside as a separate species. They claim that it is only human pride that makes us think that we are unique creatures who were “*created in the image of G-d*.”

Our lack of spiritual uniqueness is the thesis of the book by Jared Diamond, “*The Third Chimpanzee*.” The title refers to human beings, whereas the other two species are the common chimpanzee and the bonobo chimpanzee. Professor Diamond asserts that human beings have no special talents that are not shared, to some extent, by many other animals, including even our ability to think. We are more talented, of course, but nothing unusual.

In fact, the uniqueness of human beings is blatantly obvious and easily demonstrated. A Google search of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA, Professor Diamond’s home university) reveals that UCLA has a student body of 40,000 and their libraries contain over eight million volumes. But there is something amazing about these data. *Not a single one of the 40,000 UCLA students is a chimpanzee!* And there is something even more amazing. *Not a single one of the eight million books in the UCLA libraries was written by a chimpanzee!*

These facts are especially surprising because of the close physical similarity between the two species. Diamond points out that 98.6% of the genetic material (DNA) found in humans is also found in chimpanzees.

Since genes determine the physical properties of an animal, this close genetic similarity shows that *physically*, we are very similar to chimpanzees. This immediately raises the following question. If we are so very similar to chimpanzees *physically*, why are we so different *intellectually, culturally, and spiritually*?

What can one say about man's *physical* capabilities? Humans cannot run like the deer, cannot fly like the bird, cannot swim like the dolphin, cannot climb like the squirrel—the list extends forever. Quite obviously, G-d did not bestow any special *physical* talents upon mankind. Thus, there is a clear distinction between the spiritual and the physical. In the spiritual, creative, and intellectual realms, mankind excels, whereas in the physical realm, we are quite ordinary.

Prehistoric Man

This lack of any sign of spirituality is not restricted to chimpanzees. It also applies to all species of prehistoric man. The species of prehistoric man most similar to modern human beings is Neandertal Man, “who had brains as large and as complex as our own” (Eric Trinkaus, *The Neandertals*, 1993, p. 418).

What were the tools of Neandertal Man? What were his artistic achievements? What great cities did he build? What profound writings did he leave for posterity? What important moral teachings did he expound? What marvelous paintings, stirring musical compositions, magnificent sculpture, moving poetry, breathtaking architecture, beautiful gardens, and profound scientific discoveries remain from the Neandertals' 300,000-year-long sojourn on our planet? That seems like plenty of time to have accomplished something. However, their meager cultural legacy contains *not a single one* of the above items! One might attribute the lack of cultural accomplishments of the chimpanzee to his smaller brain size, but this argument does not apply to Neandertal Man, *whose brain size was equal to that of contemporary Modern Man*.

Scientists have discovered that Neandertal tools were primarily flints with a sharp edge. Their tools look quite similar to the sharp stones that one finds strewn along every beach. Neandertal tools are so primitive that someone who is not a professional archaeologist would not even recognize them as man-made objects. According to Professor Ian Tattersall, a recognized authority on Neandertal Man (*Scientific American*, January 2000, p. 43):

“The stoneworking skills of the Neandertals consisted of using a stone core, shaped in such a way that a single blow would detach a finished implement. They rarely made tools from other materials.

Archaeologists question the sophistication of their hunting skills. Despite some misleading earlier accounts, no substantial evidence has ever been found for symbolic behavior among the Neandertals or for the production of symbolic objects. Even the Neandertal practice of burying their dead may have been only to discourage hyena incursions, for Neandertal burials lack the ‘grave goods’ that would attest to ritual and belief in afterlife... Though successful in the difficult circumstances of the late Ice Age, the Neandertals lacked the spark of creativity that distinguishes Modern Man.”

Regarding artistic achievements, it is important to mention that the famous magnificent cave paintings found in southwestern France, Spain, and elsewhere, were *all* the work of Modern Man. No cave painting has ever been discovered that was produced by a Neandertal. For unknown reasons, all the Neandertals disappeared from the fossil record about 30,000 years ago, whereas all cave paintings are more recent.

What are the reasons for Neandertal Man’s lack of culture? Why was Modern Man able to revolutionize all aspects of his environment, while Neandertal Man hardly left a trace of his existence? Archaeologists must search very hard to find the remnants of Neandertal Man, in spite of the fact that the Neandertal brain does not suggest any differences from Modern Man in intellectual or behavioral capabilities. The archeological data strongly suggest that humans are fundamentally different from all other prehistoric men.

It is most interesting to note that the many unique features of human behavior appeared quite *suddenly, only a few thousand years ago*. In fact, the appearance of civilization was so sudden and dramatic that the archaeologists speak of a revolution in human behavior—the Neolithic Revolution—whose causes remain a mystery to this day. The sudden recent appearance of civilization is in complete harmony with Bereshit 1:28: “*G-d blessed mankind and commanded him to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the land and subdue it.*” Every archaeological site testifies to the fulfillment of this divine blessing.

