

Response to Rabbi Orlofsky's Lecture

By Rabbi Natan Slifkin

Rabbi Orlofsky gave a Motzai Shabbos lecture in which he attacked my writings. He first claimed that if I reject the idea that Moshe was ten *amos* tall, then I am saying that the Gemara's statement about the dimensions of the Mishkan etc. is wrong. No I am not; I am saying that we have not understood the Gemara correctly. (Incidentally, no children's book, including Feldheim's Chait Haggadah, depicts Moshe Rabbeinu as being ten *amos* tall. Are they all heretical?) The greatest irony is that Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, who Rabbi Orlofsky claims as his rebbe, follows the Maharal in stating that Moshe was not literally ten *amos* tall!

Rabbi Orlofsky then brought up the topic of the letter of the ban and says that "the first thing people said was that nobody ever signed," and adds that this is not the case, as he has the letters from Rav Shapiro, Rav Shiner, etc. (which he presumably downloaded from my website), a point to which he returns several times as a means to discredit me. But neither I nor anyone else ever claimed that *every* signature was forged; we just raised the possibility that some of them were. The letters of the rabbonim that Rabbi Orlofsky has were probably downloaded from my own website! So Rabbi Orlofsky has set up a straw man. And it subsequently turned out that according to Rav Aharon Feldman who spoke with Rav Elyashiv, Rav Elyashiv did *not* sign his name to the posted notice which said that the books contain *kefirah*.

Rabbi Orlofsky then counters the claim that the books were read in extracts and out of context. He argues that this is irrelevant, just as one can disqualify books of Mormons or advising Satan worship without reading the entire book. But if the books have *haskamos* from *gedolei Torah*, surely that warrants them being read more carefully. These *gedolei Torah* did not give their *haskamos* to utter heresy. Rabbi Orlofsky claims that even if the rest of the book contains wonderful *divrei Torah*, one heretical idea is enough to disqualify the book. If that one idea is Satan worship, then maybe. But if it is a viewpoint from the Rishonim, I don't think it is enough to render a book as "full of utter heresy," even if one disagrees with that *shittah*.

Rabbi Orlofsky states, "Nosson on his website, where he's attacking the Gedolei Torah in article after article and item after item, which is painful to read." I took great pains to ensure that none of my articles on my website would attack the Gedolei Torah, only defending my own work. This is a blatantly false allegation.

Rabbi Orlofsky then explains why the Gedolim wouldn't meet with me, and sarcastically describes how I was going to "take Rav Elyashiv by the hand and say, Did you ever hear of the Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam?" Such snide sarcasm is absolutely unwarranted in

serious discourse. When Rav Aharon Feldman met Rav Elyashiv, he did indeed ask him what he makes of these sources. Rabbi Orlofsky indicates that I was going to be condescending to them. What is the basis for such an accusation? I wanted to hear their objections, and I wanted to present sources in my support of which they may have been unaware. I still have not heard any detailed objections.

Rabbi Orlofsky says that Rabbi Gottlieb and Rabbi Meiselman told me not to publish my book on the *Camel, Hare and Hyrax*, but in the book there are acknowledgements to them which implies that they approved it, and says that they resent being “used.” However, Rabbi Orlofsky did not actually read my book. Let us look at what I wrote:

Various versions of this manuscript were reviewed by a number of distinguished Torah scholars, and I am indebted to them for their time, support, and comments. In alphabetical order, these are (and this is not to claim that they all endorse everything in this work)

I explicitly noted that not all the people I thank endorsed it. I thanked them in any case for their input.

Let us look at two letters that Rabbi Gottlieb wrote to me:

From: Dovid Gottlieb
Sent: Friday, April 23, 1999 5:48 AM
To: nslifkin@netvision.net.il

Dear R' Nosson,

I received your work on kosher/ nonkosher animals today. Even on first perusal, it is a very impressive work, both in terms of scholarship and honesty. I hope to read it more carefully soon and share some comments with you....

kol tuv,

Dovid Gottlieb

From: Dovid Gottlieb
Sent: Monday, June 14, 1999 4:01 AM
To: Natan Slifkin

Dear Natan,

I am full of admiration for the masterful job you have done. Below are a few very minor comments. Perhaps if I read it more carefully I would have more, but as it is I certainly hope that it is circulated widely, especially at Arachim and Eish HaTorah. This sort of mistake can only do us harm.

