

Evolution Denial –

How to overcome our Spiritual Challenges

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The word, “evolution,” scares us. It stimulates two core primal fears. We fear that our lives do not matter. And we fear that life will never become predictable. In other words, we exist merely as monkeys with opposable thumbs. Nothing we do makes any significant long-term impact. And we never know what comes next, which means we can’t plan for any future.

Those two fears – we don’t matter and we can’t predict what’s next create spiritual challenges, which underlie the never-ending denial of the science of evolution, which deniers call “evil lution.”

Friday, 2/12, marked the 212th birthday of Charles Darwin, in 1809. Nearly a century ago, in 1925, the Scopes trial seemed to squash efforts to squash the teaching of the science of evolution. Yet, in recent years, polls showed close to half the American public doubts that evolution is real. Many of them want it banned from teaching in our schools. And those polls were taken before COVID.

Many of us see the irony of evolution denial in a pandemic, when evolution-based science forms the key to vaccines, treatments, and prevention of more millions of deaths by mutated viruses.

Those of us who see the dangers of evolution denial, and all forms of science denial, face our own spiritual challenge. We must shape a society

which comfortably embraces our limits and the persistence of unpredictable change. Scientific education helps, but we will never reduce evolution denial, until we teach children, and adults, that a life of limits and unpredictability should feel not only normal, but beneficial.

By the way, the story of Esther, which we will read in 2 weeks, for Purim, provides amazing lessons to cope with persistent reversals of fate, together our limited power. That's my cheap plug, or brilliant promotion, for you to join us on Friday, 2/26.

I mention the fear of insignificance, of irrelevance, first, because it most often underlies depression and the worst manifestations of depression – addiction, suicide, and oppression of others. Yet, we might start with the challenge of persistent change.

Change should feel normal, natural. Life means change. We create fantasies that everything can remain the same, well, relatively the same, at least predictable, and easily resolvable. We want the life of 1950's sitcoms, where all problems disappear, after 22 minutes, plus commercial breaks.

Yet, we know, from experience and from study, that the status quo is merely a snapshot. The pandemic has embedded this lesson into our brains. Even before COVID, we had lost the foundations of trust, which used to sustain us, when inevitable anxieties arose. For decades now, we can no longer trust our family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, faith communities, even our doctors and ministers, as well as our lawyers and political leaders. Well, we could never trust those last two.

The Greek philosopher taught, "we can't step into the same river twice." Modern physics add, "we can't step into the same river once," since it

changes the moment our foot touches it. And mystics, as well as modern scientists, add, “we can’t think about stepping into the same river once,” since our thoughts shift our relationship with the river, even before we touch it.

Still, we resist and deny change, because it feels so uncomfortable, so challenging. That forms our mistake. We equate challenge, dealing with uncertainty, with discomfort, so we kvetch about it and deny it, with about as much effect as the denial of gravity. We could, and should, accept life as a wondrous, miraculous series of never-ending challenges. We could, and should, kvell, gush with joy, about the opportunity to react to change, to show our resilience.

Resilience should be seen as the norm, not the exception. From the moment of birth, we constantly adapt to new situations and we never stop adapting. Perhaps, change ends when we die, although not if we believe in an afterlife. We know one certainty. While we live, the future, which includes this moment, remains uncertain.

Together with embracing change and trusting our resilience, we must embrace our limits, our finitude -- our limited wisdom, energy, and time.

Imagine we are asked, in a radio interview, to make a crucial point in one minute. Or, we are asked in a personal conversation. We tend to spend 15 to 30 seconds explaining how we don’t have enough time to explain our crucial point. That reflects our discomfort with limits. If we become comfortable with limits, we will cut all those wastes of time, and energy, our two most limited resources. For another common example, we spend inordinate amounts of time, and energy, obsessing over technical glitches –

Zoom interruptus. For a third example, we give too many examples, when we already made our point.

If we accept limits as normal, not exceptional, then we will use our limited time and energy much better.

Now, imagine if we put our limits in the background, much as we do breathing. We would focus our limited resources on what we consider significant – making our world better, making our own lives better.

In Judaism, we call that tikkun olam, repair of the world, and tikkun atzmi, repair of the self. Moving towards those goals calls for all our energy, time, and wisdom.

We could embrace the lesson from the Talmudic teaching in Pirke Avot – *“lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor v'lo atah ben chorin l'hivateil mimena.”* You are not called to complete the task, but you are not free to avoid your role. To fulfill our role, we accept our partnership responsibilities in our covenant, our brit, with God. We listen for calls from God (mitzvot), understand them, and implement them in our lives.

We could live within our limits – fully, comfortably, joyously. That includes our limited ability to predict the future. With that spiritual attitude, we would embrace evolution science as not only real, but necessary and desirable.

With that spiritual attitude, we would see the apparent conflicts between science and religion as artificial, as human projections. We could embrace both and move our world, and our lives more towards shalom – peace, balance, harmony, and fulfillment.

L'shalom, Rabbi Harley Karz-Wagman

