



SERMON VA-ETCHANNAN:ⁱ ALIENS

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 17 August 2024
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

[1] There's a slightly strange line in the Book of Judges:ⁱⁱ *"Curse Meroz!" said the angel of God, "bitterly curse its inhabitants."* It's strange because we have no clue where Meroz is. It doesn't appear anywhere else in the Tanach, and it was no doubt this oddity that led the rabbis of the Talmud to concludeⁱⁱⁱ that it is, in fact, *"a star"*.

[2] Which would mean, of course, that it is a star with inhabitants.

[3] In today's parashah, we read a verse with a similar theme: the sun and the moon and the stars are not to become objects of human worship. Rather, *לְכָל הָעַמִּים תַּחַת כָּל הַשָּׁמַיִם*:^{iv} *God set them aside for all the peoples under all the heavens*. That particularly expansive phrase – not just all the peoples in the world, not just all the peoples under the heavens, but all the peoples under all the heavens – could easily be understood as encompassing life elsewhere than on earth.

[4] So the news earlier this week that researchers have identified vast reservoirs of water beneath the surface of Mars – reservoirs easily large enough to sustain life – seems timely.^v

[5] Of course, that discovery is nowhere near to the actual discovery of aliens, and some Jewish thinkers argue that that is just as well. As long ago as the 1960s, an American Orthodox rabbi, Norman Lamm, wrote

ⁱ Deuteronomy 4:13-23

ⁱⁱ Judges 5:23

ⁱⁱⁱ b.Mo'ed Katan 16a

^{iv} Deuteronomy 4:19

^v Victoria Gill, "Reservoir of liquid water found deep in Martian rocks", BBC News (12 August 2024): <<https://perma.cc/K2EU-QLPE>>

an article entitled ‘The religious implications of extraterrestrial life’.^{vi}
He says:^{vii}

When the existence of life elsewhere is 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 [*sic*] of the universe and set in motion ... religious and philosophical upheaval.

Rabbi Lamm particularly worries about us finding “*superior creatures elsewhere in the cosmos*”:^{viii} how would their discovery affect our understanding of our own kind as having been created in the image of the Divine? And, even if extraterrestrial life takes the form of uncommunicative single-cell organisms, it might still pose a challenge to Judaism’s traditional understanding that humanity is “*the purpose for which all the rest of creation was called into existence*”.^{ix}

[6] So, how would we, as Jews, react to the discovery of aliens?

[7] To start with, I don’t consider the displacement of the notion of ourselves as existing at the apex, and as the purpose, of the universe, to be any bad thing. Rabbi Lamm presents it as a Jewish ideology, but if anything it’s a universal human instinct, and not a healthy one. The Copernican revolution – when we discovered that our planet did not sit at the centre of the cosmos – was an important step, and it did indeed lead to one of the greatest paradigm shifts in the whole of history. Yet despite learning the physical truth, that the earth is just a small and peripheral part of something unfathomably large, we somehow clung still to the spiritual myth, that we, humankind, are at the pinnacle of all that is.

[8] Dr Val Plumwood, an Australian philosopher, connects the idea that humans are on top of the pile with other forms of supremacy deserving of our disapproval:^x

^{vi} Norman Lamm, “The religious implications of extraterrestrial life”, *Tradition* 7-8 (1965-1966), 5-56.

^{vii} Ibid: 6.

^{viii} Ibid: 21.

^{ix} Ibid: 23.

^x Val Plumwood, “Androcentrism and anthropocentrism: parallels and politics”, *Ethics and the Environment* 1 (1996), 119-152: 120.



Concepts of ‘centrism’ [are] at the heart of modern liberation politics ... Feminism has focussed on androcentrism ... Anti-racist theory critiques ethnocentrism, movements against European colonisation have critiqued eurocentrism, gay activists critique heterocentrism, and so on. The green movement’s flagship in this liberation armada has been [to challenge] the notion of anthropocentrism, or human-centredness.

[9] Rabbi Lamm is right to say that the discovery of extraterrestrial life will challenge our worldview, but it’s a challenge that’s been a long time coming, and, crucially, if it’s based on reality, then to shy away from that new understanding would be as foolish as to shy away from the fact that the earth is not at the centre of the solar system.

[10] It certainly shouldn’t lead us to question our faith or our Judaism. On a basic level, if God is capable of creating the amazing and varied biome that we enjoy here, why on earth should God not be capable of creating equally magnificent forms of life elsewhere?

[11] Even the notion, however fantastical it sounds, that there may be intelligent life on the other side of the cosmos, should not pose a challenge to our faith and identity as Jews. Indeed, one of Rabbi Lamm’s contemporaries, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, was quite explicitly unconcerned by the idea:^{xi}

It is possible that [God] created other life-forms on other planets. It is no problem to [Judaism]. The reason man likes to think he is the only created Being in the entire universe is because of his egotistical nature. Even the concept of עם נבחר [the “chosen people”] may only be relative to our world, our small section of the universe. The Torah is written from the viewpoint of our sun, moon, and stars. It would not detract from our being the עם נבחר of this region of space if there were another עם נבחר in a distant galaxy.

He added: *“Why would [God] limit [the Divine] role as a [bringer-of-goodness] to the infinitesimal speck of Creation which man inhabits?”*

[12] There is one respect and one respect only in which the discovery of extraterrestrial life should worry us: will we treat it kindly? Will humanity be cautious, respectful, deferential?

[13] Or will we instead assume our own superiority, immediately begin asking ourselves what resources and benefits the new discover can bring us, and ransack them, infecting them with our human

^{xi} David Holzer, *The Rav Thinking Aloud: transcripts of personal conversations with Rabbi Joseph B Soloveitchik* (Miami Beach: Holzer Seforim, 2009): 93.



diseases in the process,^{xii} as the West did at the height of the imperial age?

[14] Today's parashah warns us against star-worship, but above all, it warns us against self-worship. It is our Jewish duty to know our place in the great superstructure of Creation – assisted, as necessary, by the wisdom of astronomers – and to recognise that that place is a very, very humble one indeed. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

^{xii} Stafford Lightman, "Delivering disease: outside impacts on tribal health", *Survival International* (undated): <<https://perma.cc/67BH-GESZ>>

