

Response to Rav Moshe Shapiro:

Postscript

By Natan Slifkin

Version 3.1 – 2/3/08

When I wrote my “Response to Rav Moshe Shapiro and Critique of *Afikei Mayim*,” I thought that it was a technical document of little interest to most people. After all, the controversy over my books and the ban is already over three years old, and this document dealt with only one minor aspect of it.

I was completely wrong. In the weeks that have elapsed since Rabbi Gil Student posted a link to this document, I was amazed to discover that there were over 1500 downloads of this file from my website, and many more people received it by e-mail from friends and colleagues. Apparently this is still a topic of great interest to many people.

I would like to thank all those who emailed me or called me with their compliments and comments on the article. As a result, several minor errors have been corrected. I also received new testimony about mistaken information that Rav Moshe Shapiro was given about my books. Someone called to tell me that he met with Rav Moshe after the *vasikin minyan* at the *Kosel* to ask him why he banned the books, and Rav Moshe responded by citing a heretical idea from my books. However, it was (a) a grave distortion of what I had written and (b) something that was in fact not in any of my books but rather from an email discussion group.¹

Four disciples of Rav Moshe wrote to me that my understanding of his approach is correct, some added that my essay helped them grasp the situation. Another wrote to me that my understanding of Rav Moshe is incorrect, but refused my request for him to explain why.

¹ Rav Moshe claimed that in my second book, I wrote that the Deluge was allegorical. In fact my books contained no discussion on the topic, but in an e-mail discussion I had written that while I believe, along with several Acharonim, that the Deluge was limited in scope, I do not believe that someone who believes it to be allegorical should be condemned as a heretic.

The Case of the Scoffing Student

A number of people were wondering how I would address a case in the Gemara that is cited in the introduction to *Afikei Mayim* seemingly as proof that it is forbidden to accept scientific evidence over Chazal. This case is presented by Rabbi Schmeltzer with the interpretation of Rav Moshe Shapiro. The Gemara is as follows:

“And I will make your windows of rubies, and your gates of beryl, and all your borders of precious stones” (Yeshayah 54:12) – Just as Rav Yochanan sat and expounded, The Holy One is destined to bring precious stones and pearls that are thirty by thirty (cubits) and hollow out of them an area ten by twenty and stand them at the gates of Jerusalem. A certain student mocked him: “Now that we do not even find such things in the size of a small dove’s egg, can ones of such size be found?!” After some time, he set out to sea in a ship, and saw ministering angels that were sitting and carving precious stones and pearls that were thirty by thirty and hollowing out ten by twenty. He said to them, “Who are these for?” They said to him, “The Holy One is destined to stand them at the gates of Jerusalem.” He came before Rav Yochanan and said to him, “Expound, my rebbe, it is fitting for you to expound; just as you said, thus I saw.” Rav Yochanan replied: “Good-for-nothing! If you wouldn’t have seen it, then you wouldn’t have believed it! You are a scoffer at the words of the sages!” He gave him a look and he became a heap of bones. (Talmud, *Bava Basra* 75a)

Rav Moshe claims that Rav Yochanan heard the student’s initial denial of his statement, but he was not accountable as a scoffer since he may have genuinely considered the existence of such gemstones and pearls to be utterly impossible. However, if so, explains Rav Moshe, then when he traveled on the ship and saw such stones, he should have refused to believe his eyes. Since he did accept the evidence in front of him and changed his mind, this shows that he rated the physical evidence that he saw as being of greater credibility than Rav Yochanan’s exegesis. This, says Rav Moshe, is heresy that classifies him as a scoffer of the words of the sages.²

However, Rav Moshe’s approach to this case is far from the only possible approach, and we find different explanations in the Rishonim. As I heard from one rav, the student in this story is described as scoffing rather than respectfully disagreeing, and it is for this attitude that he was culpable. Another possibility is that his error was that he had not ascertained the basis of Rav Yochanan’s statement before scoffing at it; he did not clarify whether it was based on a

² Rav Moshe concludes by citing Ramban’s condemnation of the Greek materialists who deny the validity of everything that they cannot sense or explain. However Ramban also relies upon Greek science to reject traditional understandings of the rainbow (see Gen. 9:12) and Chazal’s understanding of human conception (Lev. 12:2). In footnote 54 on p. 39 of *Afikei Mayim*, Rav Moshe Shapiro claims that Ramban in the latter discussion is referring to two different frames of reality.

tradition or vision of a future supernatural event.³ This bears no relation to statements of Chazal which are made in a different context and are explained by the Rishonim in terms of then-current scientific beliefs.

Another explanation of this story is given by Rabbi David HaKochavi (c. 1260-1330; Avignon, France):

...We have already noted that we are citing many passages without explaining them, and we have noted the reasons. Accordingly, we have cited this passage, but with a little contemplation it will be seen that there is hidden meaning... it alludes to the merit of the intellect when it penetrates the entrances of true opinions... (*Sefer HaBatim* I, 6:4, pp. 185)

Rav Yochanan was *not* making a statement about the physical world. The student interpreted it as a reference to the physical world and thus mocked it; he was castigated because, had he not been shown otherwise, he would not have appreciated that Rav Yochanan was speaking allegorically. This approach echoes that of Rambam to a very similar story elsewhere in the Talmud:

Rabban Gamliel sat and expounded: [In the Messianic Era] women are destined to give birth every day... A certain student mocked him, saying, "There is nothing new under the sun!" Rabban Gamliel said to him, Come and I will show you an example in this world, and he went and showed him a chicken.

