Reilly Center Reports

American Jews & Intelligent Design

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No American Jewish organization advocates teaching intelligent design in public schools. No Jewish religious body endorses it. Official representatives of all the major streams of Judaism – Reform,[2] Conservative,[3] Orthodox[4] & Reconstructionist[5] – have denounced it; only the Ultra-Orthodox, who in any case vigilantly oppose sending Jewish children to public school, have expressed sympathy for teaching intelligent design in the schools they refuse to attend.[6] Jewish organization like the American Jewish Committee supply attorneys to prosecute school boards introducing intelligent design into their curriculum, and split the tab for the ensuing trials.[7] Among their non-denominational partners -- the ACLU, People for the American Way, and others -- Jews are represented in the rank and file in numbers that vastly exceed what one might expect of a small minority. In a famously fractious community -- an old joke has two Jews stranded alone on a desert island; the sea captain who finally rescues them is perplexed to find they’ve built three synagogues – almost all American Jews agree that intelligent design has no place in the public school science curriculum. And polls consistently show that Jews hold this view far more commonly than members of any other religious or ethnic group in America.[8]

Rabbinic Attitudes towards Darwinian Evolution

The remarkable agreement among American Jews that intelligent design is _theoria non grata_ in biology class has several explanations. One, though not the most important one, concerns what might be called Jewish theology. In the century and a half since Darwin first published his _Origin of the Species_, Jews have registered almost every imaginable response to the theory of evolution. Darwinism was initially received with discomfort by American rabbis (almost all of whom were Reform Jews, in that period before the great Jewish immigrations from Eastern Europe), but it was not long before evolution was embraced by many Jewish religious leaders. Kaufmann Kohler, the most celebrated American rabbi of the late 19th and early 20th century (he was pastor of New York’s storied Reform Temple Beth El and then Chancellor of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati), found comfort in evolution:

_Darwinism declares...that creation is not to be explained through a miracle but through the natural law of progressive development of life under favorable circumstances....Does not this view of life...harmonize perfectly with our comprehension of religion, which we do not recognize in form, but in reform, which has its living power in the internal remodeling of Judaism and its Messianic mission as progress toward a completed humanity?_

Kohler was not perfectly representative, even of Reform response to Darwin. Isaac Mayer Wise, another important Reform rabbi and Jewish leader, devoted much thought and effort to attacking Darwinism, and suggesting his own alternative in which God is “everywhere, in all space, in all objects of nature, in every attribute of matter and in every thought of the mind.”[10] By the end of the 19th century, however, evolution had been accepted by nearly all American rabbis. In the years that followed, more traditional Judaism established itself in the United States, and though there were rabbis who criticized the materialist world view that typically went along with Darwinism, there were no sustained attacks on the theory. Orthodox rabbis were often disquieted by evolution, but rarely rejected it outright. The influential German Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the preeminent theorist of modern Orthodoxy, captured this general ambivalence when he wrote in the 1880s that:

_This will never change, not even if the latest scientific notion that the genesis of all the multitudes of organic forms on earth can be traced back to one single, most primitive, primeval form of life should ever appear to be anything more than what it is today, a vague hypothesis still unsupported by fact. Even if this notion were ever to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world, Jewish
thought, unlike the reasoning of the high priest of that notion, would nonetheless never summon us to revere a still extant representative of this primal form as the supposed ancestor of us all. Rather, Judaism in that case would call upon its adherents to give even greater reverence than ever before to the one, sole God Who, in His boundless creative wisdom and eternal omnipotence, needed to bring into existence no more than one single, amorphous nucleus and one single law of "adaptation and heredity" in order to bring forth, from what seemed chaos but was in fact a very definite order, the infinite variety of species we know today, each with its unique characteristics that sets it apart from all other creatures.[11]

Hirsh’s tentative accommodation of evolution reflects an old and enduring Jewish tendency to privilege interpretative readings of scripture over literal ones. The Talmud reports that “every commandment that went forth from the mouth of God was divided into seventy languages.” (BT Shabbat, 88b) In the book of midrash on Numbers, Bamidbar Rabbah, one finds reference to the “seventy faces of the Torah”. Later midrash refers to forty-nine aspects of the Torah. The acceptance of multiple interpretations implied by these statements came to be a foundational principle of later Jewish intellectual life. “At least since the time of Maimonides,” wrote Midrash scholar David Stern, “Jewish philosophers have been aware of the Rabbis’ apparent lack of interest in making a theologically coherent whole out of their disparate beliefs.”[12] Consistency was not even a regulative ideal; it was not something to aspire to. Intellectual conflict is most often a product of the incompatibility of competing views. If one does not seek compatibility and harmony, as say between one’s reading of the “Book of Nature” and the “Book of Scripture”, one is unlikely to experience conflict.

