

SUMMARY OF THE BETECH AFFAIR

Rabbi Natan Slifkin

(Produced in response to Dr. Betech's summary, which, in the words of one my readers, was a "way-too-long, confusing and rambling group of factual distortions and misrepresentations, all in what seem to be a deliberate attempt to clutter and confuse the thought-processes of those reading it.")

Dr. Isaac Betech is a pediatrician in Mexico. He is very active in Jewish outreach, in collaboration with Rabbi Yosef Yagen of Monsey. By his own admission, he was instrumental in getting several Gedolim to sign a letter of condemnation against my books. According to someone in Mexico who wants to translate my books into Spanish, he would be unable to distribute them in bookstores due to the opposition that Dr. Betech would doubtless exert.

Dr. Betech demanded that I stand behind the claims of my book *The Challenge of Creation* and have a "scientific debate" about evolution with him. Originally, I refused to accept, for the following reasons:

1. It is not my role to defend evolution, just as it was not the goal of my book to prove evolution. I am a Torah student, not a scientist. The purpose of my book is to show how that which is accepted fact in the global scientific community does not conflict with Torah. Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky wrote about how the moon landing forces some people to re-evaluate their approach to what Rambam writes about the moon in the *Mishneh Torah*; this does not mean that Rav Kamenetzky would have been obligated to defend the factuality of the moon-landing against the many people (including Orthodox rabbis) who believe it to have been a hoax.
2. Scientific truths are not determined in public debates—even debates between scientists, let alone debates between a pediatrician and a rabbi! They are determined by papers describing evidence, arguments, predictions and experiments, that are published in peer-reviewed scientific publications. Surprisingly, although Dr. Betech claims to have 25 years of 100% success in convincing scientists that evolution is false, and considers it critical that every Jew agree with him, he has never submitted any papers to scientific journals. I asked him why he hasn't done this, but he did not respond.
3. There are already immense resources available in print and on the internet regarding this topic. There are already countless books and websites (by scientists) explaining and defending evolution, and countless books and websites (by fundamentalist Christians) attacking evolution. There are also numerous videos of debates on this topic. A debate between Dr. Betech and myself would not add anything significant enough to justify the huge amounts of time and energy involved.
4. Dr. Betech's claim to want to have a "scientific" debate was a scam. In science, one draws conclusions from the evidence, regardless of one's religious beliefs. But it is perfectly obvious that Dr. Betech's evaluation of the evidence is dictated by his passionate, fundamental religious beliefs. In response, Dr. Betech was forced to say that he would agree to objectively draw the requisite

conclusions. Yet as I pointed out, of course he has to *say* that, but the question is whether he is trying to fool other people or even himself. In order to resolve this, I repeatedly asked Dr. Betech to describe what the conclusions regarding Torah would be if the evidence was in favor of evolution. Would it be that evolution can be reconciled with Torah, or would it be that Torah is *ch"v* not divine? Dr. Betech refused to consider the question.

5. Dr. Betech had a requirement that, in order for me to justify accepting evolution and not have to retract my book, I would have to provide “irrefutable proofs” that evolution is true. But this requirement was absurd. *Nothing at all* can be “irrefutably proven”—and certainly not to somebody religiously determined to reject it. (And I don’t think that Dr. Betech’s religious or scientific beliefs can be “irrefutably proven”!) See <http://www.rationalistjudaism.com/2010/10/irrefutable-proofs.html>

6. The goal of anti-evolutionists in such debates is to present a list of objections to evolution, and use them to claim that evolution is false. But the point is not whether there are any shortcomings and difficulties with the evolutionary model (I have no doubt that there are, just as with any complex theory); rather, the point is whether evolution is superior to Dr. Betech’s theory in explaining the available evidence. (In my view, it is superior by many orders of magnitude.)