...Rabban Gamliel further sat and expounded: [In the Messianic Era] the Land of Israel is destined to grow cakes and silk garments... A certain student⁴ mocked him, saying, "There is nothing new under the sun!" Rabban Gamliel said to him, Come and I will show you an example in this world, and he went and showed him mushrooms and truffles, and regarding the silk garments, he showed him the fibrous growth around young palm-shoots. (Talmud, *Shabbos* 30b)⁵

³ Thus, Ran in *Derashos HaRan* 5 cites this story as an obligation to believe everything that the Sages say *with regard to Deyos and exegeses of Scripture* and which they say *al tzad hakabbalah* – from received tradition. These important qualifying phrases, which would exclude the scientific statements discussed in my books, are often overlooked. Note that while this paragraph from *Derashos HaRan* is cited in *Afikei Mayim*, there is no mention of Ran's statements elsewhere where he writes that we must follow Chazal in halachah *even when they are wrong* (see page 86 and 112 in the Feldman edition). For an important discussion of how our allegiance to the authority of Chazal does not presume their infallibility in halachah, see Rabbi Shlomo Fisher, *Derashos Beis Yishai* 15.

⁴ Maharatz Chajes (*Kuntrus Acharon, Avodas HaMikdash* ch. 4) cites a view that the "certain student" in this story is the apostle Paul, but disputes this as Paul learned from Rabban Gamliel the Elder. Rabbi Avraham Zalman Rapaport, in Chemdas Avraham, claims that it is the student of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya i.e. Jesus.

⁵ With regard to the question of why the student in one story is killed and the other receives a response, the answer given by some is that since the latter used a Scriptural proof, this showed that he still had respect for the Torah. See Rabbi Eliyahu Schick, *Ein Eliyahu to Sanhedrin* 100b and Rabbi Asher Rosenbaum, *Magdanei Asheh* (Tel Aviv 1959) pp. 92-93. In a variation on this, Rabbi Alter Shaul Pfeffer, *Avnei Zikaron* 1:79:2 (Sighet 1923) writes that while Rabban Gamliel's student had a Scriptural basis to justifiably believe that no such thing could happen, Rav Yochanan's student had no grounds to be certain that such gems do not exist.

With regard to these stories, Rambam writes that Rabban Gamliel's statements were not to be interpreted literally as referring to the physical reality:

There will be no difference between this world and the Messianic Era except regarding the subjugation to kingdoms... but in those days, it will be very easy for people to obtain sustenance, to the point that with minimal effort a person will reap great benefits, and this is what is meant when they said that the Land of Israel is destined to grow cakes and silk garments... and therefore this sage, who stated this to his student, became angry when his student did not understand his words and thought that he was speaking literally. (Rambam, *Perush HaMishnayos*, Introduction to *Perek Chelek*)

Shem Tov ibn Shaprut (14th century) writes similarly:

Know that these sayings are not to be understood literally – for if the literal interpretation were true, then Scripture would state it. And even when (the Sages) say it, we will not believe that these could be true according to their literal meaning. For what advantage would there be in such things, save for those lacking in intellect who think that the goal of man is to eat and drink and enjoy this world. Rather, the intent of their saying that women will give birth every day is that God will strengthen the natural forces such that women will not miscarry, and that there will not be infant deaths (i.e. giving birth will be an “everyday occurrence” with no risk of tragedy)... And because that student did not devote himself to understanding this, but rather took the words at face value in order to mock the words of Chazal, his rebbe grew angry at him... (*Pardes Rimonim*, *Seder Moed*, pp. 45-46)

I must admit that I find it perplexing that while with every other statement in the Gemara, Rav Moshe insists on the existence of a deeper, non-literal meaning, here he insists on the superficial meaning. In any case, there is ample precedent for interpreting these statements about giant gemstones and pearls, and women giving birth daily, and the land producing cakes and silk garments, in a non-literal manner. The student was castigated as a scoffer for taking these statements at face value and consequently seeing them as ridiculous.

Conclusion

There are times when Chazal were clearly speaking allegorically – for example, with the Rabbah bar bar Chanah stories (where all but a few extreme anti-rationalists insist that these are allegorical); to take such accounts literally and dismiss them is to be guilty of scoffing at the words of the Sages. There are times when it is unclear if Chazal were speaking allegorically – for example, with their description of Moshe being ten *ammos* tall (where prominent authorities dispute whether this is literal). And there are times when the overwhelming consensus of our tradition is that Chazal were making statements about the physical world – for example, with the sweat-louse, mud-mouse, and fire-salamander, where every Rishon and Acharon saw these as statements about spontaneous generation in the animal kingdom. In these cases, several authorities noted that Chazal were not

speaking from tradition or divine inspiration, and that science has shown these beliefs to be in error. These authorities were not scoffing at the words of Chazal.

(I would like to thank Rabbi Chaim Eisen, Rabbi Gil Student, and others who discussed the concepts in this essay with me.)