Intelligent Judaism

A man once heard of a marvelous blue bird that could be found only in one place in the entire world. This man decided to try and find this unique bird. He searched his town, he searched his country, and – obsessed with finding it – he looked for the special bird around the entire world. After many years, this man decides to return home: defeated, exhausted and older. Tired, he sat to rest in his balcony, let his gaze wander to his garden, and fell asleep. As he woke up, he saw next to him the magnificent blue bird. A bird that had always lived there. In his own garden.

EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

As a teenager, there were a few subjects and themes that captivated me, such as cosmology (how the universe began) and the theory of evolution, particularly, how life began in our planet. Beyond their technical aspects, these fields touch upon the meaning of existence. If the world appeared spontaneously, and if life was caused by a series of coincidences, then Creation as told to us by the Tora is not necessary to explain how we got here, or why. And without Creation, one can question the existence of a Creator.

I was 16-17 years old at the time, and these questions tortured me.

On the one hand, I felt confident about my Judaism. My heart was full of Emuna – conviction. I was very proud of everything Jewish: our People, our Land, our history. But, on the other hand, I was also held back by many intellectual uncertainties. Some of my friends and teachers tried to convince me to ignore these questions, since "they were the influence of the *Yetser haRa*," the evil instinct. They said so because they felt ignoring these questions would be for my own benefit, and because most people seemed to get by

perfectly well without struggling with these issues. However, none of them was able to persuade me rationally how to defend the Tora's version of Creation, or why to believe in a Creator when all scientists seemed to support the Big Bang and random evolution.

What was I to do? Hide my head in the sand, at the expense of my critical thinking, or abandon my Jewish tradition for being incompatible with I had gathered from modern science? I was at a loss.

So, in 1978, upon finishing high school, I decided to travel to Israel. I enrolled in Bar Ilan University, hoping to find a place that would harmonize academic rigor with Jewish tradition. Maybe there I could find answers to my questions. My flight to Israel had a layover in New York, where my uncle Rabbi Yosef Faur (or Tío José as I called him) lived. Tío José had graciously offered to host me at his house for a few days, and I accepted. I had always heard of him, and I had seen him in Argentina a few times when I was a younger boy. But this was going to be my first "serious" encounter with him.

THE BLUE BIRD

And it was a revelation. My uncle had answers to all my questions. Instead of encouraging me to forego my critical thinking, he taught me to make the most of it, and to actually apply it rigorously also to question the many dogmas assumed by science. He introduced me to the philosophy of science, which was a field of study I had never even heard of before.

I had always assumed that science was objective, and that scientists were objective. He taught me that scientists also have their own biases and ideologies, and that I had to learn to differentiate between real science and scientific theories, and that I should train myself to identify ideologically-bent theories. He helped me realize that my critical thinking,

which had given me so much grief over the prior years, was in fact my key to finding my answers.

From him, I also learned to read the book of Bereshit through the eyes and methodology of those Hachamim who had themselves wrestled with the intellectual challenges of their time. Maimonides, Rabbi David Nieto, Rabbi Moshe Hefets, Rabbi Benzion Frizzi, to name just a few. Hakham Faur showed me that dinosaurs were mentioned in the Tora ("HaTaninim HaGedolim"), and explained to me how to resolve the age discrepancies between science and Tora (billions of years, or less stan six thousand?). And he did all of this without departing a single inch from the Tora or Rabbinic traditions, and without resorting to questionable tricks (which never appealed to me) like saying that each one day on the Tora in reality refers to a million years, or something of the sort.

It occurred to me then that my uncle must have had all these answers because he, too, had already dealt with the very doubts that were bothering me. And now I didn't have to start from scratch. My privilege was that he had given me a head start and I didn't need to figure things out on my own. Things he already had.

I thought I would have to travel around the world to find my blue bird. But the blue bird was my very own uncle, and the Sephardic tradition he so well knew and represented.

TWO WAYS TO FACE AN ENEMY

I remember one of the first Tora insights that I learned from him, one which accompanied me and will continue to accompany me throughout my life. It has to do with the Perasha that we read in two Shabbatot, SHELAH LEKHA.

When Moshe sent scouts to investigate the promised land, he instructed them: "Look at the inhabitants who live in that land… and the cities where they live—are they open, or walled?" The spies return with a very pessimistic report to

Moshe and the people. Among other things, they complain that "the cities are walled up to the sky," as if to imply that they are impenetrable. But for Moshe walled cities would have been a sign of weakness. He told me, "people who hide behind fortified walls are not trained for battle. They draw their confidence from the strength of their walls. And if these walls were to fall (say, miraculously), then they would be very easy to defeat in battle. On the other hand, people living in open cities, without walls, must rely on their own skills to defeat the enemy. They train for battle, and it is much more difficult to defeat them." Immediately afterwards, my uncle explained to me: "There are two ways to confront an ideology that is adverse to you. The first way, is to build a wall, to surround yourself with cultural walls and take refuge behind them. The wall will shield you, but only as long as it is there and as long as you don't venture outside it. But if it is breached, or if you leave the wall, then you are dangerously vulnerable. The other strategy is to live in open cities. But if you are open to being exposed to other ideas, you will make a point to learn how to face and overcome them. After all, the Tora is the truth—and why then should we be afraid to confront other ideas?" (It is worth noting that the message of this parable is applicable only to the world of ideas, and not to the world of social assimilation. The social "walls" demanded by the Tora and our sages creating distance between us and other cultures are meant to protect us from assimilation.)

Through my uncle, I discovered an intelligent Judaism. Thanks to him, I was able to harmonize between my heritage and my intellect. Because of his words, I fell passionately in love, more than ever, with our Tora and our Hakhamim; and I decided then to become a rabbi, and dedicate my life to teaching Tora.

My book *Awesome Creation*, in which I explore the tensions and commonalities between Tora and modern science, is in a way also an autobiographical account of my doubts, and the answers

that I found over time. And it was inspired by what I learned, directly or indirectly, from my dear uncle, Hakham Yosef Faur.

צדיקים אין בונים להם נפש על קברותיהם שדבריהם הם זיכרונם

It is not necessary to erect a monument in the tombs of the just and wise men. The words and ideas they leave us are the true tribute to their memory (Maimonides).