Isaac, the Eternal Optimist

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One of the most overlooked events in this week’s parshah, Vayishlach, is the passing of the patriarch, Isaac. His death is reported almost as a footnote, seven chapters removed from his last appearance in the narrative. And yet, somehow it seems apropos of Isaac’s character in life that he should depart from this world with such little fanfare.

To begin with, in comparison to the other patriarchs, there isn’t a whole lot of narrative to work with on Isaac. And in virtually every story line that he does figure into, he comes across as- in the words of Leon Kass- “drab, passive and gullible” (*The Beginning of Wisdom*, 353).

All of this makes for a perplexing character. For Isaac is not some auxiliary cast member in the story of God’s founding of a chosen nation through whom to bring blessing upon all the families of the earth. Isaac is one of the leading men. He is one of the revered patriarchs whose righteousness is recalled countless times in our holy texts and in whose merit the wayward Israelites in Moses’ generation are granted entry into the Promised Land. And yet, in observing his character as presented in the patriarchal narrative, we are hard-pressed to find validation for the accolades bestowed upon him.

Isaac’s passive nature is first apparent in the episode of the Akedah where he is designated as the lamb to be offered up to God at Mt. Moriah. Not only is Isaac uninformed of his impending slaughter, it only occurs to him on the third day of his journey with his father to the mountain that they are missing the sheep for the offering. And yet, when he inquires of Abraham the whereabouts of the animal, his father responds evasively- “God will see to the sheep for the offering” (22:7). For Isaac, his father’s vague response is satisfactory and he doesn’t bring up the matter again.

A few chapters later, when Abraham decides it is time for Isaac to marry, Isaac is once again left in the dark. The discussion takes place between Abraham and his servant, with Abraham instructing his servant to travel to the former’s birthplace to select a wife for Isaac (24:2-4). When the servant suggests the possibility of Isaac accompanying him on the trip, Abraham firmly dismisses the proposition, insisting that Isaac is not to leave the protective confines of his home. Up until the moment that his bride-to-be shows up at his doorstep, there is no indication in the text that Isaac is ever informed of the plans for his marriage.

In fact, based on the attributes the servant seeks in a wife for Isaac, it appears that he has in mind a woman with traits offsetting to Isaac’s docile personality. Included in the servant’s criteria are the qualities of assertiveness and resolve; a woman who not only agrees to provide water to him upon request, but who takes initiative in watering his camels as well (24:14).

Indeed, Rebekah’s assertiveness is famously on display later in the narrative when she arranges for Jacob to steal the blessing of the first-born from his older brother, Esau (27:5-40). And there, once again, Isaac is entirely blind (in this case, both, literally and figuratively) to the events playing out around him.
Then, as Esau’s devastation at having been deprived of the blessing transitions into full-blown rage against his brother, Isaac seems, once again, oblivious to the developments around him. It is Rebekah who learns of Esau’s intentions to kill Jacob and who springs into action. Bypassing her husband, she goes directly to her younger son, warning him of Esau’s intentions and instructing him to flee to her brother in Haran for refuge and to remain there until his brother’s fury subsides.

Ironically, the matter is already settled by the time Rebekah goes to Isaac to inform him of her wishes for Jacob to relocate. Not only is Isaac last to learn of the plan, he remains uninformed of the backdrop to Jacob’s departure; Isaac’s understanding of the purpose behind Jacob’s trip is in order to find a wife and he has no awareness of the strife between his two sons.

In fact, Jacob is not the only of Isaac’s sons to deceive him. The text reports that, while Rebekah preferred Jacob, “Isaac loved Esau, for game was in his mouth” (25:28). According to the simple reading of the text, Esau was able to manipulate his father’s affection by feeding him fresh game. According to the Midrash, Esau feigned piety before his father by asking him questions on religious law (Genesis Rabbah 63:10). Either way, the clear implications are that Isaac was being “played” by his son.

Isaac’s passive nature is once again on display in his confrontation with the Philistine king, Abimelekh over the wells that Abraham had dug years earlier. In fact, Isaac’s altercation with Abimelekh is somewhat of a replay of Abraham’s own dispute with the Philistine king regarding those same wells. But despite the similar backdrop, the interplay between Philistine and patriarch in each case couldn’t be more different.