And matters were more extreme still. Jewish exegetes did not simply fail to seek consensus, they actively sought to multiply interpretations. When Jews read sacred texts, they had in their service sophisticated tools that granted them remarkable flexibility. “Another way of stating the originality of Midrash,” wrote literary critic Geoffrey Hartman,

is to point out its exceptional position as a form of commentary with strong residues of oral transmission which elude a concept of the literary based on manuscript and especially print culture. Midrash, even in the age of manuscript culture, is allowed a freedom characteristic of oral tradition, which does not congeal the transmitted communication but leaves room for diversity of performance. In Midrash, as in oral forms, ‘the integrity of the past is subordinate to the integrity or the present.’[13]

This great “freedom” and “diversity of performance” were possible because there remained in the midrash no privilege for the ostensibly “literal” meaning of the text. “The midrash realizes its goal via a hermeneutic of recombining pieces of the canonized exemplar into a new discourse,” wrote Talmud scholar Daniel Boyarin, a recombination that continually creates new interpretations that maintain the sanction of tradition. “We thus see how [this] intertextuality served both the revolutionary and conservative needs of the midrash and its authors, preserving the old wine by pouring it into new bottles.”[14]

Because the tradition of Jewish interpretation devalues the literal meaning of scripture, because it does not seek consensus (except about practical matters of law, and even about these, conflicting opinions are often granted legitimacy), and because it has developed exegetical strategies that tend to multiply interpretations, philosophical or empirical findings can never conflict a priori with scripture. This did not mean that the theory of evolution and other scientific findings were not on occasion rejected because they did not mesh well with accepted interpretations of canonical texts. But such rejection was never a straightforward matter. Harmonizing between any particular natural philosophic or scientific opinion and the great Jewish religious texts was always an available option, with legitimacy sanctioned by thousands of years of Jewish exegetical tradition. It was for this reason that – whether they accepted it or rejected it – few Rabbis experienced the theory of evolution as a challenge to their piety or that of their congregations. In a community unaccustomed to taking the story of creation literally, a scientific theory that contradicted a literal reading of Genesis need not constitute a challenge to belief.[15] It was with this in mind that Reform Rabbi Louis I. Newman chided William Jennings Bryan in a speech to San Francisco’s Commonwealth Club only months before John Scopes’ trial became a cause celebre:
Those who deny evolution on the basis of the Bible are doing it an injustice by attempting to interpret it literally rather than poetically and symbolically. The story of Adam is a dramatic poem, not a scientific narrative…Let Mr. Bryan and his followers, for whom we have only the most friendly sentiments, not seek to turn backward the wheels of intellectual progress; let them join forces with us in accepting scientific facts and in interpreting truth for spiritual and ethical ends.[16]

The relative ease with which evolution can be assimilated into traditional Jewish belief accounts explains to some degree why evolution never became a defining issue for rabbis and their congregations. But this goes only a small way toward explaining why American Jews today overwhelmingly oppose teaching intelligent design in public schools. It is telling that even among those Jews who themselves accept intelligent design and reject some or all of the theory of evolution, the great majority still favor banning intelligent design from public school curricula. Reconstructionist Rabbi Joshua Waxman recently wrote that “the concept of intelligent design is central to my understanding of what it means to be Jewish.” However, in the same essay, he insisted that “Jones made exactly the right decision in the Dover School Board case. I.D., which is just creationism by another name, has no place in a public school curriculum.”[17] Likewise, Conservative Rabbi Susan Grossman could begin an essay with a hosanna: “Thank God U.S. District Court Judge John Jones III ruled that intelligent design (ID) is not science and therefore has no place in the classroom.” Only to continue:

I believe in God as creator of the world. But that doesn’t mean I think ID belongs in the classroom. I believe there is a difference between personal piety and communal polity, between being an honest observer of the world while retaining one’s own personal faith and foisting one’s own faith upon others.[18]

This is an odd state of affairs. Even those American Jews who believe that the evolutionary account of the origins of life is incomplete or altogether mistaken, do not wish to see its authority undercut in the public schools by the introduction of intelligent design (or stickers on textbooks, or any of the other strategies that have been used to diminish the status of evolution among impressionable high-schoolers). Obviously, theology and philosophy alone cannot explain Jewish opposition to intelligent design. What, then, does explain this resolute opposition?

