

ALIENS AND US: A SERMON ON *PARSHAT BEREISHIT*

The following sermon was delivered by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik on October 29th, Shabbat Bereishit 2005/5766.

Aliens! Aliens are a constant and consistent draw at the box office. From the warm and wizened *ET: the Extraterrestrial*, to the cold and logical Mr. Spock, to the warmongering and world-destroying villains of *War of the Worlds*, Americans are intrigued by the notion of alien life living and lurking in the cosmos. And though there is nothing sinful per se about a belief in aliens, I believe that the widespread interest in extraterrestrials indicates something alarming about the state of American beliefs.

You see, for centuries, the church, as well as Jewish Aristotelians such as Maimonides, assumed that the sun revolved around the earth, and that our planet was the center of the universe. It was a cosmology that dovetailed nicely with theology: given that humanity was created by God Himself, then it was only right that humanity occupy center stage in the cosmic drama. But then the Copernican solar-centric model of the solar system was pressed and adopted. Evidence of evolution having been discovered, many came to believe that mankind not only evolved, but evolved *on its own* without any input from some imaginary Creator; that sentient beings sprang out of nowhere, from serendipitous happenstance, in at least one small corner of the universe. To such a worldview, the question presents itself: if human beings can emerge onto the stage of the universe out of oblivion by sheer luck, in one random sector of cold and lonely space, why shouldn't sentient beings evolve in like fashion elsewhere?

However, Fred Hereen, a Christian science journalist writing in the religion journal *First Things*, reports that some scientists eager for alien contact are beginning to admit that the odds of other inhabitable planets existing are close to nil, that planets with earthlike conditions are rare. It appears that one of the features that makes our celestial body lifeworthy is the specific size and precise position of the Earth's moon.

Astronomer Jaques Laskar writes: "We owe our present climate stability to an exceptional event: the presence of the moon." "Without an extra large moon orbiting at the right distance from us," Hereen reports, "scientists predict that Earth would be subject to a runaway greenhouse effect, as on Venus, or a permanent ice age, as Mars would experience if it had more water." "Worse," he concludes, "most astronomers now think that the presence of the Earth's Moon is the result of a freak accident, perhaps a one-in-a-million shot, when a smaller planet hit the forming Earth with a glancing blow that allowed the mantles of each planet to combine and end up in orbit around the Earth."

A quite pedestrian clump of rock and mineral, orbiting in precisely the right part of space, at a precise position between the sun and the earth, ensures conditions key to the existence of humanity. "A one-in-a-million shot." To the skeptical secularist, to the astonished atheist, it's all a cosmic coincidence. But maybe, just maybe, there is a Divinely ordained destiny for the sentient beings on this planet. Perhaps there is a God who wanted *us* to exist; perhaps there is a God who wanted *us* to survive, to flourish, to prosper.

When God communicated the laws of Shabbat Hagadol, almost 3,500 years ago, He turned Moshe toward the moon, and ordained Nisan the first month of the Jewish lunar calendar. The Jewish nation, our sages cryptically remarked, is like unto the moon. And perhaps science sheds new light on this aeons-old riddle, on this tradition. A minuscule moon, so vanishingly small when compared to other celestial bodies, to the planets of our solar system, to the suns and galaxies, is positioned, against the odds, in a manner crucial to the survival of the human race. Likewise the Jewish people, a minuscule nation, exceedingly seemingly insignificant when compared to other peoples and nations swirling in the solar system of societies and

civilizations, that nation is perfectly positioned, against the odds, to have a critical moral impact on humanity. "I will insist," John Adams once wrote, "that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation...[Even] if I were an atheist...who believe that all is ordered by chance, I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to...preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently all civilization."

Atem monin lo ve-ein umot ha-olam monin lo, says the Midrash Rabbah; Israel will calculate its years by the moon while other nations will select the sun. Not a superficial statement comparing calendrical devices, but rather, a metaphor. Throughout the ages, the sages are implying, Israel has been moonlike in its relation to other nations. We have for centuries revolved around other peoples, never free to choose our own trajectory. In fact, by all logic we should have been extinct long ago. And yet, we have not only survived; we have critically impacted and shaped the nature and destiny of the human race. A one-in-a-million shot. To the skeptical secularist, to the astonished anti-Semite, it's all a cultural coincidence. But maybe, just maybe, there is a Divinely ordained destiny for the *Jews* on this planet. Perhaps there is a God who wanted us to exist; and to exist for a sacred purpose.

