

## **The Religious Implications of Extraterrestrial Life**

The existence of rational, sentient beings on a planet other than earth is declared a probability by an ever-growing chorus of distinguished astronomers and eminent scientists in all fields. Should the existence of life elsewhere be established, and especially if some contact is made with intelligent beings elsewhere, we will be confronted by as much of a challenge to our established way of thought as when the Copernican revolution displaced the earth from the center of the universe and set in motion a religious and philosophical upheaval that has but recently run its course.

*I admit this is the second most serious problem we face today. The first, most important is: is there any intelligent life on earth?....*

There has been little if any serious Jewish thinking on the subject. Yet it is important to anticipate such revolutionary discoveries, and that for two reasons. First, we must anticipate such an eventuality and attempt to formulate a preliminary Jewish-religious conception of a universe in which man is not the only rational inhabitant. And second--perhaps first--the exercise itself will shed light on the fundamental Jewish *Weltanschauung* of Judaism on the role of man in the universe, irrespective of the actual existence of extraterrestrial life.

Of course, caution must be exercised in accepting uncritically any extravagant speculation on this subject and, even more, the hasty philosophic conclusions some have begun to derive from such uninhibited conjecture. Indeed, drinking deeply from the heady wines of amazing hypotheses and fascinating theories, most of them not proven, a number of scientists have become intoxicated with the sense of their own unimportance. Never have so many been so enthusiastic about being so trivial.

Nevertheless, the credentials of the scientists who believe that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe are impeccable and the weight of evidence they present is sufficiently convincing for us to take their conjectures seriously, despite any reservations we may have.

The major challenges with which Judaism is confronted by these new conceptions may be divided into three parts: the question of the uniqueness of man, the uniqueness of the Creator, and the relation between God and man. We shall here focus on the first of these.

Man was created, according to the Torah, in "the image of God." How does this God-like creature relate to other possibly superior, creatures elsewhere in the cosmos?

Jewish thinkers, along with many of their non-Jewish contemporaries, have often spoken of man as the purpose of creation. The Midrash, and especially the mystics, even into the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries, have spoken of man as a microcosm and have granted him far-reaching spiritual powers that allow him to influence the destiny of the cosmos. Can this hold true for a race of beings that inhabits a single planet of an off-center, medium-sized star in one of billions of galaxies? Can man's life have any transcendent meaning in a world in which we have received, as Harlow Shapley put it, "intimations of man's inconsequentiality" which we prefer to ignore because "we cherish our stuffiness?"

The problem is not so much theological--for God is in no way diminished by our learning that His creation far exceeds what had previously been imagined--but anthropological: man and his place in the world.

Whatever the definition of man's creation in "the image of God," and there are several, the doctrine bestows transcendent value upon man, lifting him out of the order of the purely natural. However, this is by no means necessarily an exclusivist principle.

All human beings are created in this divine Image, despite the fact that they are born unequal, some with superior endowments and some with a tragic poverty of both talent and opportunity. In the same manner, races of intelligent beings that differ from each other as radically as an idiot from a genius may both be impressed by the divine Image, by the summons to transcend the merely natural. If the Image of the Absolutely One God can be impressed upon the manifold individuals within the human race, it can be similarly bestowed upon a multitude of races--whether on Earth or elsewhere.

An illustration of the difficulty of finding a single view in Torah is Psalms 8:4-9, where both the thesis and antithesis are presented together. David addresses God:

*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars which You have ordained--What is man that You take note of him...But You made him little lower than the angels and You crowned him with glory and honor, giving him dominion over the work of Your hands, putting all things under his feet*

Here a consideration of celestial grandeur points to man's insignificance; yet man's central worth is salvaged, and proof is adduced from his superiority over other terrestrial creatures. Paradoxically, man is both important and insignificant, central and peripheral. In the context of the vast cosmos, man shrinks almost into nothingness; in the framework of his own habitation, he is supreme and worthy. Both are true.

The most illustrious systematic exponent of anthropocentrism, the position under most direct attack by the assertion of the existence of extraterrestrial rational races, is the tenth century Egyptian-born R. Saadia, Gaon of the Babylonian Academy of Sura.

For Saadia, man is nothing less than the "goal of creation" and "the axle of the world and its foundation." This anthropology is an integral part of his whole outlook. For all his frailty, man is the condition of the world's existence; without him, the creation of heaven and earth would be an



exercise in futility and all existence would be devoid of meaning. Much to the dismay of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, he maintains that the primacy of man holds sway over the entire range of the universe; All is conditioned by man.

The twelfth century Maimonides, probably the greatest Jewish philosopher of all times, takes a position diametrically opposed to Saadia and proposes man's relative insignificance in the universe. The philosophical assertion of the absurdity of anthropocentrism is supported by Maimonides from a number of Scriptural texts. Thus, he quotes with approval the words of Isaiah (40:15), "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket."

*If time permits: the "geometrical argument" by Saadia: core>periphery, example: egg, foetus...Maimonides: periphery>core--Aristotle: translunar>sublunar. But even when we discard the geometrical hypothesis, the conclusions remain the same*

This dethronement of man from his previous position of honor does not in the least disturb the intellectual equanimity of Maimonides. Man's significance does not depend upon his superiority --and, we may add, his uniqueness. Man retains his intrinsic worth even if his hegemony extends merely over earth instead of all the cosmos. The reason with which man was endowed is sufficient to qualify him as the Image of God and it is this which is the source of his value and which makes him worthy of being addressed and commanded by God.