Rabbi Gottlieb may have later told me not to publish it (I do not remember such a conversation, but it may have happened), but he certainly was greatly positive towards the project.

Rabbi Orlofsky cites Rabbi Gottlieb in reference to the Gedolim not giving me a hearing. He draws a parallel to a Holocaust conference not giving a hearing to a Holocaust denier. I think this comparison is sickening. Furthermore, how can someone with a *chezkas kashrus*

who writes books with *haskamos* of Gedolei Torah be considered so beyond the pale as to not even deserve a hearing? And why not at least give my *maskimim* a hearing?

Rabbi Orlofsky says that if Nosson were to say “I made a mistake, let me change it,” then good, but he’s not saying that, he’s saying “you didn’t understand me.” Actually I repeatedly said, in my fax to the Gedolim, in my conversation with Rav Shiner, and on my website, that I am eager to know what mistakes people think are in the books, and I will certainly correct anything that is proven to be a mistake.

Rabbi Orlofsky then responds to the charge that these Gedolim don’t know science. He first says that I don’t have a degree. This is true, but irrelevant. All my statements about science are consistent with mainstream science. Rabbi Orlofsky claims that people who know science say that my science is wrong. This is hilarious. Perhaps some trivial details are mistaken, but 99.99% of all scientists in the natural sciences agree that the world is billions of years old and that creatures do not spontaneously generate, both of which are opposed by the Gedolim (and Rabbi Orlofsky). And he’s saying that people who know science say that *my* science is wrong?!

Rabbi Orlofsky then notes that we go to Gedolim with questions involving technology, medicine, etc., and we know that they won’t sign something without investigating it. That is true with questions involving technology and medicine. But with these topics, I doubt that Rav Shiner has investigated the evidence for dinosaurs. My books deal with numerous topics in zoology; I doubt that these rabbonim have investigated them. In fact, two of the signatories sent messages to me that they cannot meet me because they are simply not knowledgeable enough about these topics to discuss them with me. Rabbi Orlofsky sarcastically impersonates my position as saying that “Gedolim can’t get the concept of tree rings.” I am sure they can get it; I just doubt that they have studied it. Why is Rabbi Orlofsky implying that I am *chas veshalom* poking fun at their intelligence?

Rabbi Orlofsky then says “I want to put forward Nosson’s position and I want to explain why big people think it’s a problem.” This sounds like a reasonable statement (although one must wonder why he is not defending the honor of the Gedolim who wrote *haskamos* to the books.) However, Rabbi Orlofsky proceeds to entirely distort my position. Not only that, but his is distorting my position on something that doesn’t even appear in the books! Not only that, but he has not even read any of the books!

He first addresses the topic of the deluge. This wasn’t in the books. It’s not the basis of the ban on the books. If Rabbi Orlofsky wants to defend the Gedolim’s ban on my books, he should do so, rather than looking for other non-published material of mine to use as a pretext for attack.

Then Rabbi Orlofsky claims that I said that there was no deluge. That is not remotely what I said. I said that there was no GLOBAL flood (as can also be found in several *sefarim*.) I also addressed the topic of allegorizing certain aspects of the flood, which I did not present as my own position, but which I said should not be condemned as heresy unless one has a better answer for people who struggle with difficulties with the topic.

Rabbi Orlofsky then indicates that he is reading directly from my email and says

“Actually, if someone feels that they need a sufficiently qualified authority upon which to rely that the *mabul* never took place then I can provide one.”

But this is not what is written. I wrote as follows:

“Actually, if someone feels that one needs to have a sufficiently qualified authority upon which to rely for the allegorization of the *Mabul*, then I can provide one....”

Rabbi Orlofsky is asserting that I claimed that there was no *mabul*. I am not. I am claiming what I say in a subsequent sentence: “there was no *global* flood” (and I am justifying an approach to use with some people that there is allegory in certain aspects of it, which I heard in the name of Rav Hutner.) Under the guise of reading aloud from my writings, he has simply changed what I wrote. (Rabbi Orlofsky subsequently agreed to clarify what I said, but argued that the difference is irrelevant. I think it is very much relevant, since the idea of a Flood that was not global was suggested by several authorities, including Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman.)

Rabbi Orlofsky continues to “read out” from what I wrote:

“There is no firm evidence that the Exodus didn't happen. But there is firm evidence that the *Mabul* didn't.”

But what I actually wrote was as follows:

“There is no firm evidence that the Exodus didn't happen. But there is firm evidence that the *Mabul* (in the conventional sense of a global flood) didn't.”

