



Jewish Community Center of Paramus  
Congregation Beth Tikvah  
304 E. Midland Avenue ~ Paramus NJ 07652- 201.262.7691

## **A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner**

Friday February 9, 2024 ~ Parsha: Mishpatim

### **Give Science and Religion the Respect they Deserve**

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

I'm not a big fan of "themed" Shabbats. There's nothing wrong with them, and I am not knocking the synagogues that offer them. But for the last 13 years I have participated in the annual Evolution Shabbat, along with several hundred other religious institutions throughout the USA to talk about the importance of science. It is especially important to do so when scientific truths and methodology are under attack in so many corners of American life. We didn't pray our way to the moon. Scientific knowledge achieved that. We didn't pray our way to the cures for diseases that even two centuries ago ravaged humanity and now have been virtually wiped out. In other words, give science its due. Stop trying to reconcile the big bang theory with "In the beginning God created the Heavens and Earth." But most importantly, let's give up trying to even harmonize science and religion. Because they exist to serve different needs.

As you may remember, I've always been interested in evolutionary psychology. I know all you psychology majors from the 70's and 80's, fascinated by the behaviorism of B.F. Skinner thought evolutionary psychology was voodoo but I always saw a lot of truth in it, and it helped me to understand the wisdom of our Torah in many ways. Without going into a long discussion about this, evolutionary psychology basically posits that human behavior is not only a response to what we have learned, or what we have experienced, or what our parents or our environment have given us. It also is a factor of physical and especially biological processes that can be attributed to when our ancestors, the first humans, roamed the savanna 75,000 years ago. Certain

behaviors are simply in us, the result of evolutionary processes that we either enforce or redirect in our own time. Now what does this have to do with our subject tonight? The human brain is itself an amalgam of different operating systems. The reptilian brain which controls our motor functions, the neo-cortex that controls reason or rationality, and the limbic or mammalian brain that controls emotions. Science is rational, and scientific inquiry is dependent on the neo-cortex, which, according to evolutionary scientists, was the last part of the brain to develop. But the limbic system is the one that allows us to experience the range of feelings that separate us from other mammals. Emotions. Love. Anger. Sadness. Attraction. Annoyance. And perhaps, for our purposes this Shabbat, wonder.

There was a wonderful article that appeared about 10 months ago in the New York Times. It told the story of a philosophy professor at a prestigious university who spent a career expressing cavalier and somewhat derogatory comments about religion to his students. But he had an experience that caused him to reevaluate his approach. He had a student whose brother who had been stabbed to death five years earlier, and the student explained to him the effect this tragedy had on him, and his family. Despite all the advice and counseling they received, it was the rituals, community, and understanding that their religious community provided that helped them heal. And upon reflection, the professor realized that from this story that he was guilty of the same mistake that religious fundamentalists make with regard to science, trying to prove the importance of one by disregarding the truths and contributions of the other. Now that's not to say that this professor started going to church, putting on *tefillin* or dancing naked in the rain forest. But the very possibility that there might be something of value in the up-to-now discounted approach allowed for a new way of appreciating both the possibilities and limits of both (*A triumph of the limbic over the neocortex!*).

As I said, we didn't pray our way to the moon. But at the same time, the answer to the great questions in your life will not be found under a microscope. That's why we need this Shabbat, especially those of us who occupy the middle ground in American life and American Jewish life. We do appreciate science. And by virtue of the fact that you are reading this Shabbat message, we are acknowledging the positive role that religion

in general, and Judaism in particular, offer as well. Perhaps we are the best people to make the case that when it comes to science and religion, it's not either or, but rather, it is both, to anybody willing to listen.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner