

Response to Campaign Package

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Version 2.2

During the recent condemnations of my books, none of those who condemned the books were interested to speak to me about their objections, and those that I tried to contact refused to discuss it with me. I therefore cannot be sure what their objections are; the posters were very vague. However, I have now obtained a copy of the package of 37 pages from my books that are marked with comments and were sent around to various rabbanim in order to muster their support in the campaign against my books. (I am not certain if I have all the pages that are in the package.) I am not sure who wrote the comments; the handwriting seems very similar to one of the individual letters of condemnation that I saw, but in any case I am not sure if the signatory to that letter actually wrote the letter or just signed his name to it.

Before I respond to these comments, an introductory point is in order – perhaps the single most important to be made in response to this package. I do not believe that it is appropriate for anyone to make a judgment of my books based on these extracts. They give an extremely misleading impression of the books as a whole. They do not include the introductions to the books, which place them in context and explain the purpose of the books and the reasons why they were written. Furthermore, some of the comments written on these pages give no hint that the issues are further clarified elsewhere in the books and that other sources are given. As I have learned from my Rav, it is against both the letter and spirit of Torah to pass judgment on someone without first hearing their side of things. That is why I am at a complete loss to understand how people can publicly condemn my work in the absence (and indeed the refusal) to discuss the matter with me. All the more so, I do not understand how people can pass judgment on the books without reading the books in their entirety. Thus, apart from the matter of copyright infringement involved in photocopying various pages and passing them around, there is the much more serious problem, to my mind, of encouraging people to pronounce judgments based on inaccurate testimony. I also do not understand why, if someone finds something in my book that they believe is mistaken or otherwise unacceptable, they don't just contact me and request that I change it, instead of immediately publicly condemning me in a most damaging way.

I will now proceed to respond to most of the annotations on the pages (I cannot respond to all of them, because some of them are simply phrases that are underlined with no explanation of the actual objection).

I. The Science of Torah

There are no photocopies of any extracts from the first third of the book. This part is a series of arguments for the existence of a Creator that have been acclaimed for being extraordinarily convincing and for possessing a degree of sophistication not usually found in English Jewish books. Those who have read the “package” of photocopies would have no idea that this book presents arguments for *emunah* that convince people who have not been helped by the existing English literature.

The first five pages in the package (each is a double spread from the books) are pages 90 through 99. These pages deal with the evidence for the universe being more than 5765 years old. There are only a few words scribbled on these pages – “what!!” (paragraph 2 on p. 90) “not atheists?!!” (paragraph 3) and “look...” (last sentence on the page) – the rest of these pages merely have various arrows and underlines on the conclusions of each piece of evidence proving the universe’s antiquity. These scribbles highlight the fundamental difference in perspective from my antagonist and myself (along with the audience of the book). My antagonist simply flatly rejects that idea that science could provide compelling evidence for a universe that is much more than 5765 years old. Yet he does not address the straightforward evidence provided by tree-ring chronology, ice layers, sediment layers in riverbeds, etc., all of which show clear proof to the naked eye that the world is much more than 5765 years old. He does not present any evidence to dispute my conclusions – he simply underscores them, as though it is a given that it is unthinkable to reach such conclusions.

Next are pages 102 and 103. Page 102 has many phrases underlined, and a comment that I did not understand. However, the page is largely paraphrased from Rav Aryeh Carmell’s essay in *Challenge*.

On page 103, after discussing the long debate over whether one should present a sophisticated approach that may confuse and harm some people, I note that Rambam believed in doing so, and I conclude:

In the same way, let us try to adopt a more sophisticated understanding of the account of creation; hopefully even those who do not agree with it will accept the legitimacy of an alternative viewpoint.

At the side, my antagonist has written, “Here there is a hope that all Israel will accept evolution.” But I did not write that I hope that everyone will accept these approaches. I wrote that I hope that everyone will accept the right of *others* to accept these approaches. Second, I am not referring to evolution, but rather to the age of the universe; the difference between these topics is spelled out clearly on page 89 (which is not part of the package).

Later on page 103, the following paragraph is highlighted:

A live Tyrannosaurus Rex might be scary, but 65 million year old fossils need not be. The entire discussion concerning the age of the universe need not frighten the religious person. After all, God wrote the book of nature, so whatever it tells us about its origins must surely be His words.

At the side, my antagonist has simply written, “!!!!” I do not know the nature of his objection.

Next is page 104. At the top of the page is a citation from Rav Hirsch:

Judaism is not frightened even by the hundreds of thousands and millions of years which the geological theory of the earth’s development bandies about so freely... Our Rabbis, the Sages of Judaism, discuss (*Midrash Rabbah* 9; Talmud *Chagigah* 16a) the possibility that earlier worlds were brought into existence and subsequently destroyed by the Creator before He made our own earth in its present form and order. However, the Rabbis have never made the acceptance or rejection of this and similar possibilities an article of faith binding on all Jews. They were willing to live with any theory that did not reject the basic truth that “every beginning is from God.”

Here my antagonist has written “He subsequently destroyed them??” which I assume is a criticism of using this Midrash to account for the universe’s antiquity, on the grounds that it appeared that these earlier worlds were entirely annihilated. This is an objection that I myself cite on page 117 (which is not part of the package). Nevertheless, since this explanation is advanced by both the Tiferes Yisrael and Rav Hirsch, I do not think that it can be classified as heresy, unless my antagonist is willing to accuse the Tiferes Yisrael and Rav Hirsch of propounding heresy.

The next comments refer to the subsequent paragraphs on page 104 and 105, where I respond to the charge of scoffers that we are engaged in apologetics since earlier generations did not understand from the Torah that the universe is billions of years old. In response to this charge, I explain that although Torah is binding at all times, its form of presentation was geared towards earlier generations whose minds worked differently from our own. Here my antagonist has written, “The Gaon Rav ____ *shlita* was shocked and stunned at this, and said that this is the root of all his heresy!!” (Note that Rav ____ did *not* sign the condemnation that appeared in *Yated Ne’eman*.) However this idea is explicitly stated in *Chovos HaLevavos*, *Shaar HaBitachon*, chapter 4. Rabbeinu Bachya writes there that one of the reasons why the Torah does not mention anything about the World-to-Come is that the generation who received the Torah were not sophisticated enough to grasp the concept properly, and God therefore had to initially motivate them towards the acceptance of the mitzvos via promising reward and punishment in this world. Rabbeinu Bachya adds that this is also the reason why the Torah describes Hashem with anthropomorphic expressions – namely, that people in those days were only able to relate to God in that manner (the same idea is also found in Rambam’s *Moreh Nevuchim*). *Chovos HaLevavos* was a favored work of Rav Yosef Karo and the Arizal – were its ideas “the root of heresy”?

