

# THE INTERSECTION OF *Religion* & SCIENCE



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## *Hello Congregation Beth Israel —*

I'm really looking forward to being with you all at the beginning of March! One of the key questions we'll be exploring over the weekend is how we recognize that the biggest questions we face in this world aren't religious, and they aren't scientific -- they are human. So how do we approach questions of our origins, our destiny and our current reality with a level of respect and understanding of multiple sources of truth? Since one of the biggest challenges we face in our society right now is where we find truth, I wanted to share a few thoughts for you to consider before the weekend that is a common refrain when looking at science and religion, namely, how do we read the opening verses of Genesis?

Genesis is not a science textbook.

That may seem like an obvious statement, but from evangelical Christians to liberal Jews to staunch atheists, people grapple with how to reconcile the opening chapters of Genesis 1 with ideas like Big Bang cosmology and the theory of evolution. Some people respond to it like the Onion article "Mistranslated Myths Of Nomadic Desert Shepherd Tribe Taken At Face Value." Yet that way of reading Genesis completely misses the point -- from both a scientific and a religious perspective.

Genesis is not supposed to be a scientific treatise. First, science as we know it today didn't arise until the 1500 and 1600s, and didn't fully come to fruition until the ideas of peer review, data analysis, and instrumentation emerged in the 1900s and 2000s. Those tools simply didn't exist when Genesis was written.

But more importantly, the opening verses of Genesis are clearly written to be poetry -- indicated by the repeating phrases of "And God said," "and God saw it was good," "and there was evening, and there was morning." We don't read poetry through the lens of scientific analysis; we read it to try to discern why those words were written instead of others. As author (and my cousin) Matthew Zapruder said in an interview on his "Why Poetry?":

...[t]o read poetry is to look for that transcendence poetry can give, the way it can bring us out of ordinary experience, into different levels of understanding, or more exciting, even magical realms. But in order for that to happen, a reader has to at first be completely attentive to the words on the page, and read at least at

first in the same way we would a piece of prose or any writing. Otherwise there can be no meaningful encounter with a poem. . .

[Yet t]here's also something else, which is that poems have an inherent strangeness to them, both in their surfaces and forms (the way they look on the page: line breaks, and sometimes even more aggressive oddities), as well as the strangeness of their movements, which are often unexpected, not linear, associative, leaping. One of the other main purposes of the book was to show how and why the formal qualities of poetry are not merely decorative accessories to meaning, but themselves the source of meaning.

Reading Genesis in this way means that we shouldn't read it like a peer-reviewed journal on astrophysics or biology. We look at the word choices, the phrasing, the evocations, the allusions, and the questions they raise.

As but one example, we can probe why each day ends with the phrase "va'y'hi erev, va'y'hi voker" -- "there was evening, there was morning." We would expect that it would go, "there was morning, there was evening," since our daily rhythm begins when we wake up and ends when we go to sleep. So why is the order reversed?

The word choices here matter -- it doesn't say, "there was night and day," or "there was darkness and light." Yes, those two words come up on the first day of Creation, but those words could easily have been swapped out, saying, for example, "There was night, there was day." Why "evening," erev, and "morning," boker?

Well, the word erev ("evening") is also used to mean "chaos" (as in the phrase erev rav, a "mixed multitude," in Exodus 12:38). And the word boker ("morning") may be connected to words related to either "split" or "investigate," as in "putting things in order." With the repetition of the words va'y'hi erev, va'y'hi voker, "There was evening, there was morning," the story rhythmically evokes an idea of chaos, then order, at the end of each day of creation.

But the universe's natural tendency is to go from order to chaos! Scientists know that from the second law of thermodynamics, but we can also see it in our own lives -- laundry is going to pile up, not clean itself. We get sicker as we age, not healthier. When food is left out, it rots rather than getting fresher. The only way to combat that tendency is to invest time and energy in correcting for it -- that's why we sort the laundry, go to the doctor and have a refrigerator. That's one of the key messages from the opening chapters of Genesis: if we do nothing, the world will remain *tohu va'vohu*, "wild and waste." God brings order out of chaos, and if we see ourselves as created in the image of God, that is our job, as well.

If we look at Genesis as poetry, not science, then we don't need to do mental gymnastics to fit the square peg of Genesis 1 into the round hole of Big Bang cosmology. Instead, its style reminds us that the universe is naturally chaotic and unpredictable -- but we, like God, can strive to bring a little more order in our lives. Even if Genesis is not a science textbook, it can still teach us lessons.