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Lichvod HaRosh Yeshivah, HaRav HaGaon R' Aharon Feldman, shlita,

I am writing concerning the Rosh Yeshivah's essay *The Slifkin Affair: Issues and Perspectives*. Of course this essay was very distressing for me, in light of the many treasured meetings that I have had with the Rosh Yeshivah over the years and in particular the sympathy and solidarity that the Rosh Yeshivah extended towards me during the first eight months of the controversy, when the Rosh Yeshivah told me that the ban on my books was a terrible mistake. While I have numerous points of contention with the essay, for the purposes of this letter I will only focus on the Rosh Yeshivah's main point – the explanation of Rav Elyashiv's view of why it is “heretical” to state that Chazal sometimes stated facts about science that are incorrect.

The Rosh Yeshivah stated that this view is a minority opinion which has been rejected by most authorities, and that we are obligated to follow the majority. My Rebbeim dispute the notion that a minority opinion in *hashkafah* may not be adopted, except perhaps where the issue is both one of *ikarei ha-das* and ruled upon in one direction in the Gemara (as per the last *teshuvah* of the Chasam Sofer in *Yoreh De'ah*). But I will not focus on that point here. Instead, I would like to show that this approach, rather than being only that of a small minority, is held by a great number of authorities – and amongst the Rishonim, was the majority opinion!

In the many months since the Rosh Yeshivah disseminated his essay, several people have sent me citations of Torah scholars throughout the ages who adopted the view that not all of Chazal's scientific pronouncements were correct. Following is a list of over forty Gedolei Rishonim and Acharonim who were of this view:

1. **Rav Sherira Gaon** states that some of the Sages' medical advice may be wrong and even harmful (*Otzar HaGeonim, Gittin 68, #376*).
2. **R. Hai Gaon**, along with R. Sherira, say that Chazal's view about the sun travelling behind the firmament is incorrect and must be rejected (cited in *Responsa Maharam Alashkar #96*).
3. **Rabbi Yehudah ben Barzilai** states that Rav Yochanan made a mathematical error (*Sefer Ha-Itim #113*).
4. **Rabbi Eliezer of Metz** states that Chazal erred in stating that the sun travels behind the firmament at night (*Sefer Yere'im #52*). This is with regard to the discussion in *Pesachim 94b* where Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi concludes that the opinion of the non-Jewish

scholars, that the sun travels behind the earth at night, was correct. While Maharal interprets this metaphorically, Rabbi Eliezer of Metz and countless other authorities take the Gemara at face value and explain that Chazal were mistaken; even Rabbeinu Tam, who claims that the Jewish scholars were actually correct and that the sun travels behind the sky at night, disputes the Maharal and takes the Gemara at face value.

5. **Rambam** states that the Sages knowledge of astronomy was not based on tradition and was sometimes errant (*Guide for the Perplexed* 2:8 and 3:14).
6. **Tosefos Rid** states that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (*Tosefos Rid, Shabbos* 34b, s.v. *Eizehu*) and expresses surprise that Rabbi Yochanan and the judges of Caesarea erred in a simple mathematical matter (but by implication it is not impossible to err in other scientific matters) (Commentary to *Eruvin* 76b).
7. **Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam** states that the statements of the Sages in medicine, science and astronomy were based on their own investigations and were sometimes incorrect. (I know that Rabbi Moshe Shapiro has repeatedly claimed that this is a fraudulent work that was falsely attributed to Rabbeinu Avraham by the *maskilim*. However the manuscript experts that I consulted dismissed this theory. Fragments of the original Arabic, dating probably from the 14th century, were discovered in the Cairo Geniza. The treatise has been printed in the *Ein Yaakov* for over 100 years without anyone challenging it as being heretical, and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach accepted it as an authentic view.)
8. **Ramban** presents the opinion of the Greek philosophers regarding conception as an alternative to that of the Sages (Commentary to Leviticus 12:2). He also suggests that the dispute between the Sages concerning *terefos* may be based on a scientific dispute – where one side would be correct and one incorrect (*Chullin* 42a).
9. **Tosafos** states that Rabbi Yochanan and the Gemara in *Sukkah* erred in a simple mathematical matter (*Eruvin* 76b). (The Vilna Gaon is appalled at the idea that they could have erred in such a simple matter; but he does not deny that Tosafos is of this opinion.)
10. **Rashba** states that Rabbi Yochanan and the judges of Caesarea erred in a mathematical matter (Commentary to *Eruvin* 76b).
11. **Rosh** states that Rabbi Yochanan and the judges of Caesarea erred in a mathematical matter (*Tosefos HaRosh, Eruvin* 76b and *Sukkah* 8b). He also endorses the view of Rabbi Eliezer of Metz that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (*Pesachim* 2:30; *She'eilos U'Teshuvos HaRosh, Kelal* 14, #2).
12. **Sefer Mitzvos HaGadol** endorses the view of Rabbi Eliezer of Metz that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (*Lo Ta'aseh* #79).
13. **Rabbeinu Manoach** states that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (Commentary to Mishneh Torah, *Hilchos Chametz U-Matzah* 5:11, s.v. *Ela bemayim shelanu*).