After his wells are seized by Abimelekh’s servants, Abraham immediately confronts and rebukes the Philistine king (21:25). In response to Abraham, Abimelekh takes on a defensive posture, twice assuring the Hebrew prince that he had no knowledge of the incident (21:26). Clearly, Abimelekh regards Abraham with great respect.

Yet, under similar circumstances, Abimelekh shows little deference to Isaac. Not only does Abimelekh make no attempt to absolve himself of any responsibility for his servants’ destruction of Isaac’s wells, but he accuses Isaac of impoverishing the Philistine people and proceeds to order him off his land. Making no attempt to resist Abimelekh’s egregious accusations, Isaac obediently submits and withdraws from the Philistines’ land. Following his relocation and his digging of new wells, Isaac is harassed a second and third time by the Philistines and is forced to relocate, yet again.

Even when Abimelekh eventually comes to Isaac to reconcile, he offers no apologies for his earlier behavior and even has the gall to claim to have “not molested” Isaac and to have “sent you away in peace” (26:29). And, once again, Isaac seems incapable of standing up to his oppressor, refusing to call out Abimelekh’s dishonesty while accepting his overtures for peace without hesitation or preconditions (26:30-31).

Contrast this with Abraham’s treaty with Abimelekh in which Abraham dictates the conditions for peace, including his demand that Abimelekh acknowledge Abraham as the rightful owner of the disputed well (22:28-30). While Abraham demonstrates agency in his dealings with Abimelekh, Isaac is acquiescent and yielding.

Perhaps, most troubling is the fact that Isaac never seems to learn from his experiences; his lack of sophistication and naivety remain as pronounced in his old age as during his formative years. This lack of character development is reflected in the fact that, of the three patriarchs, Isaac is the only one whose name is never modified. While Abraham begins his journey as Abram and Jacob takes on the name Israel, Isaac remains plain old Isaac from start to finish.

In fact, the text offers a hint as to the source of Isaac’s passive and submissive nature. Following his marriage to Rebekah, the Torah reports that Isaac is consoled over the death of his mother (25:67). The clear implications are that Sarah’s passing was a great blow to Isaac. We can, thus, assume that Isaac had a very close relationship with his mother.

Indeed, when we consider the circumstances of Isaac’s birth, his attachment to his mother becomes fully comprehensible. Recall that Isaac was Abraham and Sarah’s miracle child, the son of their old age whom they never dreamed would be born to them. As such, one can imagine Abraham and Sarah to have been doting parents to young Isaac, showering him with love and affection while in constant supervision of his every move. This would have especially been the case for Sarah, for whom Isaac was her only child.

Abraham and Sarah’s adoration of Isaac is first exhibited through the great feast made by the proud parents following Isaac’s weaning (21:8). This overt display of affection is intuited by Abraham’s other son, Ishmael, whose jealous mocking of Isaac is reported immediately following this event (21:9).

Abraham and Isaac’s close bond is particularly evident in the Akedah narrative, beginning with God’s command to Abraham: “Take your son, your only son, that you love—Isaac.” And that deep love shared between father and son is clearly displayed through their dialogue while on their journey up to Mt. Moriah-

“Father?”
“Here I am, my son”

“Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?”

“God will see to the lamb for the offering, my son.” (22:7-8)

The Akedah’s positioning in the biblical narrative—just prior to reporting Sarah’s death—also conveys Sarah’s deep love for Isaac. The rabbinic commentators conclude from the close proximity of the two stories that Sarah’s death was, in fact, precipitated through word received of Isaac’s journey to Mt. Moriah to be slaughtered (Targum Yonatan, Genesis 22:20).

Aside from shedding light on Isaac’s attachment to his mother, the Torah’s relating that Rebekah is able to fill the void left through Sarah’s passing suggests that Rebekah and Sarah share similar qualities. We already attested to the assertive, take-charge personality of Rebekah. In fact, the text presents Sarah as every bit the powerhouse that her daughter-in-law was.