**Jews, Public Schools & Science**

The answer can be found in the past century’s history of Jews in American public schools, and of the public schools in the lives and imaginations of American Jews.

Jews came to America in two migrations. The first peaked after the failed revolutions of 1848, and comprised German speaking Jews, most with little affection for Jewish religious rites. In general, they succeeded beyond reasonable expectation, and a good number of them succeeded brilliantly – some, like the Warburgs and the Schiffs, by judiciously trading on their ties with their rich European relatives, and some, like the Oches and the Sulzbergers, or the Strausses, the Gimbels and the Filenes, through that combination of luck, genius and guile that stands behind so many American commercial success stories. By 1875, there were roughly 200,000 German-Jews in the States. The second migration began in 1880, continued to 1914, and dwarfed the first. Spurred by pogroms, more than two million Jews settled in the United States, most coming from Russia. In 1880, The Jewish population of New York grew from 80,000 in 1880 to 1,400,000 in 1914, an increase of 1,750 percent.

For this mass of eastern European Jewish immigrants, Ostjuden as they were called, assimilation into American culture was no easy matter. Many took seriously their “primitive” religion. A small but loud minority embraced extremist politics: Marxism, socialism, anarchism. Many stubbornly insisted on speaking, writing and reading Yiddish. They were dreadfully poor. They were, in short, awkwardly un-American.
At the same time, they arrived with high expectations for America, seeing in it a Goldene Medineh, a Golden Land, promising fair treatment and unencumbered opportunity. It did not take long, though, for immigrants to realize that this promise of a land that “knows no distinction of race or faith” and offers “redemption from … brutalities and ignominies” would not be fully realized on their new shores. Beginning in 1915, the revivified Klan made anti-Semitism their standard, second only to their racism. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, rendered into English and serialized by Henry Ford beginning in 1920 as The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem, eventually sold upward of half a million copies in book form. Immigrations laws were revised to limit, and eventually to end, further Jewish immigration to America. Looking for work, Jews found want ads in the Times, The World, and the Herald-Tribune stipulating that “Christians only” need apply. (A contemporary estimate put at 90% the jobs that banned Jews in New York – an exaggeration but still a sign that the practice was widespread.) And, crucially important to those hoping that their children’s circumstances would be less mean than their own, universities and professional schools instituted quotas making it harder for Jews to be admitted than Catholics and, especially, Protestants. According to a study cited by Fortune magazine in 1936, more than half the 12,000 medical school applications submitted each year came from Jews. 6000 applications were accepted, and 17 percent of these were Jews --about 1000-- while 83% -- about 5000 -- were Christian. A Christian applicant was five times as likely to be accepted as a Jewish one. Medical school quotas were a special case of a broader phenomenon. Almost every good university and college established some sort of undergraduate quota system. The percentage of Jews accepted differed greatly from university to university. In the period following the first World War, Jewish admissions to elite universities diminished to less than half of what they had been before the war.

Three defining traits of eastern European Jewish immigrants in the generation before the Second World War, then, were poverty, exclusion and an enduring sense of cultural difference or distance. These traits were not universal, nor were they absolute, but they were enough to establish certain durable political and cultural patterns.[19] Of these, perhaps none was embraced with more enthusiasm than support for public schools, which were seen as offering a way out of poverty and a way into American boardrooms and clubrooms. For the public schools to provide these things, however, they had to be of a certain character. They had to be hospitable to Jews, and they had to train these Jews in the ways of America. But perhaps their most important job, was to advance an ideal, not just among Jews but among Christian children as well, of an America that is indifferent to creed, at least in its public institutions. Jews sought from public schools not just the intellectual and cultural training needed by their children so that they could be hired into good middle class jobs. Jews also sought from public schools the ideological indoctrination needed by the children of their Protestant and, to a lesser degree, Catholic neighbors so that they would one day be willing to hire Jews. Put differently, Jews looked to the public schools to advance a non-sectarian ideal of American public life, in which individuals would be judged by their mettle and not by their lineage. They looked to public schools not simply to remain mum about all matters of religion, but to advance the ideal that religion ought not have a place in public life.