14. **Meiri** indicates that the Sages' knowledge of human anatomy was inaccurate (Commentary to *Niddah* 17b).
15. **Ritva** indicates that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (Commentary on the Haggadah, s.v. *Matzah zo she'anu ochlim*).
16. **Rabbeinu Bechaya ben Asher** presents the opinion of scientists regarding conception as a legitimate alternative to that of the Sages (Commentary to Leviticus 12:2).
17. **Rabbeinu Yerucham ben Meshullam** endorses the view of Rabbi Eliezer of Metz that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (*Toldos Adam VeChavah, Nesiv V*, Part 3).
18. **Ralbag** states that Ezekiel received a mistaken scientific fact in one of his prophecies (Genesis 15:4, *Beiur Divrei Hasipur*, and Job 38:18-20, *Beiurei Divrei Hama'aneh*).
19. **Ran** expresses surprise that Rabbi Yochanan erred in a simple mathematical matter (*Eruvin* 76b).
20. **Rabbi Yitzchak Arama** states that the Sages erred concerning the motion of the stars (*Akeidas Yitzchak, Parashas Bo* 37).
21. **Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi** states that the Sages had a scientific dispute with the non-Jews concerning where the sun goes at night and that Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi decided in favor of the gentile scholars (Responsum #57).
22. **Maharam Alashkar** states that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (Responsum #96).
23. **Rabbi Shem Tov ben Yosef** endorses Rambam's view that the Sages erred in matters of astronomy (*Shem Tov* commentary to *The Guide for the Perplexed* 2:8:2).
24. **Radvaz** states that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (*She'eilos Uteshuvos Radvaz*, Part IV, #282).
25. **Lechem Mishneh** states that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (*Lechem Mishneh* to *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Shabbos* 5:4).
26. **Maharsha** states that the Sages had a dispute concerning rainfall which is to be understood literally as a scientific dispute (and hence one side is wrong) (*Ta'anis* 9b).
27. **Minchas Kohen** states that the Sages erred concerning where the sun goes at night (*Sefer Mevo Hashemesh* 10).
28. **Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo** states that the Sages erred in various matters of astronomy (*Elim, Ma'ayan Chastum* #67).
29. **Rabbi Yisrael Friedman of Ruzhin** says that because the gentiles dedicated themselves to lower forms of wisdom such as the natural sciences, they were able to attain greater proficiency in them than Chazal, who dedicate themselves to higher forms of wisdom (Cited by Rabbi Menachem Nachum Friedman in *Maseches Avos Im Perush Man*, p. 8).
30. **Rabbi Binyamin Mussafia** states that the Sages erred regarding their belief in the salamander being generated in fire and living in it (*Mussaf Ha-Aruch, erech Salamandra*).