On page 105 I give a specific application of this concept – that the generation of the Exodus may have had difficulty retaining the concept of the pre-eminence of man if he occupies so small a section of the history of the universe. This is written explicitly by Rav Kook z”l:

The crux of the matter is that the time of the appearance and the effects of every idea and thought is predetermined. Nothing is haphazard. For example, we can understand that if the fact of the globe’s movement was made known to the masses a few thousand years ago, and would have feared to stand on his feet lest he fall from the force of the earth’s movement, all the more so would he have feared building tall buildings. A general faint-heartedness and incalculably thwarted development would have resulted... Only after mankind matured through experience was it proper to allow men to recognize the earth’s movement, so that from it only good would come to man... This [idea] applies to spirituality as well... It was necessary for the people of Israel to work long and hard with the various pagan sects to make them understand that despite the vastness of the universe, man is not so inconsequential that his adherence to moral directives is without value, and that the creation of man as a moral being is of great significance – incalculably greater than even the quantitatively largest creations... What would have happened if the myriad worlds of the present state of science were known then? Man would have been like a speck and his morality of no consequence, and it would have been impossible to foster within him a spirit of greatness and universal glory. Only now, after man’s emergence from his struggle with an image [of a world of overwhelming immensity] is he truly no longer frightened by the vastness of creation. But all this required time and preparation. (Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Igros HaReiyah*, letter 91, pp. 105-107.)

While many of Rav Kook’s political views are not widely accepted in the yeshivah world, most would admit – even if only begrudgingly – that he was respected as an outstanding Torah scholar by the other Torah scholars of his time. I wonder if people are ready today to indict him as a heretic – especially in light of the fact that he was *mesader kiddushin* for Rav Elyashiv *shlita*.

Next is page 106, where I explain that none of the non-literal explanations of how to reconcile the age of the universe with Bereishis are heretical (although they might well be wrong), since Rambam’s definition of heresy are the ones adopted by most people, and Rambam himself states that Bereishis is not to be understood entirely literally. Here, aside from various underlines, my antagonist highlights my citation of Rambam and comments, “He shows his hooves!” This is alluding to the pig, which possesses the kosher sign of split hooves but does not chew its cud, and shows off its kosher sign by sticking out its hooves when it lies down, rather than folding them underneath its body as other animals do. I am not sure of the intent of this comment.

Later on page 106 I present an important qualification – that some explanations of the Torah may not only be invalid but even heretical. I give some examples, of one who posits that the first three words of Genesis, *Bereishis bara Elokim*, mean that a super-deity called Bereishis created God, or arguing that sections concerning mitzvos are allegorical or not absolutely binding. My antagonist comments, “only this,” i.e. criticizing me for not giving more examples. I think that there was no need to give further examples and he appears to be looking for excuses to write negative comments.

At the bottom of the page, I cite the suggestion that the universe was created 5765 years ago looking as though it is fifteen billion years old, with fossils of dinosaurs planted in the ground. My antagonist writes that this is a “*gantz gutta peshat*,” a very good explanation. I subsequently raise several objections to this explanation (not least of which that there is no traditional Torah source for this idea). But if my antagonist feels that this is a very good explanation, why does he object so strongly to all my citations of scientific evidence that the universe is billions of years old – he agrees that the universe does indeed *appear to be* billions of years old!

There are no photocopies of the pages which list all the different Torah authorities who explain how we can accept that the universe is indeed fifteen billion years old. I wonder if this is because my antagonist found nothing objectionable in them, or if it is because he did not want to give any acknowledgement of their existence.

The next page in the package is page 127. Here I cite Ramban’s explanation of how the universe was created from a tiny quantity of primal matter, and I state that this parallels the Big Bang theory. My antagonist first comments that the Ramban meant that this happened in six days (not in fifteen billion years). Rav Dessler, however, explains Ramban differently, as I discuss in the book. My point was just in pointing out the manner in which Ramban describes creation from primal matter, not in its duration. Still, I accept that my equating of the Ramban with the Big Bang theory may have been overly enthusiastic (in my referring to his explanation as “precisely” that given by science), and I will correct this in the next edition.

But my antagonist’s next comment to this section is very illuminating: “Here he writes that the explanation of Rambam (I assume he means RambaN) and the Big Bang are one and the same – even though the Ramban did not, *chas v’shalom*, write that it happened all by itself that the [universe was] made from primal matter. Dust in his mouth!” In writing this, my antagonist has apparently not read the first third of the book, in which I illustrate how a naturalistic explanation of a phenomenon does not preclude the Creator’s involvement. We can say that Hashem makes the rain fall even though we have a naturalistic explanation for it – the scientific explanation does not deal with metaphysical causes and does not claim that it happens “all by itself.”

I then explain how the great age of the universe does not downplay the significance of man, just as the great size of the universe does not downplay his significance; rather, it humbles him in realizing how large is his stage. Here my antagonist comments that “his pattern of thought is awful.” I disagree, and I think my explanation is implicit in the ideas of Rav Kook, cited above.

Next is page 143, where I demonstrate how there have been different eras of animal life during the world’s history, such as the age of dinosaurs, the age of mammoths and saber-toothed tigers, and the age of modern life. My antagonist has highlighted these sections, apparently finding them highly objectionable. I am curious to know his belief concerning whether and when dinosaurs existed.