Rabbi Orlofsky omitted the parenthetical qualification, which was a critically important part of the sentence! (He later claimed that the paper he had did not even include that sentence; I suppose that he cannot be blamed for someone else falsifying my words.)

Rabbi Orlofsky then states that the inference of this paragraph is that if there was scientific evidence that the Exodus didn't happen, it would also be a *moshol*. But he has omitted the very next line:

“As noted by others, though, another critical difference is that allegorizing the Exodus fundamentally affects our observance of mitzvos but allegorizing the Flood is of no halachic consequence.”

So Rabbi Orlofsky has (again) omitted a critically important part of the paragraph which negates his argument.

This concludes this section of the lecture; I would just like to reiterate that if Rabbi Orlofsky is defending the Gedolim's ban on my books, he should do just that, and not attack me on material that is not in the books. I have a separate document which clarifies what I wrote about the *mabul*.

Rabbi Orlofsky then moves on to describe, with horror in his voice, my position that something in the Gemara that conflicts with what has been scientifically proven should be reinterpreted. Yet this is precisely the opinion of Rambam. Orlofsky suggests that I am stating that with topics such as the height of people or the phoenix, the *tannaim* “made things up.” This is false, I am merely quoting commentaries who say that it is allegorical. And in other cases, where I quote Rambam and Rav Hirsch who state that Chazal followed

the mistaken scientific knowledge of their time, this can hardly be paraphrased as stating that they “made things up.”

Rabbi Orlofsky continues to state, “We work with the underlying assumption that Chazal had a *mesorah*” and that all their statements about the natural world come from Hashem and are accurate. But Rav Hirsch expressed it somewhat differently:

In my opinion, the first principle that every student of Chazal’s statements must keep before his eyes is the following: Chazal were the sages of God’s law – the receivers, transmitters and teachers of His *toros*, His mitzvos, and His interpersonal laws. They did not especially master the natural sciences, geometry, astronomy, or medicine – except insofar as they needed them for knowing, observing and fulfilling the Torah. We do not find that this knowledge was transmitted to them from Sinai.

Rabbi Orlofsky states “Rambam says that people who doubt the words of Chazal – that’s considered *kefirah*.” This is ludicrous. Rambam obviously was not referring to Chazal’s scientific pronouncements, since he himself says in two places in *Moreh Nevuchim* that they were wrong!

Rabbi Orlofsky says the sources from Rabbeinu Avraham ben haRambam, other sources etc., are irrelevant, because one has to have a rebbe who is alive. I do have several rebbeim who are, *baruch Hashem*, alive (although they have suffered terribly over the last few months) and all of them tell me that the approach of Rambam, Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam and Rav Hirsch is a legitimate approach and part of their mesorah. (Note that I am not pulling out odd lines here and there from Rambam, as Rabbi Orlofsky implies; this is Rambam’s general approach.)

Rabbi Orlofsky then elaborates that one might misunderstand what one is quoting, and gives the example that people (i.e. me) misquote/ misunderstand Rav Dessler concerning the six days of creation. Actually I think that Rabbi Orlofsky has misunderstood it. Furthermore, I had my discussion of Rav Dessler reviewed and endorsed by Rav Aryeh Carmell, who was one of Rav Dessler’s foremost *talmidim*.

Rabbi Orlofsky then explains that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and uses this to disdain my statement that there is no such thing as a phoenix. This is something that I discussed and in my book and explained why we can nevertheless be confident that many things, from fairies to phoenixes, do not exist. However, as Rabbi Orlofsky subsequently admitted, he has not even read my books!

Rabbi Orlofsky then returns to the topic of the *mabul* and claims that in personal conversation with me, I told him that it didn’t happen because of issues connected to Australia. Actually, what I told him was that it wasn’t *global*.

Rabbi Orlofsky concludes that the alternative to his approach is saying that “all the people who signed this letter are careless and foolish.” Yet the Gemara itself states that no less a person than Achiyah HaShiloni was misled into signing something. Rav Elyashiv has attested that some of the Gedolim were misled into banning Tehilla Abramov’s books. It happens.

Rabbi Orlofsky then mentions some of the miracles that the Gemara discusses concerning the Beis HaMikdash. He says sarcastically, “Well, I guess you could say that Chazal were lying, that they made up the whole story...” Nobody is claiming that. Nobody is saying that miracles never take place, or that Chazal “made things up.” This is yet another straw man.