31. **Chavos Ya'ir** states that the Sages erred in various matters of astronomy and endorses Rambam's view on this matter (*She'eilos UTeshuvos Chavos Ya'ir* #210).
32. **Pri Chadash** states that Rabbi Dosa, whose view was adopted in the *Shulchan Aruch*, erred in a zoological matter concerning whether a non-kosher animal can have horns (*Pri Chadash, Yoreh De'ah* 80:2).
33. **Rabbi Yitzchak Lampronti** suggests that the Sages may have been mistaken about lice spontaneously generating, just as they were mistaken about where the sun goes at night (*Pachad Yitzchak, erech tzeidah*). (Note that even his teacher Rav Brill, who disagrees with him, admits that the Sages themselves thought themselves mistaken in their dispute with the non-Jewish scholars.)
34. **Rabbi Aviad Sar-Shalom Basilea** states that "one does not compromise his faith in the least by disagreeing with a given statement of Chazal as long as it is clear that Chazal based that statement not on received tradition but on their own reasoning" (*Sefer Emunas Chachamim*, Chap. 5) – he adds that if Chazal were unanimous on something then they must have been correct due to their superior intellect, which would presumably not apply to scientific data that was received from the empirical investigations of others.
35. **Korban Nesanel** states that Rabbi Yochanan and the judges of Caesarea erred in a mathematical matter (*Eruvin* 76b).
36. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch** states that the Sages relied on the scientific knowledge of their era which was sometimes mistaken (Letter to Rabbi Hile Wechsler). (I know that Rav Moshe Shapiro *shlita* has repeatedly claimed that this letter is not from Rav Hirsch, and his disciple's work *Afikei Mayim* claims that it is merely a collection of Azariyah de Rossi's ideas, but there is irrefutable evidence that it is from Rav Hirsch – we have Rabbi Wechsler's original letters to Rav Hirsch containing his questions and reactions to the letters.)
37. **Maharam Schick** states that certain matters in the Talmud were not part of the Sinaitic tradition but rather were assessments that are potentially errant (Responsum #7).
38. **Rabbi Dovid Friedmann** (Karliner) states that the Sages' knowledge of many scientific things did not stem from Sinaitic tradition but rather from their own knowledge and things that they learned from non-Jews (letter quoted in Rabbi Moshe Pirutinsky, *Sefer Habris* 264:7:11).
39. **Ben Ish Chai** says that Chazal's statements about astronomy were based on their own speculation and were in error (*Benayahu, Bava Batra* 25b)
40. **Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog** states that he adopts the position of Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam that the Sages were not infallible in their pronouncements about science (*Judaism: Law & Ethics*, p. 152).
41. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler** states that the Sages sometimes gave mistaken explanations of halachos that were based on the scientific knowledge of their time (*Michtav Me-Eliyahu* IV p. 355).

Even if a few of these sources can be interpreted differently, most will remain. And there are many further sources which strongly indicate this approach, albeit not as explicitly as in the above sources. In addition, this list does not include recent authorities of our time who adopted or legitimized this approach, such as Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (who rated its application regarding medicine as a legitimate viewpoint that is clearly not beyond the pale, albeit a minority view that is not used for halachic purposes), Rav Aryeh Carmell, and Rav Shaul Yisraeli. Nor does it include current authorities who legitimize it, such as Rav Shlomo Fisher, Rav Zalman Nechemiah Goldberg, Rav Herschel Schachter, and Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky. Furthermore, all the later authorities I have cited, both in this paragraph and in the above list, were clearly not of the opinion that it was forbidden to adopt this approach. Either they disagreed that one must follow the majority view in this matter, or they disagreed that the majority view was that this position was wrong.

I am aware of only a small number of authorities who maintained that Chazal were infallible in all their pronouncements. Several authorities commonly cited as maintaining this view, such as Rashba and Maharam Alashkar, clearly did not do so, for they are in the list above as attesting in some cases to scientific errors in the Gemara. The statements by these authorities which seem to attest to the infallibility of Chazal may well be polemical statements, generalities that do not address rare scientific errors, or statements that were limited to particular cases such as *terefos* about which Chazal received their information from Sinai. The fact that authorities used the approach of *nishtaneh hateva* does not mean that they considered Rambam's approach to be wrong and certainly not beyond the pale.

In light of all the above, would it not be inaccurate to prohibit this approach as being the minority view? Is it not reasonable to conclude that at the very least there is a well-founded approach that has been in use for many hundreds of years, and that those whose Rebbeim continue in this tradition and endorse this view should be regarded as *yera'im u-shlaimim*?

Respectfully,

Natan Slifkin

P.S. In the Rosh Yeshivah's essay, it was stated that a future essay would provide cogent alternative answers to the three cases in my book where I quoted authorities who stated that Chazal relied on the mistaken science of their day – the account of the spontaneous generation of lice from sweat (with which the Gemara says that there is no such thing as lice eggs), where I quoted Rav Lampronti and Rav Dessler; the account of salamanders growing in fire, where I quoted Rav Binyomin Musafia; and the account of the spontaneous generation of mice from dirt, where I quoted Rav Hirsch. I and many others sincerely await seeing and studying these alternative explanations.