This ideal was far from universally accepted in the years between the World Wars, when the greatest number Jewish immigrants struggled to establish themselves. In 1925 (the year of the Scopes trial) alone, there were initiatives in New York, New Jersey, California, Colorado, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Tennessee to beef up the religious character, in some cases the Protestant sectarian character, of the public schools. The means varied -- mandating or sanctioning religious study in the schools, banning evolution, introducing daily chapel, mandating the “Lord’s Prayer,” introducing formal bible study, and more – but in the eyes of contemporary Jews, the end was always the same, to prevent public schools from creating the sort of non-sectarian public culture they avidly sought. Jewish leaders fought these religious initiatives with vigor and consensus; Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and secular leaders were united in their opposition. Louis Newman, who in 1925 edited a book entitled The Sectarian Invasion of Our Public Schools, wrote:

*The shrine of our common Americanism is the public school. Our children enter it not as Catholic, Protestant, Jew or unbeliever, but as Americans all. Nothing should ever be done, as the Bible amendment seeks to do, to split the student community into warring sectarian camps. The American common school is our greatest contribution to the progress of education; we must keep it intact and inviolate.*[20]
Rabbi Samuel Schulman, the charismatic Rabbi of New York’s Temple Beth-El sermonized with urgency in 1925 that:

*It is best for the American people that the child in the public school should not have either his religious affiliation, as inherited from his parents, or his racial origin, in any way emphasized. In the school, American unity should, above all, be insisted upon. In the school, the teacher should know only American children.*[21]

The united Orthodox Jewish Congregations of Cleveland issued a statement protesting “solemnly against the…attempts to divide the children of the public schools into separate racial, national or religious groups in which they belong.”[22] And Rabbi Steven Wise, Chairman of the American Jewish Congress, dryly remarked that “when the Church infringed on the State the Jews would be the first to suffer.”[23]

Wise’s observation at first seems at odds with the grandiose idealism of his rabbinic colleagues like Newman who described the public schools as a “shrine of our common Americanism.” Wise said what some Jews of his day did not wish to admit in public, that advancing in and through the public schools an ideal of religious indifference was good for Jews, and that to do otherwise would be bad for Jews. Idealism and self-interest are not always at odds, and even if Jews benefited most from the exclusion of all religious expression from the public schools, this does not mean that the ideals they trumpeted in doing so were hollow. It is often the case, as it was here, that high-minded ideals are enmeshed in a ravel of parochial interests and concerns.[24]

Until the second World War, Jewish advocacy of a strict ban on any religious forms in public schools took the form of public proclamations and quickly drafted resolutions that carried no clout. Indeed, in the decades between the wars, religious sentiments and ceremonies were common in public schools. This was true even in New York City, where in some schools Jews found themselves in the majority and in others a sizable minority, and where Christmas pageants and daily prayer were typically in the curriculum. And of course these things were taken for granted in most of the rest of the country. This state of affairs began to change only in 1941, when a ragtag coalition of civic groups -- the League of Women Voters, the New Jersey Taxpayers Association, the ACLU and the Junior Order of United American Mechanics among them – challenged a New Jersey law authorizing state subsidies for bussing children to parochial schools. By 1943, the New Jersey Supreme Court had struck down the subsidies in the case now known as *Everson v. Board of Education*. This ruling was reversed by the New Jersey Court of Errors and Appeals in 1945, and two years later the reversal was upheld by the United States Supreme Court. In his majority opinion, however, Justice Hugo Black wrote that the bussing subsidy was not itself a religious matter. He then continued, issuing what A.E. Dick Howard has called “the most famous dictum in any Supreme Court opinion on the meaning of the Establishment Clause,” writing that the clause erected “a wall of separation between church and state [that]…must be kept high and impregnable.”[25] Advocates of the separation of church and state had technically lost Everson, but they walked away with a greater victory than they might earlier have dared hope.

