BERESHIT: Dinosaurs in the Bible

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

This year, Parashat Bereshit, Genesis, which contains the account of the creation of the world, left us with only one day to study it—this past Shabbat—so before saying goodbye to Bereshit until next year, I want to share with you a brief reflection on something new we can learn from this Parasha. About ten years ago, I published my book "Awesome Creation", where I explained the story of the world's creation based on a faithful reading of the Hebrew Bible. I showed that when this literal reading (peshat) is ignored—voluntarily or involuntarily—many critical aspects of Emuná (Jewish faith) are affected, and the Tora can be discredited, reducing it to the level of fables or, God forbid, a irrelevant text. Today, I will mention an example of a topic I have not yet published. This example, I believe, deserves the first prize for ignorance of biblical Hebrew and its unexpected consequences.

THE FIRST ANIMALS

The initial chapter of Bereshit (Genesis) mentions the creation of the first animals that appeared on our planet on the fifth day. The Hebrew text says: □□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□

"And God created the *taninim gedolim* and all [other] living creatures…."

What were the *taninim gedolim*?

Let's begin with the first word. *Tanin* (singular of *taninim*) appears about 15 times in the Tanakh and describes a group of animals, including crocodiles, lizards, snakes, and vipers. In

other words, in biblical Hebrew, *tanin* means "reptile." The next word, *gedolim*, plural of *gadol*, does not necessarily mean "large" in size. Depending on the context, it can also mean "terrible," "fearsome," or "powerful." In my book, I mention several examples of this connotation, such as when God punishes Pharaoh for taking Abraham's wife. It says *nega'im gedolim* (Genesis 12:17), translated as "terrible" plagues or diseases. In our context, the best translation of the word *gedolim*, which expresses both size and the fear these animals inspired, could be "imposing or giant."

Therefore, *taninim gedolim* should be translated as "great/giant reptiles," but inexplicably, this translation almost doesn't exist!

THE CONSEQUENCES OF IGNORANCE

Let's look, for example, at a classic non-Jewish translation, the New American Standard Bible from 1995

"God created the great sea monsters and every living creature"

Why translate *taninim* as "sea monsters," two words that don't appear in the original Hebrew text?

First, let's clarify that in biblical Hebrew, the word "monster" does not exist (Note 1), simply because the Tora does not believe in monsters, despite the fact that ALL ancient civilizations believed in monsters and mentioned them regularly in their creation myths (see, for example, here: Tiamat). That's is the reason why a translation that renders *taninim* as "monsters" instead of "reptiles" should be considered tendentious and even offensive, as it—voluntarily or involuntarily—equates the Tora with pagan mythological legends.

So, how should the expression *taninim gedolim* be translated?

IN GREEK AND HEBREW

Richard Owen (1804–1892) was a renowned British scientist and paleontologist known for his work in classifying fossil remains of prehistoric animals. In 1842, he coined the term *dinosaur* to describe a group of huge extinct reptiles. This term, *dinosaur*, is a combination of two words of Greek origin: *deinos*, which means gigantic, powerful, imposing, or fearsome (similar semantic field of *gedolim)* , and *saurus*, which means lizard or reptile. Thus, the term *dinosaur* means "the gigantic reptiles" of ancient times, the exact words that the Tora uses to describe the first creatures created by God on the fifth day!

MONSTERS OR MONSTROSITIES?

The word "monsters" found its way in the Bibles's translations possibly from non-Jewish commentaries written before Owen classified these fossils as "dinosaurs." Pagan cultures assumed that those giant fossils that appeared everywhere in the world, belonged to monsters or dragons, imaginary beings worthy of pagan mythology. This would explain why the word "monster" was used in the Middle Ages. But to translate *taninim gedolim* as "sea monsters" in the 20th or 21st century (Note 2) is unforgivable because it forces a mythological reading of the Tora and takes away its incredible historical credibility.

The translation of *taninim gedolim* as "dinosaurs"—or at least as "great reptiles"—should be the most literal translation, and a testimony that the Tora was the FIRST and ONLY ancient book that records the existence of these prehistoric creatures—the first animals created by God on earth—without legends or fictions worthy of Harry Potter.

Note 1: The word *mifletzet*, used in modern Hebrew for "monster," describes a totem of pagan peoples, like *pesilim*, see Jeremiah 50:38.

Note 2: The word "sea" also does not appear in the text,

which, by the way, does NOT describe only animals that inhabit the sea!