The first example of Sarah’s assertive character comes with her insistence—owing to the fact of her barrenness—that Abraham take Hagar as a concubine in order to perpetuate the family name (16:2). Then, after Hagar conceives and begins to scorn the childless Sarah, Sarah responds with fury. First, she scolds her husband, accusing him of contributing to Hagar’s contempt for her. She then turns her wrath on Hagar, oppressing her so mercilessly that Hagar is forced to flee to the wilderness (16:4-6). Hagar eventually returns to her mistress, only to be banished a second and final time at the command of Sarah following the improprieties of Hagar’s son, Ishmael (21:9-14).

This latter incident, in which Ishmael is caught mocking Isaac, demonstrates the combined effects of Sarah’s vigilance and her intense love for her only son: in the one instance where Isaac experiences the slightest bit of antagonism, Sarah is there to quickly and decisively remedy the situation.

Adored by his parents and under the constant supervision of their watchful eye, Isaac’s development of independent decision-making and problem-solving skills may have been compromised. This can, perhaps, explain those traits of passivity, submissiveness, and naivety that stand out in Isaac as an adult. His sheltered upbringing may have simply ill-prepared him for the harsh realities of an adult world ripe with deceit and devilry.

Regardless of cause, Isaac appears to lack the character traits to earn him the prestige and honor set aside for the other patriarchs. To be sure, there are those for whom Isaac’s blandness is not so troubling. Kass, for instance, suggests that Isaac’s significance is primarily in his function as “a link in the covenantal chain” (ibid., 355). In this regard, however sloppily executed, Isaac did succeed; despite his intentions, he does ultimately bequeath the covenantal blessing to the appropriate son. And yet, it is difficult to accept the notion that one of our revered biblical patriarchs was nothing more than a go-between in transmitting forward the Abrahamic covenant.

The truth is that, in exploring the conditions of Isaac’s childhood and youth that contributed to his weakness of character as an adult, we begin to discover the attributes that would ultimately come to define Isaac’s greatness. In a sense, all the love, attention, and affection that Isaac received as a child nurtured in him a natural joie de vivre. Rarely experiencing hostility or cruelty, Isaac saw the world as essentially good and he developed an optimistic approach to life as well as a natural affection towards all those he encountered. In his eyes, all people were intrinsically good and were to be judged as such.

This natural tendency to see the best in people is reflected in Isaac’s love for Esau. While it is true that Esau was able to deceive his father, it would be mistaken to think that Isaac’s affection for his eldest son was premised on a false impression of Esau’s character. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks correctly points out (Essays on Ethics, 37), Isaac was fully aware of Esau’s true nature, of his lack of refinement. This is evident from the episode of the blessing of the first-born. Note the content of the blessing initially set aside for Esau—“the dew of the heavens and the fat of the land” and for “the abundance of grain and wine.” It was a blessing entirely suited to Esau’s character. Esau was a man of the field whose interests were in economic prosperity and material wealth. Indeed, the blessing he ultimately receives from his father is a similar—albeit, more modest—version of the original one intended for him—“the fatness of the earth” and the “dew of the heavens” (27:39).

Esau’s schemes and deception did nothing to convince Isaac of his eldest son’s piety and refinement, for Isaac had never had such illusions of Esau as such. What did influence Isaac’s affection towards Esau was his perception that his son so badly yearned for his father’s love and approval.

If Isaac had, all along, intended to give Esau the appropriate blessing, then all of Rebekah’s plotting and scheming proved to be entirely superfluous (see Rabbi Sacks, ibid.). Once again, there is no denying the fact that Isaac was duped by Rebekah and Jacob. However, his naivety was not in his judgment of his children’s character; he recognized the unique qualities in each of his sons. His oversight was his naive assumption that everyone else saw the basic goodness that he saw in each of his children.

In fact, Isaac’s unconditional love of Esau left a lasting impression on his first-born son. Knowing that his father appreciated and adored him, Esau made a special effort to improve himself in order to make his father proud. This is evident when, upon seeing his father’s displeasure at the prospect of Jacob taking a wife from among the Canaanites,
Esau, too makes a point of selecting a wife from among the family relations (28:6-9).