Next is page 161, where I suggest that even if Darwin’s theory of evolution is inadequate to explain the development of life, there is likely to be some sort of naturalistic explanation, as that is how Hashem operates. My antagonist highlights these lines and makes a comment, that I do not understand, about my being a “fool who becomes an authority on *mussar*.” His objection to naturalistic explanations may indeed be consistent with the position of Ramban and others who readily posit the liberal occurrence of miracles. However, as I explain earlier in the work, I take the approach of Rambam (and Ralbag, and Rav Yerucham Levovitz etc.), which is to minimize the occurrence of miracles and to explain that Hashem used a system of natural laws wherever possible. I know that many condemned Rambam and Ralbag, and I do not mind if my antagonist condemns this as foolishness and heresy, but for the sake of honesty, he should admit that he is likewise condemning Rambam and Ralbag.

Next are pages 179-181, where I discuss the possibility that human evolution is compatible with Judaism provided that one accepts that man possesses a unique *neshamah* that makes him fundamentally different from animals. I noted that this is not a traditional idea, but it is not heretical. My antagonist has highlighted much of this section and has written several comments: “Oy!” “Oy *vevov*!” “What shall we respond, what shall we say,” “How is it possible even to utter such a distortion with knowledge, intellect and in a Torah way,” “Woe to the ears...” I think it is safe to assume that this was one of the key aspects to the charge of heresy. Nevertheless, this idea was stated as acceptable by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch and Rav Kook, and it was explicitly preferred by the late Rav Gedalyah Nadel of Bnei Brak, who was one of the foremost *talmidim* of the Chazon Ish and whom the Chazon Ish appointed as halachic decisor of a local community. I do not think that the Chazon Ish considered him to be a heretic.

Next are pages 210-211, where I discuss how even Darwinian explanations of natural selection are not only compatible with Judaism, but would still describe a world that clearly points to a Creator. I also cite a Nobel-prizewinning scientist who expresses this beautifully. My antagonist highlights several paragraphs and writes, "terrible," "very terrible." I must first point out that I wrote clearly earlier in the book (not included in the package) that there is considerable controversy over whether such evolutionary explanations are scientifically viable, and I am merely discussing whether one who does believe in such explanations can still be a believing Jew. It seems that my antagonist would rather write such people out of Judaism; I doubt that he realizes how many people he would be excluding from the community. Furthermore, in this particular section I was showing not only how such scientific beliefs can be compatible with Judaism, but also that someone who views the world in this way should realize that it indeed does point towards the existence of the Creator. I think that such a point should be lauded, not condemned.

In conclusion of this part - my antagonist has scorned my discussion of these very difficult topics. Does he have a better approach to present to those who are bothered by these issues?

Hello Rav Slifkin!

I... deeply appreciate your publication of "The Science of Torah." I am a Baal Teshuva (or on the way)... I grew up with a great deal of appreciation and wonder for the prehistoric past, dinosaurs, and evolutionary theory. One of the toughest conflicts I had when coming to Torah was how to reconcile my fairly broad paleontological knowledge with Torah - especially as I had seen some *hashkafic* approaches which merely ridicule evolutionary biologists and paleontologists. Your *sefer* is, in my humble opinion, the best Torah/Science work that I have ever seen in its fairness, balance, and scholarship. In sum, *yasher koach!*

Sincerely,

A.S.

Washington DC

II. The Camel, The Hare, And The Hyrax

The first page from this book in the package is page 54. Here my antagonist has highlighted the paragraph beginning "But what..." and has written, "He thinks that this is an Arachim Seminar!!" I do not know what he means. I make it clear in the book that I am addressing an argument that was started by Wessely, continued by Malbim and Netziv, and is today used by outreach organizations such as Arachim (although I am told that after reading my book, they stopped using it). I suspect that my antagonist is appalled that I can challenge the validity of an argument used by Malbim and Netziv. If so, I would like to know why this is wrong.

Next is page 55, where the following sentence is underlined: “No matter what one’s belief regarding the Torah’s origins, the initial and primary audience for it was certainly the Jewish People in the wilderness.” Here my antagonist has written, “He is mixed up about the entire giving of the Torah!” As noted earlier, my sentence accurately echoes the views of Chovos HaLevavos and Rav Kook.

(I can’t decipher the next comment on this page)

(Next is page 56, where I also cannot decipher the comment)

Next is page 208, where I discuss the problem that Rav Chisda’s rule that all animals lacking upper teeth are kosher would seem to be contradicted by animals such as the aardvark and rhinoceros. One of my answers is as follows:

A possible variation on this answer would be that Rav Chisda was referring specifically to the absence of *upper* teeth, and was thereby implying that *lower* teeth must indeed be present. Since aardvarks and rhinoceroses lack lower teeth also, they would not be included in Rav Chisda’s rule. However the Somali warthog may present a difficulty with this answer, since it does sometimes possess lower incisors, although these are rudimentary.

Here my antagonist has written, “This makes one’s hairs stand on end!” I do not understand his objection. I am trying to give an answer to a difficulty that modern zoology raises with the Talmud. I suggest a possible answer, and note that it may not work. I am trying to defend the honor of the Talmud, but simultaneously being honest. What is my antagonist’s objection? Is he willing to provide a better answer?

Next are pages 209-210, where I point out an alternate legitimate answer. Rabbi Avraham Chaim Schorr in *Toras Chaim* states that Rav Chisda’s principle was not received from Sinai but was based on his understanding of animal physiology. I then cite the view of Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam (also held by Rambam and Rav Hirsch) that the Sages did not possess flawless knowledge of the natural world. I then conclude that according to this view, it is not so problematic if Rav Chisda’s principle is found not to hold true with certain animals. (I then state that this answer is unnecessary as there is an easier solution.)

On these pages, my antagonist has written, “Very terrible... one must rend one’s garments, and this publication must be burned.” I wonder if my antagonist would also hold this view with regard to *Toras Chaim* and the Rambam; if not, I would like to know why.

Next are pages 228-229, where I deal with the problem of the existence of additional animals that have one kosher sign, which are not listed in the Torah. One answer that I give is that the Torah does not need to list them, because they live in South America and Australia, which is not part of the “world” of the Torah. My antagonist comments that this is “terrible.” Yet this is an answer for which I provide numerous sources (and I have since discovered additional sources that are posted on my website, www.zootorah.com/hyrax); I also discussed it with Rav Gedalyah Nadel z”l and, *yibadel lechaim*, one of the *mo’etzes gedolei haTorah* in the US, who both endorsed its legitimacy.