The American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League had declined to file *amici* briefs supporting the plaintiffs in *Everson*, but they were electrified by its outcome. Above all, Leo Pfeffer, staff attorney of the American Jewish Congress, saw Everson as proof that the courts could and should be used to remove all vestiges of “sectarianism” from the public schools. Under Pfeffer’s leadership, the AJCongress, the AJCommittee and the ADL played a pivotal part in a largely-successful twenty-five year campaign to extend the application of the establishment clause. They were not alone, of course; the ACLU was at the forefront of this effort from the start, and they were joined by many smaller, ad hoc groups like Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (POAU). Still, Jewish organizations were at the center of the struggle to diminish the role of religion in the schools and other public institutions, providing increasingly experienced and confident legal assistance. No less, the struggle to diminish the role of religion in the schools and other public institutions found its place at the heart of the identity of important American Jewish organization and, increasingly, at the heart of the personal identity of many American Jews.[26]
Several issues, at one time or another, became embroiled in the church-state conflicts surround the schools: funding, bussing, prayer, holiday celebration and decoration, bible study and creation/evolution. The last issue – the challenge to the place of evolution in the public biology curriculum – has for some Jews been the most significant. This is because, over the past several generations, science itself has assumed unique importance among the subject taught in the public schools. And this is because many Jews came to see science as the best means for promoting the very ideal Jews looked to the public schools to advance: the ideal of a civil society blind to creed, race and background. For a variety of reasons, many American Jews (like their German forebears of the late 19th century and early 20th) came to see the sciences themselves as something that could render religion and ethnicity irrelevant, but without demanding that Jews deny their religion or ethnicity. Science would do this because, as Robert Merton wrote in 1938, it was characterized by such virtues “as intellectual honesty, integrity, organized skepticism, disinterestedness, impersonality,” and because “it is a basic assumption of modern science that scientific propositions ‘are invariant with respect to the individual’ and groups.” Further, Merton insisted, science cannot “suffer itself to become the handmaiden of theology or economy or state.” Science, then, is a path from “tribal brotherhood” to “universal otherhood,” to borrow Benjamin Nelson’s lovely turn of phrase.

The Jewish biologist and writer Benjamin Gruenberg, who taught high school science in a New York public school for some years beginning in the 1920s because he believed that it offered children of immigrants a way to improve their meager circumstances, saw science in this way. “The chief obstacles to science have always been fixed ideas and vested interests,” he wrote in Science and the Public Mind:

> Orthodoxies of all sorts, whether religious or political, whether moralistic or intellectualistic, are inimical to the spirit of inquiry.... An appreciation of the development of science as a great cooperative enterprise of mankind is likely to promote solidarity and to make each individual feel a sense of unity with his fellows..... Science is a means of broadening the sympathies and cultivating tolerance toward other groups, races, nationalities, tastes and philosophies.[27]

And what was true of science in general, according to Gruenberg, was especially true of evolutionary biology:

> The growth of the evolutionary point of view has carried a new implication regarding the significance of the individual. A new concept of species, as itself merely a convenient generalization, shifts attention back to the individual. The individual human being finds here a new dignity. He can articulate now excellent reasons for his resentment against being treated as a member of some inclusive group – whether it be peasant or teacher, voter or customer, or the more meaningless “public.” He is discovering that he is after all, with the full approval of “science,” what he always felt himself to be – namely, his own peculiar and unduplicated self. … [T]here is always more in the individual than our categories acknowledge.[28]

For someone who shares Gruenberg’s view, chipping away at the authority of evolution by replacing it or augmenting it with theories of creation or intelligent design is twice an attack on precious and fundamental American values. By endeavoring to find a place for religious thought in the public schools, it is an affront to the ideal of a neutral, non-sectarian society. And by diminishing the standing of science, it is an affront to the “broadening of sympathies” and “tolerance” that science at its best both embodies and advances.

