

Dovid Orlofsky: Not Very Funny

(condensed version – not including the step-by-step rebuttal of his lecture, and of his letter)

Rabbi Orlofsky's Leaked Letter and Inadequate Apology

Much to the surprise of myself and many others, Rabbi Dovid Orlofsky, a very popular and very funny speaker, launched several attacks upon me – including a public lecture in Har Nof, and a particularly nasty letter that was leaked when sent for peer review. I must note that I was very distressed when I heard about all this. I had known Rabbi Orlofsky for several years and he even spoke at my Sheva Berachos. I would have hoped that he would at least speak to me before publicly condemning me. I was even more disturbed at the manner in which he condemned me – utterly distorting my positions on several issues, bringing in issues that were not part of the ban, and engaging in vicious personal attacks which included repeating lies about my history.

Rabbi Orlofsky's letter of condemnation was entitled "Torah Community Under Attack Again" (the title referred, somewhat bizarrely, to the heated reaction against the Gedolim's attack on everyone who accepts modern science). He had sent this letter to a colleague for review prior to distribution, and his colleague sent it out, reportedly without Rabbi Orlofsky's approval. The letter was full of nasty invective, including numerous personal insults as well as repeating lies about my history; it referred to me as a "sad and tragic figure" who is "arrogant," "seriously messed up" and who was "asked to leave" two yeshivos (which, needless to say, is utterly false). After Rabbi Orlofsky's letter became public, there was an uproar. Many people, including *talmidei chachamim* and *Roshei Yeshivah*, were appalled at the crassness of his writing. Rabbi Orlofsky suddenly found himself being roundly condemned, and was forced to issue an apology. It is a masterpiece of obfuscation:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Someone is circulating a letter containing personal attacks against Nosson Slifkin purporting to represent me.

I have not authorized ANY letter to be distributed! I am working on a letter relating to this issue. That letter is NOT it. Please send this to whoever has a copy and ask them not to distribute this letter.

I apologize to Nosson and his family for the hurt they must have suffered from this action.

Sincerely,

Dovid Orlofsky

Note that he does not retract the false slander in the letter. Note too that he does not express any regret for anything that he wrote, claiming that the hurt is from the actions of the person who sent out the letter rather than from his own disgusting words. The apology itself is extraordinarily disingenuous: "I am working on a letter relating to this issue. That letter is NOT it." This is false. That letter was indeed the letter he was working on! Many people understandably took this part of the "apology" to mean that Rabbi Orlofsky was not the author of the letter "Torah Community Under Attack Again." While there is, ingeniously, room for Rabbi Orlofsky to deny that he was trying to escape responsibility for authoring the letter, this is certainly how it reads.

Rabbi Orlofsky is Caught Out

In Rabbi Orlofsky's letter, he made an interesting declaration:

Imagine for a moment that the gedolei Torah said that a position you held was kefirah. Personally, I would tremble to the depth of my soul. I would beg them to teach me where I had gone wrong and how I could atone for this most heinous crime.

This was especially interesting in light of the fact that Rabbi Orlofsky had himself taught the same "heretical" views. Furthermore, Rabbi Orlofsky's endorsement of these views was still present on his website at the same time that he issued his letter of denunciation! Here they are:

<http://www.jemsem.org/dama/5764-iyar.html>

Dear Rabbi Orlofsky:

I teach the 7th grade in a Hebrew school, and Baruch Hashem, they are very sophisticated and ask a lot of tough questions. One question I seemed to stumble upon was when one of the students asked me where dinosaurs fit in with the torah, and whether or not science and Torah disagree or agree. I am hoping you can help me with this one!

Thank you so much.

Name withheld

Post Shalhevet - Summer 2001

Dear Everyone,

Well, these are certainly Rabbi Orlofsky's favorite subjects: biology, and physics. Needless to say I have no formal training in these areas, and I am only repeating what I have heard from others.

Let's start at the beginning (no pun intended). Where did the universe come from? Today people like to say "from the Big Bang" but that is nonsensical. The Big Bang theory maintains that there was an original mass of matter/energy that exploded about 16 billion years ago and expanded into the universe we see today. Okay, let's say that is true. It doesn't answer the question of where that primal matter came from. Just the opposite, it creates more problems for us. Because if the universe exploded at some point and is expanding all the time, eventually it will stretch all the way and burn itself out. If so, the universe is finite, not infinite. If it is not infinite, than like all

finite things, it had to come from somewhere. So to say “I believe in the Big Bang instead of G-d is silly.