On page 229, my first sentence in the book’s summary is that “there is no explicit claim in the Torah that there are only four animals in the world possessing one kosher sign.” Here my antagonist has written in English, “sick man.” Why? I have written a true statement, that serves to defend the Torah against objections from science. Why am I a “sick man” for doing so?

On pages 230-231, I summarize the two answers to the problem that the Talmud does seem to state that the four animals listed in the Torah as possessing one kosher sign are the only such animals in the world, and yet it seems that additional such animals do exist:

* The Talmud is only making a limiting statement about the camel (due to it being the only *ma’aleh gerah* animal that is domesticated, or that lacks upper teeth, or that is a true ruminant); but the hare and hyrax may indeed share their characteristics with other animals. This only leaves the problem of the lamoids, which can perhaps be rated as a type of camel, albeit with some difficulty.

* The Talmud is only giving a rule for the general region surrounding the Land of Israel, but there may indeed be other such animals in remote regions of the world.

My antagonist has circled both of these paragraphs, and by each, he has written, “*rasha*” – “wicked person.” Yet both of these answers are based on traditional, authentic sources, and were endorsed by prominent *talmidei chachamim*. Furthermore, I wrote them in order to solve a problem with the Gemara that is used by heretics to argue that Torah is not divine. I thereby produced a book that has been applauded by those who were struggling with their *emunah*. Why am I a *rasha* for presenting these answers? Does my antagonist have a better answer for these people?

Later on page 231 the following paragraph is highlighted:

With the current state of knowledge, the Torah’s list of animals that possess only one kosher sign does not appear to be an exhaustive list of all such animals in the world, and nor does the Torah claim it to be so. The Talmud does appear to make the problematic claim that it is an exhaustive list, but there are different ways of understanding the Talmud, according to which it is making no such claim.

Here my antagonist has written, “*Shaygetz, poyer* (low-life), *rasha merusha* (thoroughly evil person)!” He also adds with regard to the last sentence that “this is the opposite of Rashi and Tosafos, of course.” Actually, only one of the alternate ways of understanding the Talmud (the first of my two answers) was in contrast to Rashi and Tosafos; my second answer even works with their explanation of the Talmud. In any case, I do not believe that it is utterly evil to offer an explanation of the Talmud that differs from that of Rashi and Tosafos. I do not believe that this paragraph justifies the slurs that my antagonist has written, and I would like to know his justification for writing them.

This book provides answers to difficult problems that bother many people and make it fundamentally difficult for them to accept the Torah. Is my antagonist providing an alternative for such people?

Dear Rabbi Slifkin,

It's been a while now since I have completed "The Camel, The Hare & The Hyrax," but I think of it almost every day. I think of why it took so long for someone to come out and write about this subject. There are many kinds of Jews out in the world and they have been unsuccessful in coming back to Judaism, due to certain "controversies". The issue of the identity of the Kosher animals has for a long time been the sticking point for me, and each of the rabbis that I would talk to would always push it aside or give some apologetic answer to it mainly because they are just plain ill informed.

Not you Rabbi Slifkin. Your research into the matter topped with your honesty is a breath of fresh air. Many Jews need this kind of "intellectual" look into the matter to bring us back into Judaism rather than just seeing it from a "hashkafah" point of view. I have had many doubts before, regarding this matter. But through your book I have realized that there is still hope for me. Many people fear to speak of this subject, because of what we might find out. In this book, you have shown me that we should not fear to ask questions and that sometimes admitting to not knowing something is not the same as admitting to defeat.

You have shown me that an Orthodox Rabbi is not afraid to tackle this matter in an honest fashion and I am very proud of that. This book deserves to be in every serious Jewish thinker's home. Long have people used the subject of the identity of the kosher animals as evidence that the Torah is not from God. This book gives us all the ammunition to fire back at them... to show them that they do not own a monopoly on intellectual thought... nobody does.

Thank you Rabbi Slifkin for your great work on this subject. You have given me, as well as many other people, a reason why we should give Judaism another chance. Sincerely,
H. D.

Los Angeles, CA

III. Mysterious Creatures

In the extracts from this book, my antagonist entirely omits the introduction, which explains the pressing reasons for publishing it. People are thereby judging the book completely out of context. I must reiterate that I do not think that people should form judgments on my books without reading them in their entirety.

The first pages from this book in the package are pages 20-23. These are from a section in which I demonstrate that some seemingly impossible phenomena reported in the Talmud can indeed be substantiated from modern science. One would think that this would be enthusiastically received by my antagonist, but in fact he strongly objects to it.

First I note that the Talmud itself, when quoting a question from R' Zeira regarding wheat that "fell from the clouds," asks if such a thing is possible, and I write that "the Talmud apparently understood that Rabbi Zeira's rule was not, or perhaps need not, be based on an actual possibility." Here my opponent has written, "!!?" I do not understand his objection, and I think it is significant that the Talmud did indeed seek to clarify whether his question was based on factual reality.

Then I cite documented cases of waterspouts in Miami lifting boats into the air, and I point out that we can thereby certainly accept Rashi's explanation that the Talmud is referring to wheat that was on a boat which was sucked into the clouds. My antagonist sarcastically comments, "Now we can accept Rashi, because this happened in Miami..." Clearly my antagonist is able to believe in Rashi's statement without any supplementary support, but at least 99% of my readers do not fall into that category and would find such statements difficult to accept, just like Rashi's description of mermaids. Indeed, the Gemara itself wondered if such a thing was possible! In citing a documented case from modern times, I have shown to my readers that this is a case where they can indeed accept Rashi's amazing explanation. I would think this is something to be lauded, not derided.

On page 23 I discuss the Talmud's report that a snake has a gestation period of seven years. I cite different records from zoological literature of snakes storing sperm in their bodies and laying eggs several years after mating, although I note that records vary up to a total of ten years. My antagonist has highlighted these lines and has written, "The Records!!!" I presume that he discounts the significance of such records. In fact it is precisely such records that do lend credibility to the Talmud's statement and which have therefore served as a *kiddush Hashem* in the eyes of many people (which is why this page was cited in ArtScroll's new translation of Ramban on this topic).

