

Sermon for Rosh Hashana Evening 5778/ 2017

North Shore Temple Emanuel

The Sheldon Factor and the Meaning of Progressive Judaism

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As heard at the start of our Rosh Hashana service, we are today counting a new year since the creation of the world – to be exact, since the sixth day of creation, when human beings who could actually count years were created. So, today is 5778 years since the creation of the universe.

That follows Jewish tradition, of course. We live, so to speak, in a different universe from that of our ancestors, a post-Darwinian, post-Einsteinian universe. Whenever I think about the creation of the world, the Big Bang Theory comes to mind. Well, not the actual theory, but the television series. It's one of my all-time favourite comedy series. I started watching even before it became popular, won lots of Emmys and turned its leading characters into stars in the Hollywood firmament. I remember the feeling of those early days; it was as though I'd discovered something about the universe that no-one else had ever known before. "Have you come across The Big Bang Theory?" I'd ask my friends. And they all replied, You mean the cosmogonic theory that describes the explosive generation of the entire universe from an infinitesimal point of energised matter? And I'd say, smugly, No, the TV show!

That sense of knowing what others do not know, what theologians call "omniscience" or all-knowing-ness, is really at the heart of the show. Fellow aficionados will recall the opening sequence: at tremendous speed, in just a few seconds, we trace the history of the universe from the very beginning of time – the eponymous Big Bang – to Sheldon's living-room. It's as though the past means very little; the only reason for the past is to lead us to the present, where everything is focussed. Sheldon's brain is as it were the epitome of creation. As Sheldon constantly reminds us, he knows everything, and what he doesn't know he can work out from the principles of physics. With the possible exception of Stephen Hawking, and then only on a good day, Sheldon is the most intelligent person on the planet. His brain is the goal towards which evolution has been striving for these millions, nay billions, of years.

Sheldon is the reflection of how many of us human beings see ourselves today. We are the highpoint of evolution. It all aims at us, and ends with us. I am at the centre of the universe, which exists in the main to give rise to me, and it is only through my sense of largesse and noblesse oblige that others have a role to play at all.

The way I've put this, I know, sounds incredibly egotistical. Very few of us would put things this way, if we were asked. But deep down, we might share these feelings. I invite you to have a look within and I await your responses! Nor do I believe that we are the only ones through human history who have thought this way. Generations prior to Darwin may not have had the idea of evolution to play with, but they still seem to have thought that human existence began and ended with them. I

recently returned from a trip to Uzbekistan and the ancient Silk Road. In the 14th century this area was ruled over by an upstart princeling from Samarkand named Timur; in English history books he is referred to as Tamerlane. He ruled over one of the greatest empires the world has ever seen, stretching from India to the Mediterranean and northwards into the Russian steppes. Like so many before him (the Romans and the Persians immediately come to mind) Timur probably thought he was “the greatest” and his empire would last forever. It took just two generations after Timur for it to collapse into several warring kingdoms and a few more centuries for its memory virtually to pass into oblivion, until the last few decades of the 20th century when it was resurrected by historians.

A glancing acquaintance with current affairs and reports in the media will reveal the number of Sheldons who populate our world in every area of life today, from politics to economics, from psychology to jurisprudence, indeed from the church to the synagogue to the mosque and beyond. Whoever thinks and acts as though they are the meaning and end of the world’s creation, that they have all the answers and that the world exists for their pleasure, is a Sheldon. We may laugh at Sheldon’s antics on *The Big Bang Theory*, but it’s a nervous laugh because there is an element of Sheldon in many of us, insofar as we believe that “the world exists for my sake”; that it is “my power and the strength of my hand” that has created the wealth and life-style I enjoy. These thoughts, by the way, come not from Darwin but from Deuteronomy. It is, we are admonished in Torah, the wrong conclusion that I am the creator of my own destiny, that I have all the answers; this is the conclusion that we arrive at through a misunderstanding of creation and its purpose.

After Darwin came up with the idea of evolution by studying nature, sociologists like Herbert Spencer applied the idea to human societies. According to “social Darwinism” human society is evolving to a perfect state through its own process of “survival of the fittest.” One of the fruits of this thesis was Nazism. The history of Nazism is sufficient to teach us how dangerous the idea of evolution can be if taken up and applied socially by those with a Sheldon-like mentality.

I don’t believe that evolution is moving us human beings towards a climactic conclusion, an ultimate goal. Indeed, from my studies of history I conclude that human beings today are much the same in essence as we have always been. Our circumstances have changed considerably, our technologies have exploded with creativity, we are surrounded now by *things* – labour-saving devices, forms of entertainment, modes of communication and so forth - that never existed and were hardly dreamt of before. But our primary attitudes and driving forces are the same as they ever were. The naïve, social-Darwinist thinking about human progress has long since been exposed for the seductive but dangerous illusion it is.

Yet, there is still a place for the progressive attitude in the world. This is the progressive attitude that we have in mind when we speak of ourselves as Progressive Jews. “Progressive” in this usage doesn’t mean moving towards some kind of evolutionary perfection or goal. That’s a meaning that has a messianic quality about it. It conveys a sense of self-righteousness – of “I am all-knowing; I have the truth and you do not” - that consumes everything and everybody in its path.

Our understanding of “progressive” is different. For us Progressive Jews, to be progressive means to take the past seriously, not to assume that we are more clever or more intelligent than our forebears (as, for example, Sheldon does) but also to be sensitive to historical change and the Torah that is present in human experience. This sensitivity gives us the ability to re-read and critique the past in the light of present understandings and insights, so that we come up with new expressions of our Jewish values appropriate for the present day. The “progress” we speak of is not progress towards perfection, but rather a deepening in our understanding of what it means and has always meant to be human.

By doing this, we are better able to control the Sheldon-like tendencies within us, to restrain our impulse to think we are omniscient or all-knowing and that others have been put on earth only to serve us. It can lead us to be humble in the face of the vastness of the universe, of all we do not know, and to feel awe before the cosmos – that is the awe that is at the very heart of these “Days of Awe,” *Yamim Nora'im*. Part and parcel of this is the ability to reduce the space that we take up in the world in order to make space for others and learn to listen to them – their viewpoints, their struggles, their narratives. Our Progressive concern for *tikkun olam*, “mending the world,” really proceeds from this act of withdrawal to make space for others, for the stranger, the needy and the marginalised in our society. For this reason, we cannot truly think of ourselves as Progressive Jews if we do not respond to the desperate cries of others for fair and equitable treatment in society.

Today we count a new year since the creation of the world. The count did not start with our appearance in the world, with the day of our birth, and the count will not conclude with our exit from life. It long preceded us and will continue long after our brief sojourn on this earth. Many hundreds of generations have counted new years in the past. Generations unknown to us will still be counting the years in ages yet to come. This thought, so insignificant to Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*, should give us Progressive Jews and, indeed, all Jews everywhere, a sense of hope in all that the future holds.

I wish you a good new year 5778.

G'mar chatima tova.