The next issue is the age of the universe, or more important to most people, dinosaurs. We know dinosaurs existed – we saw them in Jurassic Park. Also we have dug up a lot of big bones. They obviously belonged to someone. Based on all the big bones, I conclude that there were pretty large creatures that used to use those bones that have all died out. When did this happen exactly? That’s a good question. The Torah says that 5764 years ago Adom and Chava were in Gan Eden. What happened during the five and a half days before that is certainly a point of speculation. There are definitely sources that indicate that they were not our conception of days. Dr. Gerald Schroder in his books on creation and evolution suggests that using Einstein’s theory of relativity the six days could equal 16 billion years. That is an approach. Another approach is that no one can tell you how old the world is – only how old it appears. Hashem according to the story created everyone fully grown. So perhaps the world looks millions of years old but is really younger.

When it comes to evolution, I can likewise take a nonchalant attitude. Maybe things did evolve and that was the method Hashem used to bring about life. Personally, I feel there are so many problems with the evolutionary theory that it takes a lot of faith to believe in it. That is probably why whenever I have tried to discuss the problems of evolution with scientists they tend to get defensive to the point of sounding shrill. So I usually just nod politely. There are many classic works on the subject of problems with evolution – you can do a search on the web, I’m sure or try a library, if people still use those things.

I have been asked, why would Hashem create a bunch of dinosaurs and then wipe them all out? My personal feeling is that we needed fossil fuels and dinosaurs sure make great fossils!

Well, as always there is more to say, but I hope this gives you all enough material for a five-minute response to seventh graders or college professors. Then maybe we can deal with more important issues like having a meaningful life.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Dovid Orlofsky

<http://www.jemsem.org/dama/5764-sivan.html>

1 Sivan 5764

Pomegranates, Science & Emunas Chachamim

Dear Rabbi Orlofsky,

Judaism is full of spiritual representations including the claim that there are 613 pips in the pomegranates for the 613 Mitzvos. This is usually presented by parents and teachers to be a true and absolute fact. The scientific reality tends to be somewhat different (I have never personally counted but I have heard from people who have.)

My question relates to this anomaly in the broader sense. How are such statements from Chazal that contradict objective science meant to be understood? One can say that they are only meant symbolically rather than literally. However hardliners would decry this as iconoclastic and a lack of Emonas Chachomim. How then should such discrepancies be understood, and how should they be presented to young and older pupils.

Thank you for your time and interest.

Name & Seminary withheld

Dear Name Withheld,

Let me begin with a number of picayune responses to your question that doesn't answer the essence of the point you asked, but will hopefully make for some interesting reading.

The chazal never said that a pomegranate has 613 seeds. The gemara says that just as a pomegranate is filled with seeds, so even the empty ones of Israel are filled with good deeds.

Furthermore, every Rosh Hashana my daughter counts the seeds of a pomegranate and on more than one occasion claims to have found 613 seeds (I didn't check).

But for arguments sake, let us say they made this claim and it isn't true. There are more than enough such statements that you could have chosen. For example, a nursing woman will not menstruate because the menstrual blood turns into milk. That's one that the scientists haven't come up with yet.

There are three basic approaches that one can take to this issue.

1. They were wrong!

There have been many important Jewish thinkers over the years who have suggested that the chazal worked with the knowledge available at the time when they lived, and maybe they were wrong. For a more thorough discussion of this approach you can see Nosson Slifkin's "The Science of Torah".

2. They were right, but things have changed!

The converse of the above approach. The chazal described the scientific reality at the time but mishana habriyos - the world over time has changed.

3. You don't understand what they are talking about!

The chazal say there were 600,000 people at maamad har sinai. But there were more! Well, we aren't counting woman and children. But what about men over 80? The number doesn't even include Moshe and Aharon!

Obviously the chazal aren't trying to teach me a historical fact based on the population 3300 years ago. There is a significance to the number 600,000 and that's how many people were there, even if there were more. You have to delve into the meaning of the chazal and understand the message they are trying to teach, rather than understand them as explaining an exact scientific fact.

"Im Lavan garti, vitaryag mitzvos shimarti", Yaakov says on his return from Padan Aram. But he married two sisters! Many meforshim explain that Yaakov didn't keep the Torah outside of Eretz Yisroel. Then how can the chazal say Yaakov said he kept the taryag mitzvos! Obviously the chazal are telling us something deeper about the message Yaakov sent to Aisev.

So if there are supposed to be 613 seeds in the pomegranate than that represents something more than a simple botanical fact.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Dovid Orlofsky

Thus, Rabbi Orlofsky had himself taught such "heresy" to thousands of innocent seminary students, and yet he showed no signs of trembling to the depths of his soul or begging the Gedolim to tell him how to atone for this most heinous crime.

Rabbi Orlofsky's Attempt to Regain Credibility

The bloggers caught out Rabbi Orlofsky on this hypocrisy. As a result of this, and apparently also due to a message that he received that the Kamenetzky family greatly disapproved of his antics, Orlofsky wrote a public statement in which he sort of tried to back down somewhat.