I then state that although the snakes do not always lay eggs after seven years, and other statements in the Talmud about animal gestations are not consistent with modern science –

...this does not negate the wonder of the Talmud's statement regarding snakes. It is difficult to believe that this feature of snake gestation was widely known. In any case, it seems that the Sages derived the knowledge of the snake's long gestation from the Torah, rather than using the Torah source as an additional proof for something that they knew from experimentation.

My antagonist comments, "Here he is partially conceding to the Gemara, and shows his amazement at their greatness!" Does he object to my expressing my amazement? I presume that he just takes it for granted that everything in the Gemara is scientifically accurate, and therefore for me to write a book expressing wonder at it, is an affront to Chazal. My readership, on the other hand, is interested in such things.

Next are two critical pages, 38 and 39. First I cite the Talmud in Pesachim:

The Jewish sages said, "By day the sun passes beneath the firmament and at night above it." The sages of the nations maintained, "By day beneath the firmament and at night beneath the ground." Rebbe said, "Their opinion seems more correct than ours."

I note that "there are alternate explanations of the Sages' admission that the non-Jewish scholars were more correct," and provide sources accordingly, but I point out that "the most straightforward explanation of it is certainly that they admitted no necessary superiority in the natural sciences" – which is the explanation of Rambam, Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam, and Rav Hirsch. Here my antagonist comments, "Even when they agreed to the sages of the nations, their decision in this was through their *ruach ha-kodesh*. But one should not, Heaven forbid, distort the words of Chazal in any place, Heaven forbid, [unclear word], as the foolish author does in many places in this book." I would like my antagonist to provide a source for his assertion that the Sages' retraction was done through *ruach ha-kodesh*. I wonder whether my antagonist, when teaching this section of Gemara, would acknowledge the existence of explanations that he disputes, as I did. Furthermore, Rambam, Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam, and Rav Hirsch explicitly cite this section of Gemara as license to explain in other cases that Chazal may have erred in matters of science.

I then cite the important statement of Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam:

...When Rebbe heard these words... he decided in favor of the opinion of the sages of the nations. And how precious is that which is learned! For Rebbe did not consider these opinions from any standpoint other than their evidence, without considering the Jewish sages and the sages of the nations. He decided in favor of the opinions of the sages of the nations because he considered that their proof was more acceptable... And it is appropriate that this master is called "Our holy teacher" (*Rabbeinu HaKadosh*), for when a person casts down falsehood and accepts the truth and decides

in favor of the truth, and has changed his mind when the opposite was explained to him – there is no doubt that he is holy! Behold, it is made clear to us that the sages, z”l, were only interested in looking at opinions from the standpoint of their truth and their proofs – not from the standpoint of who said it, regardless of who it was!

Here my antagonist writes a lengthy comment: “Everything that he brings from Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam – there is a lengthy discussion there and there are contradictions in his words, and in any case, it is not part of our mesorah, as Rav Aharon Kotler ztz”l said regarding this to Rav Klein *shlita* (in the office of BMG); also Rabbi Akiva Eiger in *Gilyon HaShas, Pesachim 94*, decides in favor of the *Shitah Mekubetzes* with regard to the ruling, see his words there. Now there is a research project by way of [unclear word] to find the source of this manuscript of Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam, which was first printed less than two hundred years ago, and was publicized by the *maskilim*.”

There are a number of points to be made in response. First is that I do not understand what it means to say that this is not part of our mesorah. We do not excise the views of Rishonim just because they are less popular. This view of Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam is also quoted in *Shemiras ha-Guf ve-ha-Nefesh* (and is in vol. 1 pp. 53-54). After quoting Rav Sherira Gaon and Rabbeinu Avraham ben ha-Rambam, he mentions that Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z”l said that this view should be referred to as a *yesh omrim*, a minority opinion. In his letter, Rav Shlomo Zalman says that he doesn’t know if anyone is even able to dispute with this view – in other words, it is forbidden to say that this view is not acceptable. This is precisely what I did in the book; it seems that my antagonist would rather follow the approach of excising those opinions with which he disagrees (is he implying that the *Ein Yaakov* should be edited to remove the introduction from Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam?).

Furthermore, Rav Hirsch clearly felt that it was adequately part of the mesorah in order to adopt this approach. This was presumably in part because the questions for which this approach is required are no less pressing than in earlier times, and are in fact more pressing. Since Hirsch’s time, the questions have become even more powerful and there is even more need for this approach.

My antagonist refers to Rabbi Akiva Eiger, who cites the opinion of *Shitah Mekubetzes* that the sages of the world only overcame the sages of Israel in their reasoning, but that the truth ultimately lay with the sages of Israel. I myself referred to this opinion, too. But other opinions do exist and I do not believe that one should pretend that they do not exist or that they are any less legitimate.

With regard to the authenticity of the treatise of Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam, there does not seem to be any reasonable regarding this, according to the authorities that I consulted. The treatise was translated into Hebrew in the 16th century, long before the *maskilim* came into existence. Fragments of the original Arabic, dating probably from the 14th century, were discovered in the Cairo Geniza.

In any case, it merely echoes the words of Rambam himself in *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:8 and 3:14. This view is also found in the Rashba in the *hashlamos* to *Minchas Kana'us*.

On page 44, I discuss the status of modern zoology, and note that while there are still new discoveries to be made, we can predict what *type* of wonders will not be discovered. I write that “we can be sure that no ants fifty feet in length will be discovered.” My antagonist has underlined this sentence, and I am extremely curious to know his objection to this sentence. Does he believe that this is indeed a possibility?

Various sentences on page 45 are underlined, but I do not know the nature of the objections.

Next is page 52, where I address those who feel that if Chazal accepted ancient beliefs about science, this proves them to be gullible. I explain at length why this is false, demonstrating how gullibility has to be measured against prior knowledge, and how it is entirely understandable that people in ancient times believed such reports. I believe that this is a very important part of the book – perhaps one of the most important – which clarified why we need not lower our respect for Chazal if they are mistaken in science. Yet my antagonist has highlighted the entire section and apparently objects to it.

On page 53 I point out that in many cases it was irrelevant to Chazal whether the scientific information was accurate, and I cite the statement of Ramchal that:

...the point of them is not the information about science or nature, but rather the secret that they wanted to allude to with it. Thus it does not make a difference to the truth of this allusion whether the parable with which they clothed it is true or not.