Man’s Uniqueness

I have emphasized that the Torah characterization of Man as having been created “*in the image of G-d*” refers to the unique spiritual, creative and intellectual qualities of contemporary human beings. I will discuss three main aspects of man’s uniqueness.

1. Language and Communication

The past several thousand years have witnessed enormous progress in all areas of human endeavor. An essential ingredient of this progress is the unique ability of human beings to communicate ideas with each other through speech. This ability enables human beings to benefit from the ideas of others. The distinguished physicist Isaac Newton once remarked: “If I have seen farther than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Human speech should not be confused with the speech of parrots. Humans have the ability to *communicate ideas*, meaning to convey abstract and complicated ideas in science, technology, philosophy, art, etc. Parrots cannot convey any ideas.

The importance of the communication of ideas cannot be overemphasized. The many technological innovations that have revolutionized human society resulted from the cumulative efforts of many talented people. Because man can communicate ideas, one need not “reinvent the wheel” before making new discoveries. Building upon the work of others has led to the rapid technological progress that is the hallmark of civilization.

Man’s ability to communicate with his fellows is an important aspect of man’s having been created “*in the image of G-d.*”

2. Intellectual Curiosity

Man is the only creature that displays intellectual curiosity regarding abstract matters that *do not enhance his chances for survival*. These include philosophy, art, history, mathematics, aesthetics, theology, science, psychology, sociology, and many others. All other creatures concern themselves only with food, shelter, safety, and mating, for themselves and their family or colony. Only human beings express intellectual curiosity and devote much time to the pursuit of knowledge *that has no practical consequences whatsoever*.

An excellent illustration of this phenomenon is the article that you are now reading. Reading this article will *not* increase your salary, will *not* put better food on your table, and will *not* improve your physical situation in any way. Nevertheless, in spite of the absence of any practical benefits, you continue to read in order to satisfy your intellectual curiosity.

Man’s intellectual curiosity is another aspect of his having been created “*in the image of G-d.*”

3. Conscience and Morality

The most striking feature of man's spiritual uniqueness lies in the realm of conscience and morality. *Only* human beings are capable of making decisions based on the principles of right and wrong. Human beings often sacrifice their personal welfare in the cause of morality. For example, newspaper stories of starving people generate a worldwide appeal for help. These hungry people usually have nothing in common with the average American or European—neither race nor religion nor language nor ideology nor life-style. Yet, the sight of starving people touches our hearts, and our conscience demands that we help alleviate the suffering.

Only mankind deals with moral problems and only human beings possess the spiritual ability to make moral judgments. This divine privilege and accompanying responsibility are ours alone, because we were created “*in the image of G-d.*”

“I have set before you this day, life and good, and death and evil... therefore, choose life.” (Devarim 30:15, 19)

Evolution

The discussion of the origin of mankind cannot be considered complete without a discussion of evolution. No topic generates more heat—and less light—in the religion-science debates than evolution. Ironically, evolution is the only topic about which there is complete agreement between *hareidim* and atheists. Both groups assert that accepting evolution is incompatible with belief in G-d. For example, Richard Dawkins, arguably the world's most famous atheist, writes (*The Blind Watchmaker*, 1986, p. 5): “Darwin has made it possible for me to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.” Similarly, Lee Spetner, a devout Jew, writes (*Not by Chance: Shattering the Modern Theory of Evolution*, 1997, p. viii): “Evolution has led to atheism and the belief that we human beings are no more than a cosmic accident.”

Both Dawkins and Spetner agree that evolution contradicts the Torah. However, the conclusions that they draw from this premise are very different. Spetner believes that the Torah is a book of divine origin, whose truth is incontrovertible. Therefore, he concludes that evolution is nonsense, and he writes his book to justify his view. Dawkins believes that evolution is a well-established branch of science, as reliable as chemistry or astronomy. Therefore, he concludes (even more explicitly in his recent book, *The G-d Delusion*, 2006) that the Torah is nonsense.

We shall see that both of these conclusions are in error. The source of the error lies in the original premise. As many Torah authorities have written, the Torah and evolution are *completely compatible*.

Rav Yehuda HaLevi: In his famous book, *The Kuzari*, Rav Yehuda HaLevi wrote the following about G-d (Fourth Article, Section 3):

“I am He Who ordered the formation of life and raised it up in the following wise order: from basic elements to inanimate forms, and from these to plant life, and from these to animal life in the water and in the air, and from these to animal life on land, with fine senses and wonderful awareness.”

Rav Avraham Isaac HaCohen Kook: Rosh Yeshiva Rav Giora Radler has summarized the teachings of Rav Kook on the subject of evolution (*Evolution, the Laws of Development*, p. 35):

“The claim that evolution contradicts Torah is not only a mistake, but it is a rejection of the Holy One, Blessed be He, in that it rejects G-d’s ability to work through nature...Moreover, it is entirely mistaken to claim that evolutionary theory disproves the existence of G-d or that evolutionary theory shows that the world has no architect or direction.”