1 Iyar 5765

A Letter From Rabbi Orlofsky

Dear JEMSEM Readers,

First of all, I would like to apologize for my less than perfect attendance record this past year. I have too many obligations and unfortunately, my JEMSEM responsibilities has been among the casualties.

One issue that has occupied a disproportionate amount of my time has been an unfortunate situation that I would like to address publicly for the first time. That is the issue of the kol koreh that was released some months ago regarding three of the works by Nosson Slifkin. I stress "publicly" because apparently two drafts of my letter were released to the public and so I have been thrust into responding to letters that I never meant to release. I am finally, as a result of the drafts that have been floating around, releasing my letter officially on JEMSEM, since this is the only official forum I have.

First, I would like to establish a general approach to my answers offered on JEMSEM. Rabbi Tendler, who answers the "Ask The Posek" questions once sent me a question and asked me to respond. I told him it was a halachic question; I am not qualified to answer halachic questions. If he will tell me what the halacha is, I will do my best to explain why it is that way.

I suppose this approach could be described as apologetics; I prefer to see it as humility. In the words of the Sheriff in "Cool Hand Luke" (ask your grandparents) "A man has to know his limitations". I have been accused on occasion as having no theology, meaning I don't innovate a new approach to religion. I agree. I have always tried to follow my Rebbeim and be true to their views, and I am neither a scholar nor perfect. None the less, I think I have done some good over the years presenting Torah positions in a way that people can understand and accept.

On JEMSEM we have discussed approaches to many questions. All the views expressed in my column represent my own understanding. I am sure I have made mistakes. Sometimes they are simple mistakes based on the fact that I have no editor. When I wrote an article for the HaModiah, it sometimes took weeks of writing and back and forth with my editor, as well as with the editorial board, before my articles were published.

On JEMSEM, I shoot off a response, sometimes stopping to reread it, sometimes not, before clicking the "SEND" button and that is it. No doubt all of my responses in the archives could use a good review and editing, but that is a task I must leave to others or I will never have time to write anything new.

Recently, however, it has come to my attention that I may have misled my JEMSEM readership. Several months ago, a letter was signed by many gedolei Torah establishing a halachic position regarding Torah and Science. The attitude that Chazal can be wrong when it comes to science was deemed to be illegitimate. Among the signatories was the person I consider to be my Rebbe, HaRav Moshe Shapiro Shlita.

As such, I have asked JEMSEM to take down my two responses regarding Torah and Science and request that those whom I may have misled please accept my apologies.

Let me make clear; I am not saying you have to accept my view on this subject. There are gedolei Torah who disagree and feel that it is acceptable to espouse such a view. But though I try to present all the Torah views on a subject, I personally try to express the views of my Torah authorities

I will shortly be posting my latest draft of my “letter to no one in particular” on my understanding of the Slifkin affair. If you are interested, you can read it; if not, then don’t waste your time.

I wrote this letter to clarify the issues for myself and for a number of B’nei and B’nos Torah who felt their emunas chachamim had been shaken. Usually there are two sides to an issue; Gadol A says this and Gadol B says that and everyone follows their Rebbe. In this case for some reason it became gedolim A say this and they are stupid, evil, irresponsible, etc.

You can agree with these gedolim or not, but it is inappropriate to attack them or question their competence. That was my motivation for writing the letter. To allow those who wish to still believe in the gedolei Torah to at least understand their point of view.

Many people have chosen to close their eyes and wait for this all to go away. I considered that. But if there is one individual whose opinion I can affect and restore their emunas chachamim, then all the time I have spent and all the abuse I have been subjected to, is more than worthwhile.

Sincerely,

Dovid Orlofsky

This was likewise dishonest. Rabbi Orlofsky claims that the only reason why he sent out mistaken material was that he didn’t have time to review it – as though if he would have taken the time to do so, he would have realized that it was inappropriate to recommend my approach. This is nonsense. At the time, neither he nor any of his colleagues were aware that there were any objections to my approach. He himself admitted in his letter of condemnation that nobody realized that there was anything wrong with this material until the Gedolim came out against it!

Furthermore, Rabbi Orlofsky’s description of the situation is likewise wrong. “Usually there are two sides to an issue; Gadol A says this and Gadol B says that and everyone follows their Rebbe. In this case for some reason it became gedolim A say this and they are stupid, evil, irresponsible, etc.” Yes, usually there are two sides to an issue; Gadol A says this and Gadol B says that and everyone follows their Rebbe. But in this case, Gadol A claimed that there was never a legitimate Gadol B, and Rabbi Orlofsky was likewise echoing this approach!

Finally, Rabbi Orlofsky’s self-martyrdom, when he speaks of all the abuse to which he has been subjected, gives the impression that this abuse was due to his taking upon the noble task of defending the Gedolim. Nothing could be further from the truth. The “abuse” – or rather, strong condemnation – to which he was subjected, was a result of his shockingly offensive personal attacks and slander against me.