Here my antagonist notes with sarcasm that “everything is not necessarily accurate, as he ‘proves’ from Ramchal.” Actually, I was clearly not referring to *every* case, just raising this as an approach to be considered for *some* cases. My antagonist continues, “And he did not begin to understand Ramchal’s intent – he did not mean to say that these things did not exist, but that it is irrelevant, since it was expressed for its secret aspects.” I do not understand this objection. Ramchal states that it does not make a difference if the clothing of the parable is true or false. This clearly allows for the possibility that it is not true. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander cites the Ramchal to make the same point, in *Sifsei Chaim, pirkei Emunah ve’Hashgachah* vol. II.

I then state that I shall later refer to the view of Rav Hirsch that “Chazal were interested in clarifying laws and it was not important to them to investigate whether a reported creature actually existed.” My antagonist writes that this “appears to be

heresy.” Now, I must concede that I summarized Rav Hirsch’s view incorrectly. He did not state that it was not important to Chazal whether the creature existed, but rather that they had no reason to doubt the reports of the Roman naturalists:

Imagine if a scholar such as Humboldt had lived in their times and had traveled to the ends of the world for his biological investigations. If upon his return he would report that in some distant land there is a humanoid creature growing from the ground or that he had found mice that had been generated from the soil and had in fact seen a mouse that was half earth and half flesh and his report was accepted by the world as true, wouldn’t we expect Chazal to discuss the Torah aspects that apply to these instances? What laws of defilement and decontamination apply to these creatures? Or would we expect them to go on long journeys to find out whether what the world has accepted is really true? And if, as we see things today, these instances are considered fiction, can Chazal be blamed for ideas that were accepted by the naturalists of their times? And this is what really happened. These statements are to be found in the works of Pliny, who lived in Rome at the time the Second Temple was destroyed, and who collected in his books on nature all that was well known and accepted in his day.

Nevertheless, I do not consider my statement to be at all heretical. In fact, the same concept is stated in a Tosafos that I cite at the end of the book, concerning a case in the Gemara of a coffin-cover made from an animal:

...But is it normal to make a cover for a coffin out of an animal?! The answer is that even though it is not normal to do so, we nevertheless find many unlikely cases that the Talmud discusses, in order to analyze them and be rewarded for this. (*Tosafos to Kesuvos 4b*).

Thus, my antagonist seems to be effectively rating Tosafos’ view as apparent heresy.

Still on page 53 and continuing through page 54, I then explain that someone who is skeptical of the astounding zoological phenomena described in the Gemara should not be castigated as a scoffer, since a skeptic does not draw negative inferences about the Gemara, as would a scoffer. I also point out that Rishonim such as Rambam adopted this approach. My antagonist triple-underlines my statement that “a skeptic is not the same a scoffer” and writes that this sections shakes every Jew. It did not seem to shake 99% of my readers (but my antagonist would probably condemn them all as both skeptics and scoffers!). My concluding sentence in this paragraph is that “a skeptic can remain respectful.” This is underlined by my antagonist, who writes that “this is so much full of foolishness – do we really need the respect of a fool.” I do not believe that those who maintain a skeptical approach towards bizarre phenomena are fools, and I think that Rambam and other great Torah scholars fall into this category.

Next on page 54 is a section where I state that Chazal, as great as they were, were not infallible in matters of Torah, and I bring various sources to back this up. My

antagonist highlights this entire section and writes that “these words shake my [thoughts?]; anyone who sees these choking words should rend his clothing on the desecration of Hashem and His Torah at the head of all the streets.” I do concede that it was unwise to put this section in the book and I plan to remove it in future editions. However I do not believe that it is at all false and certainly not heretical. The idea that Chazal could theoretically be in error (even though we have to follow them anyway) is stated by the Ran in several places in *Derashos HaRan*. The Maharsha (to *Taanis* 9b) describes a *non-halachic derashah* from the Torah that is potentially disprovable by science. The concept that Chazal were not infallible is stated by no less a conservative than Rav Avigdor Miller z”l: “It is true that the Sages’ extraordinary desire for Torah-knowledge and for success in all branches of God’s service was rewarded with extraordinary supernatural assistance (רוח הקודש) that provided them with a miraculous abundance of mental energy and a largesse of genius. But supernatural inspiration is not Torah. After Moses, no Torah could be given by prophecy. Each Sage utilized his genius according to his free will, and always had the opportunity to err” (condensed from Rabbi Avigdor Miller, *Rejoice O Youth*, pp. 244-246). *Pachad Yitzchak*, which I cite at the end of the book, considers that even the halachah may have to be changed (*lechumrah*) as a result; this is a ruling followed by several contemporary authorities. However, at the end of the book, I bring several sources and explanations to show that even if something in the Gemara is somehow shown to be mistaken, we would *still* have to follow it and we would not be able to change the *halachah*.

My final paragraph in this section, on page 55, reads as follows:

Finally, and perhaps most critically, it should be noted that these errors of science are not oversights, poor judgment, lack of intellectual ability, or anything such as that. They do not indicate any deficiency regarding the methods of Chazal. It is simply the information provided to them that was flawed.

Here my antagonist writes, “Woe to us that this has arisen in our day!” I do not understand his sentiments, since I believe that this paragraph does a tremendous service to the honor of Chazal.

Later on page 55 I note that “there is a concern that if the science of the Talmud is flawed, then the laws based on that science would have to be redressed.” Here my antagonist resorts to sarcasm again and writes, “No problem, he can also change the laws according to his desire!!!” Actually, rather than imply that there is no problem, I used the word “concern,” which indicates that this is indeed a very problematic topic. As I write, “this is a complex topic which is dealt with in the final chapter of this book,” where I bring different approaches amongst Torah authorities to the matter, with some stating that the law should indeed be changed in some cases, and others disagreeing and providing reasons otherwise. My antagonist comments, “He means to say that it is not so relevant how we answer this... it is enough to know that there is,

according to this, a problem with the *din...*” Actually, this is not at all what I meant to say; I meant to say exactly what I wrote, which was that this is a complex topic that is dealt with in the conclusion of the book.