Isaac's purity of mind is no more evident than with his response to Abimelekh following the latter's attempt to reconcile. Note Isaac's reaction upon seeing Abimelekh at his front door- "Why did you come to me? For you hated me and sent me away" (26:27). There is no anger or hostility in his tone. There is only the sadness and hurt that comes with having experienced, perhaps for the first time in his life, the loathing and hostility of another human being. The pain that Isaac felt through the harsh treatment he endured at the hands of Abimelekh and his servants is reflected in Isaac's naming of the wells over which the dispute was instigated—Sitnah (hatred) and Esek (contention).

And yet, Isaac does not lose hope. He wants to love and to have his faith in man restored. And, as soon as it becomes apparent that Abimelekh has come in peace, Isaac is ready to forgive and forget without hesitation or reservation.

If Isaac’s pain-free upbringing nurtured in him an innocent optimism towards life and a simple and unrestrained love for his fellow man, the Akedah taught him just how precious and fleeting life was. Imagine the shock Isaac must have felt upon realizing, at the altar, that he was the lamb to be slaughtered by his adoring father. Here is this young man who, until this point, had lived a life of comfort and ease and who had rarely been exposed to even the slightest hostility from others. Now it was all about to come crashing down, and at the hands of the man he most trusted and admired in life.

While Isaac survived his ordeal at Mt. Moriah, it most certainly left scars that remained with him throughout his days. But, as is often the case, it is those who endure near-death experiences who come to develop an even greater appreciation for those simple pleasures in life that had, until then, been taken for granted. Likely, the trauma Isaac endured at the Akedah only reinforced his love of life and his goodwill towards others.

There is little doubt as to the fact of Isaac’s timid, naïve, and passive character as demonstrated throughout the narrative. Without question, Isaac possesses neither the charisma or ambition of Abraham, nor the fighting spirit or determination of Jacob. As such, Isaac is not your typical biblical hero. However, while he may not exhibit conventional traits of grandeur, his contribution to humanity and, more specifically, to the Jewish people is no less significant.

The Talmud (Shabbat 89b) relates an aggadic story in which God approaches the patriarchs to ask what should be done with the Jews who have sinned. Both Abraham and Jacob answer that they should be eradicated. Only Isaac responds in defense of the Jews, arguing that for most of their sins they should not be held liable. Only Isaac can look into the iniquitous deeds of his people and find hope.

And, as demonstrated in his relationship with Esau, it is that confidence he has in people—despite their deficiencies—which propels them forward to reaching higher moral ground. Whereas most see man’s failings and imperfections, Isaac sees man’s potential and promise. This is the true eminence of Isaac.

For the Jewish people, it is Isaac to whom we owe our survival through centuries of countless massacres, inquisitions, pogroms, and holocausts that, by all logical accounts, should have extinguished this proud nation from the annals of history long ago. Like Job, the Jew should have, by now, given up on this world, cursing the day of his birth while wishing for death. And yet, not only have the Jews survived, they have thrived. There is, perhaps, no other nation in history that has contributed to the development of civilization as much as the Jewish people have. Each time the Jew gets knocked down, he gets right back on his feet, dusts himself off, and is back enthusiastically leading the way in the search for the next scientific discovery, medical cure, or humanitarian cause. Just like Isaac, the Jewish people continue to put their faith in man, to forgive and forget, and to hope that this time it will be different, that humanity has finally learnt the lessons of the past.

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A Cosmic Puzzle Best Left Unsolved: A Review of Harold Gans’s New Book

BEN ROTHKE reviews of books on Jewish thought for The Jewish Link of New Jersey, The Jewish Press and Times of Israel.

At the Science as a proof of God

In an interview on 18Forty, Sara Susswein Tesler (a former teacher at SAR High School in Riverdale, NY, who is currently a Torah lecturer based in Efrat) says that she was once walking in the Old City of Jerusalem and happened to pass by Yeshivat Aish HaTorah (where I was fortunate to study for several years). She noticed that they were hosting a seminar and decided to join, and she soon discovered that the topic of the seminar was the proof of God. When she found out what was being taught, her initial thought was: you just took away all of my emunah.