Now, the Torah's legislation--Halakhah--takes nothing but man into consideration. It focuses on his duties and his destiny, and simply assumes that he is the "axle of the world." Does that mean that Halakhah opts for Saadia's anthropocentrism? Maimonides clearly does not think so.

It is noteworthy that not only did Maimonides not feel it necessary to adopt anthropocentrism in order to strengthen the underpinnings of Halakhah, but he discarded such a view of man in the very introductory chapters of his great halakhic code. Obviously, Maimonides held that the validity of the Halakhah does not require an anthropocentric presupposition.

It is of the utmost significance that this philosophical anthropology which denies cosmic superiority to man was proposed by a major thinker who in no way considered that this theory contradicted his notion of man's significance as a God-like creature. Man's non-singularity does not imply his insignificance. Metaphysical dignity is not part of a numbers game; it is absurd to insist that it exists in inverse proportion to the number of beings who participate in it.

*Skeptic to Believer: How can you believe that God pays any attention to me , puny and very mortal creature, in a universe that is so incredibly vast, millions of galaxies, solar systems...Answer: That depends on how big a God you believe in...*

Judaism, therefore, can very well accept a scientific finding that man is not the only intelligent and bio-spiritual resident in God's world.



It matters little whether the globe we populate stands at dead center of the Milky Way, which in turn is at the very center of all the billions of galaxies, or whether we are residents of but one planet of a star that is 50,000,000 light years off-center in a galaxy which is itself in only one of billions in a remote corner of the magnificently spangled heavens. By way of analogy, the brilliant and saintly R. Elijah of eighteenth century Lithuania gained immortality not because he was the Mayor of Vilnius who lived in an opulent official mansion in the center of the city, but because he was the Gaon of Vilna who never ceased studying Torah and cared little that he spent his years in a cold hovel in the impoverished outskirts of the city. Similarly, the claim by a race to spiritual dignity and intrinsic metaphysical value does not depend upon a "good" cosmic address. It depends only upon the ability of the members of that race to enter into a dialogue with the Creator of all races. God makes Himself available to His creatures wherever they are in His immense universe; He is not a social snob who will not be seen in the cosmic slums and alleys.

Maimonides' anthropology offers us a much needed restraint upon what might otherwise tend to become an exercise in racial pride and global arrogance.

However, there is a wide gap between Maimonides' rejection of an anthropocentric teleology and the facile assumption by certain contemporary agnostics that man is utterly purposeless. As British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said, "Scientists animated by the purpose of proving that they are purposeless constitute an interesting subject for study."

For the believing Jew--as well, perhaps, for others--man can accept a far humbler place in the universe than previously assigned to him without surrendering his intrinsic worth and meaningfulness before God. Even if a believer does not consider mankind the "axle of the world," he does not take seriously Hegel's brash statement that the stars are nothing but "a rash on the sky." The purpose of man's life, therefore, is profoundly religious and very real, and is unaffected by the fact that he is not the sole telos for which all else was called into being.

Paradoxically, in the days before man exerted his present control over and independence from Nature, when he still was painfully conscious of his own impotence, he held to a view which regarded man as sufficiently significant to warrant the love and the judgment of God. Today, with a surge of power which has liberated him from the mighty grip of gravity and begun to extend his hegemony beyond earth, he finds himself trivial and irrelevant, unworthy of divine attention, alone in a universe from which teleology and value have been abolished, a world as cold as it is vast and as lonely as it is crowded.

When man holds to a conception of a personal God who creates and reveals and invites man to seek Him out, he is, despite his frailty and intrinsic worthlessness, endowed with significance by his Maker by virtue of His personal nature. When, however, man depersonalizes his God, he dehumanizes himself. No matter how much power he acquires over his environment and beyond it, no matter how much he tries to read his own values into his life by right of his own existential autonomy, he remains desperately alone. His whole scientific armory cannot forge for him a weapon with which to win



more than physical significance; and as long as he remains without metaphysical worth, he regards himself, in his heart of hearts, as a nothing, a cosmic accident, shrieking his utter loneliness against the infinitely empty and unresponsive heavens.

The discovery of fellow intelligent creatures elsewhere in the universe, if indeed they do exist, will deepen and broaden our appreciation of the mysteries of the Creator who, in His infinity, is not bewildered by numbers. Man will be humble, but not humiliated. With renewed fervor he will be able to turn to God, whose infinite goodness and providence are not limited to, but certainly include, one small planet on the fringes of the Milky Way.

It is perhaps most fitting to conclude with a statement made but a few years ago by a distinguished scientist famed for his courage and humanity--and not primarily or at all as a religious man. The statement reads:

Other civilizations, perhaps more successful ones, may exist an infinite number of times on the preceding and following pages of the Book of the Universe. Yet we should not minimize our sacred endeavors in the world, where, like faint glimmers in the dark, we have emerged for a moment from the nothingness of unconsciousness into material existence. We must make good the demands of reason and create a life worthy of ourselves and of the goals we only dimly perceive.

The author of that statement was Andre Sakharov who delivered these lines in his Nobel Prize lecture.