**Conclusion: Science as a Social Philosophy**

It may be seen as a paradox that Jews, lacking a fundamentalist tradition in their interpretation of scripture, have embraced a fundamentalist commitment to “separationism,” as some have called it, along with a rather fundamentalist interpretation of what counts as good science, or science at all. But this makes sense in light of a history in which the very ability of Jews to find a place for themselves in American culture was taken to depend upon fierce insistence on the creating a public sphere utterly free from religion, and upon unflagging defense of science.
It is in light of this history that one can begin to understand the near unanimity of Jewish opposition to intelligent design. Teaching intelligent design comes off to many Jews as an attack on a social philosophy that has allowed Jews to thrive in America more than anywhere, ever, in the past. This social philosophy mandates a radical divide between a public realm in which creed and ethnicity are so fundamentally irrelevant as to be utterly inadmissible and a private realm in which they are privileged. Further, by calling into question evolution, intelligent design appears to many Jews as a rejection of the ethos of science itself, which calls for, as Merton observed, “organized skepticism, disinterestedness, and impersonality.”[29]

Some Christian advocates of teaching intelligent design in the public schools explain their wishes as such: The public schools have embraced a radically secular ideology intended to weaken the faith of children and the role of faith in public discourse, essentially to quarantine religion in the private sphere. Television Evangelist Dr. D. James Kennedy captured this sentiment in extremis in his 1994 book Character & Destiny: A Nation In Search of Its Soul. “The diabolical ‘wall of separation’ has led to increasing secularization, godlessness, immorality and corruption in our country” and “students from kindergarten through high school [are] stripped of any sense of moral or ethical absolutes.”[30] Intelligent design is, for such advocates, a small step towards undoing the effects of this wall of separation.

Stripped of its fire-and-brimstone hyperbole, many Jews might agree with Kennedy’s analysis. They might agree that the public schools have embraced secularization and, at least within their walls, godlessness. They might agree that the public schools have discouraged moral and ethical absolutes. And they might agree that intelligent design is a small step towards undoing these effects of the wall of separation.

It is precisely for this reason that the great majority of Jews, including those who have their own qualms about the impact of secular materialism on their own children, oppose teaching intelligent design in public schools with a commitment unrivaled by Americans of any other religious tradition.

Notes

[1] This essay was originally written in 2005 and reflects the state of the debate at that time.

[2] Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, said of the 2002 Georgia case in which a school board decided to affix stickers to textbooks indicating that evolution was merely “a theory” that it represented “the efforts of others to impose a theological discipline where it doesn’t exist,” and that “it violates church-state separation. It’s bad technique and not good for children.” (quoted in Chanan Tigay, “Cases on Evolution Expose Rifts between Orthodox and Liberal,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Jan. 18, 2005. Available online at http://www.jta.org/page_view_story.asp?intarticleid=14944&intcategoryid=4). Rabbi Marc Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, issued a statement in response to the Dover ruling:

The scientific theory of evolution is being challenged in public schools and in our courts by those seeking to tear down the wall of separation between church and state by enshrining one religious view into public school curricula. This campaign is dangerous, especially to those who cherish true religious liberty. We, therefore, applaud today’s District Court decision reaffirming the First Amendment…As the Court rightly held, intelligent design, also known as creationism, is not science; it is religion. The Dover School District’s effort to advance religion by teaching creationism in public schools was a disservice to its students and to all of us. Available online at http://rac.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=1389&pge_prg_id=7037

[3] For example, Rabbi Robert Abramson, director of the department of education at United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, explained that he rejects teaching intelligent design not only in the public schools, but even in conservative Jewish parochial schools: "I'm just uncomfortable with Intelligent Design because it has built in it a very specific theology that is mixing science and religion in a way that we really try to stay away from" (quoted in E. B. Solomont, “Day Schools Balance Science, Religion,” The Forward, January 20, 2006. Available online at http://forward.com/articles/7213/in-other-words-/
Two days after the Dover ruling, the Rabbinical Council of America, or RCA, issued a statement endorsing evolution:

In light of the ongoing public controversy about Evolution, Creationism and Intelligent Design, the RCA notes that significant Jewish authorities have maintained that evolutionary theory, properly understood, is not incompatible with belief in a Divine Creator, nor with the first 2 chapters of Genesis.

The RCA is the largest organization of Orthodox rabbis in America.