7. Even if I were to be personally convinced that evolution is false, I would still consider it vital to share the teachings of Rav Hirsch, Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik and others regarding how it can be reconciled with Judaism, for the sake of all those people who do regard evolution as true and are not going to be convinced otherwise by Dr. Betech. This is consistent with the approach of Rav Hirsch himself, who personally did *not* believe in evolution, but considered it important to show how it can be reconciled with Judaism. I discussed Rav Hirsch’s view in this post: <http://www.rationalistjudaism.com/2010/10/-wisdom-of-rav-hirsch.html>. In the comments thread I repeatedly asked Betech to respond to Rav Hirsch’s position, but he never did.

For all these reasons, I did not agree to Dr. Betech's proposal. I did, however, offer a counter-proposal. Dr. Betech had claimed that he wants to engage in scientific debates with me, that such debates lead to truth, and that such pursuits of truth are one of his main goals in life. I therefore suggested that in light of this, since he considers his view of Creation to be (a) correct (b) binding upon every Jew and (c) based on science as well as belief, and since (d) his view, unlike that of the scientific community, has never been critically evaluated or even described, he should therefore explain his view in detail (i.e. describing when each group of animals lived), and subject it to a scientific, critical appraisal. I even offered to let him have the last word in this discussion.

But Dr. Betech refused to explain his view and accept questions on it, unless I agreed to first debate evolution (which he knew I would not do; hence, he was effectively refusing). He proffered some “reasons” for his refusal, none of which remotely explained why he would not unconditionally share his view of Creation and accept questions on it.

Despite Dr. Betech having effectively refused my proposal for no apparent reason, in contrast to the numerous legitimate reasons that I gave for refusing his proposed debate, he then publicly claimed that he had agreed to my request and I had unjustifiably refused his. Someone using the name “Baruch Gross” sent out a mailing to hundreds of people portraying Dr. Betech as the reasonable scientist and myself as the closed-minded fundamentalist!

In response to this disingenuous misrepresentation, I decided to show that Dr. Betech’s way of distorting the situation could be used against him. I stated that I would agree to debate Dr. Betech, if he would fulfill two conditions that he himself had acknowledged to be required in such cases:

1. Dr. Betech claimed that he was searching for the truth and agreed that he would have to objectively evaluate the evidence and draw the necessary conclusions. I pointed out that since Orthodox Jews are prohibited from considering beliefs that are heretical, Dr. Betech (an Orthodox Jew) would have to clarify that belief in evolution is not contrary to the Torah.

2. A while back, Dr. Betech refused my invitation to debate the halachic/ hashkafic propriety of my books, on the grounds that, since he is a pediatrician, he is not qualified to engage in such a debate. I therefore requested that Dr. Betech prove himself qualified to engage in a debate about evolution—either by demonstrating relevant academic qualifications, or by publishing his work in suitable scientific publications.

In the discussions with Dr. Betech on my website, www.RationalistJudaism.com, my readers observed that Dr. Betech “consistently misrepresents and distorts facts, in addition to avoiding answering pointed questions”; that he “claims to have proved things, when he hasn’t proved them;” that he is “seemingly full of *temimus* and *yashrus* on the surface, but in fact full of posturing and dishonesty”; and that “he has been deceptive time and time again... he continuously made statements that misrepresented the facts and made claims that distorted the truth... attempts at dialog with someone who has proved to be dishonorable, disingenuous and deceptive and whose aim is clearly to hurt you, is a mistake and something which should be avoided.” Hopefully this summary will conclude matters. Dr. Betech is welcome to publish his own book; my frustration with the Charedi Gedolim who banned my books without discussing it with me was because they were issuing a religious condemnation based upon authority and without explanation (and based on false reports), but I certainly have no problem with someone publishing a critique of my work that is based on arguments rather than authority. Dr. Betech is also invited to submit papers to scientific publications; if he succeeds in convincing the global scientific community of the merits of his position (and he claims that he has never failed to convince even scientists of this), I will certainly acknowledge it in future editions of my book and adjust it accordingly. Meanwhile, if anyone has questions for me, they are welcome to write to me at zoorabbi@zootorah.com.