In an age in which judgmentalism is frowned upon, and all cultures are placed on pedestals of equal stature, God's statement on the eve of the Exodus appears profoundly politically incorrect: *Ve-he-yitem li segual mi-kol ha-amim*, God thunders, you will be for me an elite, a chosen nation. You have been selected for an influential role in the divine drama that, given your small size, is stupefying: to communicate the monotheistic message to humanity, and

to amass an intellectual heritage even in centuries when most men and women were illiterate, and that continues to blossom today despite our sheer numbers. "Arise fair sun," Shakespeare wrote, "and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief that thou, her maid, art far more fair than she." But the moon that is Israel has nothing to be envious of; for it proudly exudes a radiance disproportionate to its size.

Now I must tell you that not all Jews wear this history with pride, and that the widespread interest in extraterrestrials is also instructive in seeking to understand the sorry state of American Jewry. Fred Hereen reports that he once asked Stephen Hawking why he is so sure that alien life must exist, and he responded that "The human race is so insignificant...I find it difficult to believe the whole universe is a necessary precondition for our existence." Alas, so many American Jews today feel, in like fashion, that they as Jews are not significant, that their heritage is too narrow, too parched, too irrelevant, too anachronistic, too limited to be the focus

of God's plan here on earth. The late Shlomo Carlebach once commented on visiting American universities: "When someone comes over to me and tells me he's a Protestant, I know he's a Protestant. When somebody tells me he's a Catholic, I know he's a Catholic. When someone tells me that he's just a human being - I know he's a Jew." As scientists deem humanity unworthy of divine attention, and search space for a more spectacular species, so do too many Jews deem our small nation unworthy of divine chosenness, and proclaim themselves citizens of the solar system of civilizations, rejecting the option of associating with the minor moon that is the nation Israel. As Hawking failed to be amazed at the sheer marvel that is man, many Jews lack the sheer wonder at the odds-defying achievement that is their heritage.

This Shabbat, we begin the Bible again. And this book has all the elements of a fantasy and science-fiction story: heroes and villains, a chosen people with a miraculous destiny, and, in the endtimes, good's ultimate triumph over evil. Yet the author of this saga had

added one ingredient that Tolkien, Wells, Harry Potter's Joanna Rowling, and even Stephen Spielberg, with all his special effects, could never add: this story is true. Moreover: it is the truth that makes this story special, a truth that is vindicated by the story's endless sequels. For if Israel was never chosen, if Israel was not ordained with a divine destiny millennia ago, how are we to explain its extraordinary impact and intellectual achievement? "To examine the Mishna, Gemara, Cabbala, Zohar, and the Talmud," Adams wrote to Jefferson in amazement, "would require the life of Methusalah." If our children are to grow not only as "human beings," but as Jews as well, it is amazement at this achievement that must be constantly cultivated: of the moon that is the nation Israel, that began its orbit in Egypt, that careened through the universe of history, and that impacted upon humanity in an odds-defying and inexplicable fashion. The continuation of our tale, the moral impact of our people on eternity, depends upon our own performance.



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Men's Club Sukkah Supper speaker Hon. Tevi Troy (Ramaz '85), Deputy Asst. to the President for Domestic Policy, with Rabbi Haskel Lookstein and KJ Men's Club volunteers.



From the Sept. 18 film screening of *SOSUA: Haven in the Caribbean*. Right to left: Sylvain Kanfou, Mrs. Denise Kanfou (Sylvain's mother), Dominican Republic Ambassador Enriquillo Del Rosario and Mrs. Rosario, Harriet Taub (filmmaker of *Sosua*), KJ member Ernest Apfelbaum (who lived in Sosua during the Holocaust) and Dr. Mark Meirowitz, President, KJ Men's Club



Hon. Tevi Troy's lecture was entitled "From Levy to Rubin: 350 Years of the Jewish Presence in America."

UPCOMING MEN'S CLUB FILM SCREENING
"THE LAST JEWS OF BAGHDAD"
 with the filmmakers Carole Basri and Adriana Davis
Sunday, January 29 at 6:30 PM