The lecture she sat in on may have been given by Harold Gans, author of The Cosmic Puzzle: A Scientific Investigation into the Existence of God (Feldheim Publishing, 2020). In this work, the author uses the scientific method and evidence from science to prove God’s existence. As a former senior cryptologic mathematician with the United States Department of Defense, Gans is a person who understands and thrives on the beauty of numbers in particular and science in general.

Make no mistake; this is a fascinating science book. Gans writes of the most significant perfect storm that occurred when, at the time of creation, everything came together just right, and the world came into being. He notes countless various effects that were coalescing just right, which led to a world that could sustain life. Moreover, if all of these just-right ingredients for life did not come together in a perfectly timed sequence, down to the nanosecond, life as we know it would not exist. In fact, everything is so fine-tuned and perfect for existence here on Earth that Gans tells us it is statistically impossible for this to have happened without a Creator.

A few more of the voluminous just-right events include that Earth has just the right amount of atmospheric pressure for liquid water at our surface, we are at just the right distance from the Sun so that temperatures are conducive to life, organic ingredients mix just right in that there is the correct balance of organic molecules and heavy elements to have life created, and countless more. Yes, there is a whole lot of just right here on planet Earth.

Gans also attempts to investigate God’s existence statistically, and his premise is that if we believe things in the physical world at a certain statistical level, then when approaching the question of God’s existence, those same statistical levels should be used to create an acceptable level for belief.

And in the physical world, there are many instances where we do accept statistical evidence as conclusive. For example, American pharmaceutical companies spent about $1 billion to bring each of their new drugs to the market between 2009 and 2018, according to a recent JAMA analysis. These drugs are released after a tremendous amount of testing and analysis have been performed, but these analyses only establish a statistical likelihood that the drug will be safe and effective, rather than complete certainty. In aviation, too, airplanes are declared safe using statistical evidence. To gain airworthiness certification, proposed airplane models are put through tens of thousands of hours of testing, from wind tunnels to computer simulation and more. However, this certification does not mean that it is impossible that the aircraft is unsafe, just that statistically, it is extremely unlikely. Gans argues that if we accept that statistical levels are sufficient to deem a drug or an airplane safe, then we should accept the existence of God at roughly that same statistical threshold.

But even with all of the mesmerizing science that Gans details here and the dizzyingly massive numbers he mentions that stretch the bounds of scientific notation, can an understanding of science indeed transform a person’s atheistic non-belief to a theistic belief?

For the most part, when it comes to science and religion, there is an observer bias. It is said that for the believer, there are no questions, and for the heretic, there are no answers. For the former, The Cosmic Puzzle will undoubtedly strengthen their beliefs. For the non-believer, their response will be closer to “meh.”

And to that point, Dr. Jeremy England writes in Every Life Is on Fire: How Thermodynamics Explains the Origins of Living Things that there are some intelligent people who behold the awesomeness of chromosomes, galaxies, and everything we can understand about the universe and feel confirmed in the idea that this is the handiwork of a transcendent Creator. But clearly, there are also plenty of intelligent people who behold these very same things and reach the opposite conclusion.

Gans writes of the unlikelihood that our universe could have been created by chance, without a first mover. But, how to connect the first mover to the God of the Torah is left to the reader. Gans covers various topics, including the origin of the universe, the origin of life, the wisdom that went into it, and more. When reading of the spectacular nature of creation, a believer will consider what King David wrote in Psalms 104:24: “How many are the things You have made, O LORD; You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of Your creations.” The non-believer will take that same evidence and perhaps argue from the point of non-overlapping magisteria.

The first sentence of the book states that “the gold standard for the inquiry into the natural world is the scientific method.” With that, a critical reader might suggest that the book stops there, as a theistic Deity is not within the science of the natural world.
What troubles me about bringing God into the scientific method is that one can argue that Gans is in fact opening something of a theological Pandora's box. If science can be used to prove God, then it can be used to disprove God. Moreover, for those who use science as proof of God, that means they must be open to the possibility that it could also be used to disprove God, which begs the question: would anyone want their belief in God to be based on something that could be scientifically disproven?