Reconstructionists, whose theology does not include the notion of a transcendent God and Creator, accept evolution as a matter of course. Hence, Rabbi Richard Hirsh, Executive Director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, bemoaned the entire debate over intelligent design:

If we are going to endure another round in the battle between “evolution” and “intelligent design/creation ‘science,’” have we the time and energy to explain yet again how one can be religious while believing in evolution? Notwithstanding the modern, progressive and critical forms of religion, the overwhelming majority of believers, regardless of which religion they endorse, remain wedded to some form of supernaturalism, to a belief in some cosmic force or reality, and to an understanding of themselves as characters in a cosmic drama directed by God. To affirm “religion” against “secularism” is therefore not only to sin against the light but to risk being associated with dark forces. (“Can Secularism Save Jewish Religion?,” Jewish Currents: A Secular, Progressive Bimonthly, May - June 2005. Available online at http://www.jewishcurrents.org/2005-may-hirsh.htm

Some years earlier, Rabbi Art Green, then the President of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, wrote expansively that:

The fact is that we Jews have largely abandoned Creation as a theological issue. Convinced as we are that the origin of species – and of the universe itself – is something to be explained by scientists rather than theologians, most of us have seen no value in attempting a defense of ancient Jewish views on Creation. (Arthur Green, Seek My Face, Speak My Name, Northvale, NJ, Jason Aronson, Inc., 1992, p. 53; quoted in Marc Swetlitz’ marvelous essay, “Responses to Evolution among Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Jews in Twentieth-Century America”, forthcoming in Swetlitz & Cantor, Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism, University of Chicago Press).

Rabbi David Zwiebel, the Executive Vice President for Government and Public Affairs of Agudath Israel of America, issued a terse statement following the Dover verdict:

The judge determined that the “Intelligent Designer” behind “Intelligent Design” is G-d. In this respect, his is right. If our Constitution, however, is to be understood as forbidding any mention in public schools of even the possibility that the universe was brought into being by the Creator, that should deeply trouble all Americans. (Available online at http://www.canonist.com/?p=394)

Rabbi Avi Shafran, the organizations director of public affairs, added that “if one teaches that the human being is just an evolved ape and that our consciences and sense that we have a soul and free will are just phantasm – that road leads to amorality. It leads to it being impossible to say that any particular way of living is right or wrong.”

Agudath Israel is the largest ultra-orthodox organization in the United States.

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On December 20, 2005, the day of the Dover ruling, the American Jewish Committee issued a press release applauding the decision:

Today’s ruling is a significant blow to those who are attempting to intrude religious dogma, under the guise of science, into the nation’s public schools…The court’s ruling underscores that the appropriate place to teach religion is no churches or synagogues, and not in the public schools…AJC is a staunch defender of the separation between church and state in the public school curriculum, particularly in the science classroom. In this vein, AJC has submitted amicus briefs in the key legal cases concerning evolution and creationism over the years. (Available online at http://www.ajc.org/site/c.ijITI2PHKoG/b.685761/k.CB97/Home.htm)


Creationism, creation science, intelligent design and other theories that set out to challenge widely held scientific explanations about the origin of the universe have no place in the public school curriculum. The U.S. Constitution guarantees the rights of Americans to believe the religious theories of creation (as well as other theories) but it does not permit them to be taught in public school science classes. (Available online at http://www.adl.org/issue_religious_freedom/create/creationism_QA.asp)

Ira Forman, the Executive Director of the National Jewish Democratic Council attacked President George W. Bush’s press conference endorsement of intelligent design:

Public school science classes should teach just that: science. There is a time and place to teach religion to our children -- either at home, or in private or religious schools, or after the public school day and on weekends in our houses of worship. America's public schools are no place for this President to advance his 'flat earth society' mentality. (Available online http://www.njdc.org/)

The National Council of Jewish Women announced that the Dover decision was a “resounding victor for religious and academic freedom [that] should once and for all end the nationally orchestrated effort to insert religion into science classes.” (quoted in Ain). Dozens of other national and local Jewish organizations issued similar statements.

