



## ONE MASTERMIND OF SUBSTANCE AND SPIRIT

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In *parasha* (weekly Torah portion) Vayigash, we reach the climax of the Joseph story. Joseph finally identifies himself to his brothers as the sibling they had sold into slavery. (Genesis 45:4) The long-delayed “family reunion” narrative, given the extraordinary events that precede it, engages us emotionally and intellectually, year after year.

But what is revealed in the reunion is much more extraordinary than the reunion itself. We find what may be characterized without exaggeration as Joseph’s *tzadik*-like (righteous) attitude towards his brothers. He extends *comfort* to the brothers who had caused him the seemingly unforgivable hardship and pain of being enslaved and imprisoned. The Hebrew reads *al teitzvu* (אל-תעצבו). (Genesis 45:5) The root of the word תעצבו, which is ע-צ-ב, has the basic meaning of feeling the pain of holding back or renouncing something.

So in effect, Joseph counsels his brothers that, notwithstanding all the circumstances of their betrayal, they need not worry. They need not imagine any necessity to renounce any pleasure or enjoyment in life to make up for the burdens they had imposed on him. If they look at themselves, even through Joseph’s eyes, they need not be angry with themselves, since the Hebrew reads, *v’al yichar b’eineichem* (ואל יחר בעיניכם).

How can we understand Joseph’s attitude and behavior?

Recollect the prolonged estrangement between members of your own family, if such has been the case—and the incomprehensibly pathetic explanations that are typically given to rationalize the longevity of such estrangement. In the lives of our own families, it would certainly be the most exceptional case that even remotely approached the con-

sequences suffered by Joseph. And yet he not only forgives, but also comforts those who consciously chose to seal his fate.

The first glimmer of an answer to our question about Joseph’s attitude and behavior comes in the concluding words of the verse. The Hebrew text reads: *ki l’michya sh’lachani Elokim lifneichem* (כי למחיה שלחני אלקים לפניכם), “. . . for to preserve life, God has sent me before you.” (Genesis 45:5) Joseph’s equanimity reflects an implicit, unshakable conviction that his God is masterminding human events. He believes that there is a “God of history”—natural enough, because he is the son of Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. He sees himself not as the pawn of his brothers’ scheme, but as an empowered agent who has been given the opportunity to save thousands of lives. He trusts the Mastermind of Creation to manage Divine Providence—planned fulfillment of life in an unfolding of the Creation—which is within Joseph’s reach because he is dedicated to reaching out for God’s will, even while living in the midst of Egyptian paganism.

But those of us living thousands of years after Joseph find it difficult to keep a firm grip on such conviction. We sometimes find it an overwhelming challenge to convince ourselves that the Divine Masterminding of Creation is *continuing*, up to and including the present moment. We sometimes find ourselves incredulous when contemplating the prospect of benefiting *personally* from Divine Providence, disbelieving that we can become its beneficiaries by realigning our lives.

Questioning of Divine Providence and God’s continuing masterminding of Creation is reflected in the current unhelpful debate between the more extreme and vocal protagonists of evolution and

intelligent design. The extreme polemic of evolution's advocates denies any cause larger than the theory or law of evolution—take your pick—to explain the presence and purpose of humankind in its present incarnation. The extreme polemic of the advocates of intelligent design would have us believe that virtually all creatures were created in their present forms.

Their mutual hostility would seem to suggest, at least superficially, the opposite of our Talmudic wisdom—in effect, that *neither* rather than “. . . both these and those are the words of the everlasting God.” (Eruvin 13b and Gittin 6b) As Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld has said, “The increasingly nasty debate . . . hinges on the fact that most creationists relate to evolutionists as if they have no soul, and most evolutionists relate to the creationists as if they have no brain.”<sup>1</sup>

Why reject these two polemical extremes?

Common sense would certainly have us regard both as unenlightening. But more fundamentally, the best reasons for us to regard them as extreme may follow from our unique gifts as human beings.

Consider our qualitatively higher intelligence, with our unique powers of observation, understanding, and intervention to accommodate our environment. Our intelligence confirms the undeniable evidence of evolution, and debating the details doesn't change the fundamental understandings of human biology that evolution affords to us.<sup>2</sup>

And consider the singularly spectacular grant of moral choice we have received, in contrast to the inborn instinct that is the hallmark of all other creatures, which ineluctably reveals to us that our own free will largely determines whether the character of the Creation we experience is to be order or chaos. And, certainly, it is our ability to make moral choices that compels us to seek and, in turn, sustain the Source of the potential for moral order in the Creation.