And more than that, even if one accepts the fact that God's existence is necessary due to science and statistics, Gans does not indicate that there is anything to prove that God commanded us to keep mitzvot. While science might be able to bring one to deism, there is no way science can prove Judaism's most sacred fundamentals, such as the revelation at Sinai and the observance of mitzvot.

And the next logical step would be, if science can be used to prove God, could it also be used to poke holes in God's law? If such were the case, that would open Shulhan Arukh to the scientific method. With that comes the unintended consequence of removing several sections from Shulhan Arukh that conflict with science. Some examples include the laws of tereifot, where contemporary veterinary science does not jive with particular assumptions within the laws of kashrut. When it comes to hilkhut niddah, what does a believer do when a fertility specialist tells a couple that the blood is non-uterine when the rabbi says the opposite? There are countless more examples to which science and religious law at times can be strange bedfellows.

The argument Gans uses, one which is compelling for a believer, is that our world and existence point toward a divine Creator who brought everything into being. As he articulately writes here, science has shown that there are so many conditions required for life to exist on Earth that it is scientifically impossible that all of these could have happened by chance. However, that knowledge alone will not necessarily translate into belief in a divine Creator.

When it comes to weather, people do not realize that a 100-year flood can occur next year. Furthermore, a non-believer, when faced with the fact that the statistical odds of everything working just right may be 1 in $10^{9928}$ of happening, would reply that statistical unlikelihood does not mean it could never happen like that.

Can the mathematics of the Torah Codes prove God wrote the Torah?

Google "Harold Gans" and the first few pages of results will be of his efforts to promote the Torah Codes. It's not surprising, then, that this book has a chapter on the codes, but I found it to be the least compelling section.

There are numerous websites and countless articles written on the Torah Codes. The Light of Torah Codes site presents the essence of Torah Codes, summarizing the research from the pioneers of the field from 2002 through 2019. In contrast, academics such as Dr. Brendan McKay (emeritus professor of computer science at the Australian National University) and mathematical physicist Dr. Barry Simon take a much more skeptical and dismissive approach to the codes.

In The Cosmic Puzzle, Gans writes of the Great Rabbis Experiment, carried out by Doron Witztum, Elyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg. Their claim is that biographical information about certain rabbis is encoded in the Torah. One example given in the book is that the name “The Gaon of Vilna” can be found in the Book of Genesis.

However, the finds made by proponents of Torah Codes often incorporate assumptions that make their examples cherry-picking at best, and not statistically meaningful at worst. The Vilna Gaon example, for instance, illustrates assumptions that are often made regarding spelling and transliteration from non-Hebrew languages. For example, the city name Vilna is generally spelled ending with the letter aleph in Hebrew and Yiddish, but in Hebrew, it could also be written ending in the letter hey. While the convention is to write it ending in an aleph, there is no reason it cannot be written the other way. Furthermore, why is it that the English version of the city name is used? The city name is Vilnius in Lithuanian. If one could expect the English pronunciation of Vilna to be found in the text, should Spanish, Hindi, and other versions be found as well?

Gans shares with us a Torah code for Osama Bin-Laden, and these same issues apply. This name is one that can be written in Hebrew in scores of different permutations. The challenge of transliterating foreign names in general, and Arabic names specifically, is quite tricky. In fact, during the hunt for Al-Qaeda (alternatively spelled al-Qaida and al-Qa’ida), different U.S. intelligence agencies spelled Osama Bin-Laden’s name differently, which caused significant information-sharing issues. But I digress.

The main critique of the Codes, though, is not spelling issues. Instead, the main critique is based on the law of large numbers, meaning that the same results can be found in any text containing enough letters.