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch: Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany was known for his uncompromising opposition to any idea that deviated even slightly from Torah *hashkafa*. Shortly after Darwin’s theory was published, Rav Hirsch wrote the following (*Collected Writings*, vol. 7, p. 264):

“If the notion of evolution were to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world, Judaism would call upon its adherents to give even greater reverence to God, Who in His boundless creative wisdom, needed to bring into existence only one amorphous nucleus and one law of ‘adaptation and heredity’ in order to bring forth the infinite variety of species that we know today.”

Charles Darwin: Rav Hirsch was preceded in his view by Charles Darwin himself, who ended his famous book, *On the Origin of Species*, with the following stirring words:

“There is a grandeur in this view of life, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one, and from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved.”

G-d and Evolution

Darwin, Rav Hirsch, Yehuda HaLevi, and Rav Kook all viewed evolution as the *mechanism* used by G-d to produce the animal kingdom. Particularly interesting is Hirsch's statement that the evolution of the animal kingdom is *even more impressive* than producing every species by a separate act of divine creation. Although it is impressive to make a beautiful pair of shoes, it is much more impressive to make a factory that automatically takes raw materials and from them produces "endless forms" of shoes "most beautiful and most wonderful."

Our Sages have always stressed that G-d works *within* the laws of nature (*olam keminhago nobeg*). This important principle explains how G-d interacts with His world. It follows from this principle that *no scientific discovery* can cast doubt on the existence of G-d or on the divinity of the Torah.

The Words of the Torah – Mankind

The key to understanding the Torah words "*G-d created man*" is to recognize that the Torah is not a biology textbook. Therefore, the word "man" in the Torah creation narrative need not have the same meaning as the word "man" when used by a scientist.

To the biologist, the species Modern Man (*Homo sapiens*), like any other species, is defined by his *physical* characteristics (skull, jaw, teeth, pelvic structure, limbs, etc.) and by his DNA sequences. However, physical features play no role in the biblical understanding of the term "man." Standing six feet tall, walking upright, and possessing a hominid skull are not relevant criteria in the biblical classification scheme. The "man" in the Torah creation narrative, described as "*created by G-d*," is characterized *solely* by his unique creative, intellectual, and spiritual qualities.

The origin of human beings is described in the Torah by the words "G-d created" (*vayivra*). However, this verb is not restricted to mean creation in the physical sense. "Creation" means the formation of something *fundamentally new*, either physically (creation *ex nihilo*) or conceptually (the creation of a totally new kind of entity, such as a living creature). All Torah commentators write that the creation of man "*in the image of G-d*" refers to the unique intellectual, creative and spiritual abilities with which man was endowed by his Creator.

The preceding discussion suggests that the "creation of man" refers not to a new species at all, but to sudden and radical changes in human behavior. If the changes in human behavior were so dramatic and revolutionary that they completely altered all aspects of human society,

then one can truly say that contemporary mankind was “created” by these changes. This is the meaning of the words: “G-d created man.”

Have scientists discovered any evidence for sudden, radical changes in human society and in human behavior within the last several thousand years? As we have already discussed, the remarkable answer to this question is: “Yes.” Archaeological findings show that several thousand years ago, human society suddenly changed so comprehensively that scientists speak of a “revolution”—the Neolithic Revolution.

To summarize, the scientific term “evolution of man” refers to the gradual *physical* changes that have taken in prehistoric man over time, leading to the contemporary species *Homo sapiens*. The Torah term “creation of man” refers to the sudden *spiritual* changes that took place in the behavior of human beings, leading to the beginning of civilization. These two concepts are completely different and completely compatible; there is no contradiction between them.

The Words of the Torah—the Animal Kingdom

We now turn to the formation of the animal kingdom. It is widely, but erroneously believed that the Torah states that each and every species in the animal kingdom was the result of a separate act of divine creation. Malbim, quoted above, emphasizes that this is not the case. The Torah verb for the formation of the advanced land animals (verse 1:25) is that G-d “made” them (*vaya’as*), and not that He “created” them (*vayivrah*). Malbim explains the Torah use of the verb “made” as meaning “the completion of an object and its improvement.”

One sees the consistency between these words of the Malbim and the scientific concept of evolution. Theologians refer to the idea of evolution being orchestrated by G-d as “theistic evolution.” This concept is accepted by many Torah luminaries, including Yehuda HaLevi, Rav Kook, and Rav Hirsch (as quoted above).

In conclusion, equally unfounded are Spetner’s assertion that accepting evolution promotes atheism and Dawkins’s dismissal of belief in G-d based on evolution. The religious person has no reason or need to reject the scientific findings about evolution. 