These two ways of looking at the Creation, seeking to fathom its biological substance and its spiritual intelligence, rely of course on different basic principles and methods to achieve dramatically different insights, and may be understood as such—which is typical of normative Judaism.

Yet we're left with nagging questions: Is there any convincing evidence that God is masterminding the Creation in general and human life in particular? Can anything reliably reinforce our hope that our lives are not simply the result of random, haphazard forces and events, but that there is a prospect they can be aligned with the Divine Providence that is revealed in the otherwise enigmatic history of our people?

We take the principles of evolution not as theory, but as scientific *law*. Their significance is not primarily in their existence and operation, however, but instead in their durability, their persistence—that they continue uninterrupted, no longer changing and developing. Moreover, it would be reasonable to expect that if the creation of the universe and its subsequent development reflect random, haphazard events, corresponding to the general portrayal of the evolutionary process, then the scientific method itself would undoubtedly be stymied by the absence of consistency and predictability that enable the formulation of laws.

Cosmological science and astrophysics teach, however, that the creation of the universe and its workings are not accidental, but systematic, knowable, and thus predictable. Thus the *law* of evolution, even though it describes a non-directive process, itself represents the opposite of a *continuous* random, haphazard development—like the laws of gravity and electromagnetism, the laws that regulate the world within the atom, the laws of motion, and all other scientifically validated laws.

As one scientist<sup>3</sup> put it, “You couldn't be a scientist if you thought the universe was a meaningless jumble of odds and ends haphazardly juxtaposed. When physicists probe to a deeper level of subatomic structure, or astronomers extend the reach of their instruments, they expect to encounter additional elegant mathematical order. And so far this faith has been justified.” It may not be surprising, however, that as a scientist he assumes “the [scientific] laws should have an explanation from within the universe and not involve appealing to an external agency.”

Withal, it's evident that the unfolding of the Creation *stopped* in respect to the establishment of consistent, durable physical laws and constants. This halt of Creation reveals, more than anything else, the masterminding that mandates every molecule, revealing the Creator's power to set limits for every necessarily entailed facet of the Creation.

Our generation's cosmological scientists and physicists tell us, for example, that the particular molecules that are essential to sustain life, which were constituents of exploding stars in the early “moments” of the Creation, are now indispensable components of our bodies.

So should we imagine that the Mastermind of the Creation devotes attention only to cosmological and natural history, excluding human history? If so, we might ask: Why should our uniquely human attributes and social history be considered any less a part of cosmological and natural history than the social life of ants or the family life of wolves?

The confusion occasioned by these questions, not unlike the debate between advocates of evolution and intelligent-design, springs partly from a false antagonism between substance and spirit. It reflects the widespread and mistaken notion that the two are mutually exclusive, a residual of Greek dualism, which has had such an outsized influence on western culture and Christianity.

Too often, “spirituality” is defined nonsensically, as if it existed entirely apart from physical life. But as Jews we understand that the *unknowable* Mastermind of the Big Bang of Creation, the infinite, ever-enduring, enigmatic *spiritual* God that ordered the Creation of the universe so that exploding stars would create the constituents necessary to sustain our lives, is the same God that distributed those constituents so that singularly we would have intelligence and moral choice. One God is masterminding substance and spirit, which are inextricable elements of the same phenomena. Beyond that understanding, our tradition teaches that it is useless, literally, to probe what existed before Creation or what exists beyond it.

Yet the Mastermind of Creation can be understood as rolling out and rolling back the Creation,

starting and stopping it in ways that have the potential to be life-affirming. Although it’s true that such Divine Intelligence only finds expression in material substance, the substance itself is not the intelligence, merely the means of materially manifesting the Creator’s spiritual dimension.

The inseparability of substance and spirit is the same whether we consider the incorporeal Author of the Big Bang and the physical laws that followed it, or the moral and ethical acts that follow from our intangible human intelligence and moral sensibility. The spirit that we see manifested in substantive *acts* of love, justice, and creativity demonstrates the conjunction of spirit and substance, whether in the Mastermind of Creation or our own attempts to live in the image of that Mastermind.

So like Joseph, we too can have an unshakable conviction that the Mastermind of Creation plans the fulfillment of life in the unfolding of the Creation, including opportunities we are given to save life, which are within our grasp when we reach out for God’s will that is revealed to us in the vision and path of Torah.

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<sup>1</sup> See “Evolution and Religious Faith: A Jewish View,” National Public Radio (August 8, 2005), online at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4761360>.

<sup>2</sup> See National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine, *Science, Evolution, and Creationism* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2008), available online (without charge) at [http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=11876](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=11876).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Davies, Director of Beyond: The Center for Fundamental Concepts in Science at Arizona State University.

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