As British statistician David J. Hand writes in The Improbability Principle: Why Coincidences, Miracles, and Rare Events Happen Every Day, where there is a large amount of numbers or letters, one who attempts to search for hidden messages will inevitably find one. He notes that “with a large enough number of opportunities, any outrageous thing is likely to happen.” This is due to the fact that people tend to focus on specific instances instead of the broader context and fail to recognize the real probability of an event.
For example, Michael Drosnin, author of *The Bible Code*, challenged his critics to find a message about the assassination of a prime minister encrypted in *Moby Dick*, claiming that the Bible was uniquely able to be used for such predictions. In response to this challenge, McKay, in fact, found links in the novel for the assassinations of Indira Gandhi, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, and others.

The Bible Codes, in fact, may find themselves going the way of the Codes in the Book of Esther. The Book of Esther is said to contain a hidden prophetic allusion to the Nuremberg trial, in addition to many other historical events. But as Emmanuel Bloch writes in “The Code of Esther: A Counter-Investigation” (*Hakirah* vol. 28), “In the final analysis, the supposed prophecy (i.e., codes) of the Book of Esther seems very ill-founded. Amongst its constituent elements, there is none that can long withstand a serious critical examination based on an in-depth study of facts and texts.”

So, what is one to do with the Bible Codes? While they are cute and can be used as a *milta de-bedihuta*,¹ like science itself they should not be used to establish the existence of God or the veracity of Judaism’s fundamentals.

**Can one really use science to prove God exists?**

There have long been numerous arguments for the existence of God. They span the gamut from logical arguments, empirical arguments to subjective arguments, and more. The nature of the arguments is often based on the times and culture in which we live. These arguments are often indicative of the milieu in which the believing Jews lived.

For the last few decades, the challenges against the existence of God have often been in the area of reconciling certain scientific beliefs with religious beliefs. Today, scientific arguments seem to reign supreme. Books have been written on the topic from a wide diversity of authors.

In his paper “*Is There Science in the Bible? An Assessment of Biblical Concordism*,” Rabbi Dr. David Shatz writes that “some distinguished scientists, for some reason mostly physicists, push for concordist readings. Other intellectuals, for example, those immersed in the humanities, are as a rule wary of, or put off by, such interpretations.”

Based on Shatz’s observation, it is therefore not unusual to find physicists such as Gerald Schroeder in *Genesis and the Big Bang: The Discovery Of Harmony Between Modern Science And The Bible* and Nathan Aviezer in one of the earliest works on the topic, *In the Beginning: Biblical Creation and Science*, as well as in *Modern Science and Ancient Faith*, attempting to square the circles of Biblical texts and modern science.


The difference between these books and Gans’s is that these are an attempt to reconcile science and the Torah, showing that there is harmony between the world of science and the world of Torah truth. Gans takes a more daring approach to use science to prove the existence of God.

**Science and faith can exist in perfect harmony**

And that gets back to Sara Susswein Tesler’s observation: what about faith? Science answers so much about the physical world in which we are enmeshed, but science is powerless in this area and can answer nothing about that which is nonphysical. Should one’s faith be based on equidistant letter sequencing? Furthermore, what if a Fields Medalist comes along and disproves the Torah Codes? To which *emunah* comes to our rescue.

Habakkuk wrote over 2,500 years ago that “the righteous man is rewarded with life for his fidelity.” This was long before the scientific revolution. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard calls Avraham Avinu, the knight of faith par excellence. Furthermore, I am pretty sure Habakkuk would stand by his observation today, and Avraham Avinu would remain the knight of faith, even post-scientific revolution.

**Conclusion**

As a science book and a conduit to straighten one’s faith, *The Cosmic Puzzle* is certainly a fine achievement. But this is a book that should be in the popular science section of a bookstore, not necessarily in the Judaica section.

To conclude with the *words* of the late great mathematician Amir Aczel, which is consistent with what R. Sacks writes in *The Great Partnership*: science and religion are two sides of the same deep human impulse to understand the world, to know our place in it, and to marvel at the wonder of life and the infinite cosmos we are surrounded by. Let us keep them that way and not let one attempt to usurp the role of the other.

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¹ Aramaic term for humorous remark. The Gemara (*Shabbat 30b*) relates that Rabbah would start his lectures with a *milta de-bedihuta*, opening his students’ minds for learning with a humorous statement.