The most recent of these polls was conducted in May, 2005, by researchers at the Louis Finkelstein Institute for Social and Religious Research at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Surveying physicians, the poll found that 54% of Protestant doctors “agree more with intelligent design than evolution,” while 60% of Catholic doctors “agree more with evolution.” Eighty-eight percent of Jewish doctors “agreed more” with evolution. Of the 12% of Jewish doctors who expressed sympathy for intelligent design, half at the same time accepted evolution. Alan Mittleman, director of the Finkelstein Institute, concluded that “sympathy for the idea of intelligent design comes primarily from Protestant members of the medical community, although openness to consideration of intelligent design as a legitimate speculation is strong among Catholics but completely lacking among Jews.” (Available online at http://jtsa.edu/research/finkelstein/surveys/evolution.shtml)


[15] Still, for all that, the last generation has seen a rise in outright rejection of evolution among ultra-orthodox Jews. Rabbi Menachem Schneersohn, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, dismissed evolution in a 1962 letter:

> What scientific basis is there for limiting the creative process to an evolutionary process only, starting with atomic and subatomic particles — a theory full of unexplained gaps and complications, while excluding the possibility of creation as given by the Biblical account? For, if the latter possibility be admitted, everything falls neatly into pattern, and all speculation regarding the origin and age of the world becomes unnecessary and irrelevant….

> If you are still troubled by the theory of evolution, I can tell you without fear of contradiction that it has not a shred of evidence to support it. On the contrary, during the years of research and investigation since the theory was first advanced, it has been possible to observe certain species of animal and plant life of a short life-span over thousands of generations, yet it has never been possible to establish a transmutation from one species into another, much less to turn a plant into an animal. Hence such a theory can have no place in the arsenal of empirical science.

> The theory of evolution, to which reference has been made, actually has no bearing on the Torah account of Creation. For even if the theory of evolution were substantiated today, and the mutation of species were proven in laboratory tests, this would still not contradict the possibility of the world having been created as stated in the Torah, rather than through the evolutionary process. The main purpose of citing the evolutionary theory was to illustrate how a highly speculative and scientifically unsound theory can capture the imagination of the uncritical, so much so that it is even offered as a scientific” explanation of the mystery of Creation, despite the fact that the theory of evolution itself has not been substantiated scientifically and is devoid of any real scientific basis. (Available on the Chabad/Lubavitch website http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/60680/jewish/Essays.htm)

Recently, a raucous controversy arose over the natural history books of Rabbi Nosson Slifkin, which implicitly endorsed evolution. On the eve of Yom Kippur, 2003, posters appeared on walls and bulletin boards in the ultra-orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood of Me’ah She’arim bearing the following decree:

> Three English essays by Nosson Slifkin were brought to me… and I was shocked to find them full of terrible sacrilege and heresy, wherein the author scoffs at all the faith with has been transmitted to us from generation to generation, and at what is plainly conveyed by our sources and scholars of blessed memory, and he twists and manipulates their intentions, so that they will match the opinions of the [scientifc] researchers….Therefore, it is forbidden to read or possess or promote the books of this man, as it is for all the books of the heretics. … Israel Eliyahu Weintraub (Available online http://www.zootorah.com/controversy/cherem.pdf)
L’Affair Slifkin remains the subject of anxious controversy in ultra-orthodox circles, but stands as clear testimony to the growing ultra-orthodox rejection of evolution. At the same time, though there were American rabbis who endorsed the banning of Slifkin’s books, the issue never gained the same traction in the United States at it did in Israel.


[22] In Newman, 1925. 87

[23] In Newman, 1925, 46.

[24] As was true in the later case of broad Jewish support for the Civil Rights Movement. About this, see my “All We Did for Them,” Boston Book Review, November, 1997, pp. 18-19.


[26] This story is wonderfully told, with great care and detail, by Ivers.


[29] Less abstractly, the criticism of science that inevitably accompanies the tabling of intelligent design has come to seem (to some Jews) inseparable from criticism of Jews themselves. This because in the period following the second World War Jews became remarkably prominent the sciences, entering the sciences in record numbers and winning disproportionately many Nobel prizes and other prestigious awards. Through such public icons as Robert Oppenheimer, Richard Feynmann, Norbert Weiner, Herman Kahn and, above all others, Albert Einstein, science at mid-century came to be associated with Jews and Judaism in the minds of many American Jews and Christians alike. Angry denunciations of the noxious materialism embodied in the theory of evolution which accompany debates of intelligent design wherever they arise can seem like an indictment not just of science, but of the scientists who produce it and, by extension, of Jews who are extravagantly overrepresented among scientists.