We now skip to page 102, where I discuss the fireproof qualities of the salamander. This is something long dismissed as myth in popular works, and yet I managed to uncover an obscure scientific paper corroborating its authenticity. I think that in doing so, I have performed a *kiddush Hashem* by demonstrating that stories in the Talmud that are popularly dismissed can sometimes be proved true by serious investigation, but my antagonist gives me no credit for this. His only comment is with regard to my parenthetical note that “experimentation in this direction could be rather cruel!” My antagonist has underlined this sentence and has written at the side, “a merciful person!!” This comment does, however, appear to be crossed out; perhaps he thought better of such gratuitous sarcasm.

I then note that notwithstanding the salamander’s ability to produce a fireproof skin secretion, this would not seem adequate to explain the Talmud’s account of Chizkiyah being coated with *salamandra* and thereby surviving being thrown in a fire, due to the difficulty of obtaining the substance and of obtaining a sufficient quantity of it; I conclude that the Talmud’s account “remains difficult to understand.” My antagonist double-highlights this phrase, and clarifies his objection in a later comment to my conclusion to the salamander chapter, which reads as follows:

There are several factors that seem to have contributed to the legend of a creature that is born from fire, thrives within it, and produces a substance that can render people or clothing fireproof:

- * The remarkable fire-resistant skin secretions of salamanders;
- * Their emergence from damp logs that were placed in fires;
- * The fiery pattern of the fire salamander’s skin coloration;
- * The existence of asbestos, a truly fireproof material;
- * Finally, the toxicity of the salamander’s skin secretions probably contributed to the general aura of wonder surrounding them and thereby enhanced their reputed fireproof abilities.

The Talmud in *Chagigah* and *Sanhedrin* merely stated that the salamander produces a fireproof secretion, which is, as we have seen, true. It is only the statements of Rabbi Akiva and the Rishonim, which speak of the salamander growing in fire, that are unsupported by contemporary zoology. It seems far more reasonable to conclude that the factors listed above were, in one combination or another, responsible for the salamander mythos, than to suppose that there really is a creature that is born in fire and is unknown to contemporary science.

My antagonist has circled the last paragraph and has written, “[unclear word] not to really go crazy from this; his brazenness, mockery and derision beyond the greatest thing that one can bear.” Since my antagonist apparently accepts all the words of both the Gemara and the Rishonim as being true, he presumably believes that if one burns a fire in one place for seven years, a salamander emerges from the fire. Unfortunately I simply do not believe that this is the case, and nor do 99% of my readers; there are industrial furnaces burning for decades in many places, and no salamanders have emerged. Does my antagonist have a better explanation of the Gemara and Rishonim about the salamander? He may be satisfied to believe that such a creature used to exist, but my readers do not feel the same way. I think it is also important to remember Rav Hirsch’s statement about the dirt-mouse, that Chazal relied on a description that was given to them of a creature and had no reason to disbelieve it.

My final paragraph in the salamander chapter reads as follows:

Still, although we have found a plausible set of explanations for the legend, this should not cause us to find any less wonder at the real salamander. Aside from it being a strikingly beautiful creature, its toxic and fire-resistant skin secretions should set our souls aflame with awe before the Creator. Failing to be fired up in this way might mean that we are like the atheist who can remain unmoved in the contemplation of the starry heavens...”

The comment of my antagonist reads, “Here he shows that he is greatly aroused and excited with awe of Heaven.” I assume that this is intended sarcastically, and I challenge him to back up this insinuation.

Next is page 165, where I note that there is no evidence of dinosaurs since they became extinct 65 million years ago. My antagonist has underlined several sentences in this section, and writes that, “he has been absolute with this, because the age of the universe is obvious to him.” In a footnote I point out that the topic of the age of the universe is reconciled in my book *The Science of Torah*, and my antagonist comments sarcastically, “It is already clear and has become FACT.” I do indeed believe that it is a fact that the world is many millions of years old, as is stated by at least 99.99% of all scientists, and I bring extensive evidence for this in *The Science of Torah*; if my antagonist believes me to be mistaken, let him bring evidence to the contrary and present a viable alternative approach. But in any case, my antagonist himself has already stated that he considers it a “*gantz gutte peshat*” to say that the world was created to look old. If so, then he believes that Hashem made the world to make it look like dinosaurs became extinct 65 million years ago, and he should have no quibble with this paragraph.

We skip now to page 192, where I write that “contemporary science totally rejects the idea of spontaneous generation,” which my antagonist has underlined. I am curious to know his objection to this sentence.

I then cite the Talmud and explain it to mean that “the Rabbanan believe that lice are not considered to be life-forms like other animals, because they ‘do not reproduce’ – that is to say, they are formed through spontaneous generation.” My antagonist has underlined and circled the word “believe” and has written, “Animal!!” The same explanation can be found in *Pachad Yitzchak* from Rav Yitzchok Lampronti, and I also heard it from Rav Gedalyah Nadel z”l. Would my antagonist also classify them as animals?

As an introduction to the topic of spontaneous generation in lice, I write as follows:

There are two issues that must be addressed:

- 1) Is the Talmud’s statement, that lice do not reproduce via eggs, true?
- 2) If it is not true, what are the ramifications for the halachah?

My antagonist underlines these two questions and comments, “See his mocking and blasphemous terminology.” I believe that my questions are sincere questions that have been asked both implicitly and explicitly by many Torah scholars. I do not believe that I am using mocking and blasphemous terminology. It is important to note once more that the books were not written for people such as my antagonist and those that have vilified my books. They were addressed to people that are educated in the sciences and grapple with the questions that it raises. The style that I used was entirely appropriate for this audience.

I then write that “With regard to the first question, contemporary knowledge of the natural world tells us that it is not true. All animals, including lice, are born from other animals.” My antagonist underlines this and writes, “Most terrible of things!” I suppose that this means that he does indeed believe in spontaneous generation, and there is not much that I can say to this. He later makes further highlights and comments on my certainty that there is no spontaneous generation, where I write on page 195 that –

...there are other powerful arguments against it. All of our experience tells us that everything happens as a result of a prior cause – with the possible exception of the beginning of the universe itself (to which we attribute a spiritual cause but no physical cause). In all the studies that have been made of the natural world, in all the video footage that has been shot, in all the experiments that have ever been performed in laboratories, nobody has ever seen an animal pop into existence except where being born from another creature. Lice are born from other lice; they are not spontaneously generated from sweat or dirt.

On my words, “all of our experience tells us,” my antagonist writes, “Wow!!” At the conclusion of the paragraph, which is heavily underlined (especially the part about video footage), he writes, “His manner of proofs are utterly astounding.” Yet empirical evidence is something that was also made use of by Chazal. Why should it not be used?

Again, it seems that my antagonist is not convinced that there is no such thing as spontaneous generation. However, my readership and myself are indeed convinced of this, for reasons that are well explained in the book (which most people have not read).

I then write that:

There is good reason to believe that the statement of the Sages about the spontaneous generation of lice is based on flawed information. The entire world used to believe that spontaneous generation occurs with a wide range of creatures.

My antagonist here notes that “One must actually rend one’s clothing upon this.” (I assume he actually means that one must *figuratively* rend one’s clothing.) If so, he must also rend his clothing upon learning *Pachad Yitzchak*, and *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*, which state exactly the same point.

In a footnote on page 207, I write that:

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein mentions the concept of *nishtaneh hateva*, “nature has changed,” several times in his various responsa. It seems that he used this phrase to delicately refer to the increase in scientific knowledge rather than to an actual physical change.

My antagonist comments that “the effect that bias can have is truly terrible.” However, I was told by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Tendler that this was indeed what Rav Moshe Feinstein meant. In any case, I think it is implicit in his statement that “nature has changed, both inherently, *and also in our understanding of it.*”

My antagonist would probably prefer to use the approach of *nishtaneh hateva*, “nature has changed,” to solve all conflicts between the Talmud and science. However, while this approach works in some cases, there are many cases where the kinds of changes being proposed are far beyond anything that is conceivable, even with the most liberal usage of evolution (which my antagonist would surely not give any credibility!).

Later on page 207 I cite the Chazon Ish and write that:

...the Chazon Ish does not seem to accept that Chazal could have made a mistake in their science; rather, he proposes that God alters the biological reality in each generation. However, the main point is that the halachah is fixed according to the situation at the time of Chazal, even if the reality is subsequently found to be different.

My antagonist writes that “Here he has [unclear word] the Chazon Ish and does not use his words at all, but returns to his basic point.” I think I made it clear exactly what the Chazon Ish does and does not say.

In what is one of the more important parts of the book, I explain why the inaccuracy of the interpretation of a physical phenomenon does not negate the law that was based upon it:

On a mystical level, this is explained by saying that it must have been the Divine will that such a law be established. On a practical level, the Torah commands us to follow the rulings of the early halachic authorities for the sake of the stability and continuity of Torah observance. If we were to say that the halachah should change, then the ramifications for the body of halachah as a whole could be drastic. It could also cause a lack of respect for earlier Torah scholars who followed different rulings. As Rabbi Kasher points out, to act stringently and refrain from killing a louse on Shabbos might cast the Sages of the Talmud in a negative light. This would be along the lines of the reasoning presented in the *Sefer haChinnuch* with the topic of rulings that are based on mistakes.

My antagonist highlights the entire paragraph and writes, “See how terrible this is!! How could it be that there is such a fool.” I simply do not understand his objection, and I think that this paragraph fulfills a critically important function in explaining why the halachah should stay the same even if the science does prove mistaken.

My summary of the topic of spontaneous generation in lice, on page 209, reads as follows:

In summary: it appears that the Talmud’s statement that lice spontaneously generate was made according to the accepted belief of that time, which is now known to have been in error. This has no derogatory implications whatsoever for the spiritual stature of the Sages, but the halachic implications are disputed.

My antagonist has underlined this and has simply written three large exclamation marks. I do not understand his objection, but I can understand that these sentences may disturb people who do not read the rest of the chapter with sources and discussion to back up these statements. This is indeed what happened and is precisely why I object to people passing judgments on the books without having read them in their entirety.

On page 220, I discuss the section of Shulchan Aruch that describes birds which grow on trees. I write that “The accepted explanation for the tree-goose legend is that it is based on the peculiar anatomy of a certain sea-shell.” My antagonist circles the word “accepted,” and asks, “According to who?” The answer is, according to all who

have studied the topic. My antagonist's objection is perhaps clarified by his comment to my later paragraph:

There are those who would state that even the Rishonim cannot be mistaken, and that if the *Shulchan Aruch* issues a ruling regarding birds that grow on trees, such a type of bird must exist. However, there is a qualitative difference between Chazal and Rishonim with regard to the degree of increased greatness that exists with earlier generations. Many of those who would reject the idea that Chazal based halachos on faulty science would be willing to accept this regarding the Rishonim.

My antagonist has underlined all this and has written, "Woe to us!!" He apparently does indeed believe that there are birds that grow on trees.

This concludes the comments from the package of extracts from my three books. My antagonist has variously described me as a "thoroughly evil person," "idiot," "*shaygetz*," "low-life," "animal," and "sick man." Aside from such rhetoric, however, his substantial points are few and scattered. There are a few minor amendments that I would make in future editions (which people could simply have requested me to make), but my antagonist does not appear to at all have justified the charge of "absolute heresy" that has been applied to these three books. I do not understand the justification for this severely hurtful charge.

Dear Rabbi Slifkin,

I am writing to you to say thank you. Being that I am trying to be a "Baal Tshuva," I have always had an inquisitive mind. As my Torah Learning grew, however, so did my doubts and questions... Reading two of your works, *The Camel, The Hare, and The Hyrax* and *Mysterious Creatures*, I found your research to be exhaustive, honest, and refreshing. I feel that addressing such issues head on, and taking the time to do extensive and honest research is the best and only approach to get a true answer to these questions. Seeing an Orthodox Rabbi willing to address these questions in the detailed manner which I am used to (being that I am an engineer), rather than an off-the-cuff answer, has given me new found inspiration in my relatively new Torah-Observant way of life. I cannot praise you enough for your work, as I have found it to be a major reason I have decided to continue this way of life. Thank you so much, and *hatzlacha raba* to you!

Sincerely,

A.L.

Los Angeles, CA