
BOOK REVIEW

Review of the journal, *B'or Ha'Torah* (Volumes 16-18)

This review discusses *B'or Ha'Torah*, a publication whose genre is shared with only a handful of other journals that cater to the scientist who is also versed in Torah scholarship and interested in the interface of Torah and secular wisdom, and the *talmid chacham* who recognizes the importance of also studying God's other forms of revelation. The journal wherein this review appears, *Bekhol Derakhekha Daehu (BDD)*, is another such example. It is published by Bar-Ilan University, was launched in 1995 by its founding editor Professor Cyril Domb, describes itself as a "Journal of Torah and Scholarship" and is published twice yearly. It has both Hebrew and English sections.

A second such publication is the *Torah Umadda* journal published by Yeshiva University, which "explores the complex relationships between Torah, the humanities, and the natural and social sciences." It was initiated in 1989 and its founding editor was Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter. It is an annual that is published in English and almost all articles, including the recently published Volume 15, may be accessed online at <http://www.yutorah.org/>.

Another example is *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, which is a joint publication of The Sidney M. Edelstein Center for the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine and the Institute for Jewish Studies, both at The Hebrew University, and Indiana University Press. It describes itself as a journal that: "explores the interface between Judaism and science and studies the interactions between science and Judaism throughout history. Science is conceived broadly and includes the social sciences and the humanities. Likewise, the history of science is broadly construed within the journal's purview and includes the social and the cultural dimensions." *Aleph* is an annual that first appeared in 2001.

The publication under review bills itself as a journal that presents "Science, Life and Art in the Light of the Torah." *B'or Ha'Torah* describes itself as "a peer-reviewed forum for wondering Jews, scientists, artists, teachers and students—examining personal and intellectual concerns through the microscope and telescope of the scientist; the algorithm of the mathematician; the discourse of the philosopher; the imagery of the artist, poet and photographer; and the tested faith and learning of the Torah-observant Jew." This is a rather challenging and noble undertaking.

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B'or Ha'Torah is an annual, which first appeared in 1982. A great deal of information about the journal, including a complete Index and Table of Contents to all issues can be found at: <http://www.borhatorah.org/>. Such a site is a plus for *B'or Ha'Torah*, and the lack of an updated website is a big drawback of *BDD*. Many of the papers found in *B'or Ha'Torah* are proceedings of the various Miami International Conferences on Torah and Science. The first conference was held in 1987 and they have convened biennially ever since. Volume 16 of *B'or Ha'Torah* includes papers from the fifth conference, held in 2003, and *B'or Ha'Torah* 17 includes proceedings from the fifth and sixth conferences.

Before discussing the merits and shortcomings of the journal, I must digress and pay tribute to the editor-in-chief, who was the driving force behind the journal and the Miami International Conferences. In the early 1980s I was an undergraduate student in a small, prestigious engineering school in New York City, The Cooper Union, and I remember the feeling of pride and the *kiddush Hashem* that was created when Professor Herman Branover came to speak, not as a guest of the Jewish student organization as a *refusnik* or a *ba'al tshuva*, but as a guest of the university, which recognized him as a world leader in magnetohydrodynamics (MHD). He was born in Riga in 1931, and rose to be acknowledged as a leading scientist in the Soviet Union. As a young man he became active in the Jewish intellectual movement and translated many of the important Jewish classics into Russian. He continued his work in Israel as president of the Shamir Organization, which has produced and distributed literally millions of copies of Jewish content books in Russian. And it is through Shamir that *B'or Ha'Torah* is published. Professor Branover has succeeded in bringing knowledge about Torah to millions of Soviet Jews in Israel as well as in the FSU, with a particular emphasis on academics. *B'Or Ha'Torah* is but one small part of his great effort to cross-pollinate Torah and modern scholarship. Unfortunately, he is currently suffering from the advanced stages of a degenerative neurological disease.

B'Or Ha'Torah typically includes articles that address important contemporary issues and are often written by world-class authorities with expertise in both secular disciplines and Torah principles, rare individuals successfully recruited by *B'Or Ha'Torah*. The contributors include: medical experts Prof. Abraham S. Abraham, Prof. Shimon Glick, Rabbi Mordechai Halperin, Dr. Fred Rosner, Rabbi Prof. Moshe Dovid Tendler, and Dr. Deena Zimmerman; rabbinic leaders: Rabbi Shlomo Aviner; physicists and mathematicians: Prof. Nathan Aviezer, Dr. Lee M. Spetner, and Dr. Baruch Sterman.

An example will give a taste of the type of articles included in this publication.

Rabbi M.D. Tendler is a *talmid chacham* of international stature, rabbi of a large synagogue, and *rosh yeshiva* and professor of biology and medical ethics at Yeshiva University. In Volume 16 he revisits the classical problem of free will versus genetic predestination, which in the light of recent developments is vexing philosophers, theologians, and, on a practical level, legal scholars. If molecular biologists and geneticists have successfully found the genes that predispose for various physical ailments and are closing in on genes that seem to play a role in behavioral patterns and choices, and if neuroscientists can point to regions of the brain that play a role in moral choices, does free will really exist? Perhaps society should absolve individuals from responsibility: kleptomaniacs because they were born with a predisposition to steal, murderers with an urge to kill, adulterers with a biologically insatiable sex drive, and gays with a genetic tendency for homosexuality? A similar question has been asked regarding predetermination. In theory, given the current state of all cells in the body, and assuming a deterministic system, should it not be possible to predict every future state, thus removing any role for the exercise of free will. This latter question has been addressed by physicists, who respond with explanations based on quantum physics and uncertainty theories. Rabbi Tendler cites sources that show the centrality of free will within the Jewish tradition and cites a supporting anecdote involving his father-in-law, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. He accepts the notion of a biological tendency toward a certain behavior pattern, but concludes that this does not preclude the existence of free will and the ability to control one's actions. Articles like this are of extreme importance and *B'Or Ha'Torah* does a service by disseminating such writings.

B'Or Ha'Torah also publishes another sort of article that is much less commendable. Professor Marvin Gold, retired professor of medical genetics and microbiology, presents a paper (Vol. 16) summarizing some of his impressive work in genetics. The only connections that I can find to Torah are his claim that *chazal* knew about genetic imprinting, his feeling that his wondrous findings show the hand of God, and a few quotes from some Lubavitcher rebbes. The claim about *chazal* I find silly and counterproductive. *Chazal* were far above modern man, but they did not know modern science and there is no need to claim that they did; nay, it is counterproductive. Seeing the hand of God in his work is wonderful—we all should. But that is not something worthy of an article. And the quotes from the various Lubavitcher rebbes are part of one of *B'Or Ha'Torah's* flaws—its overemphasizing Lubavitch themes to the point of silliness. Many of the authors have Lubavitcher leanings and often it is not necessary to read their biography to know that; the articles blare it out. But it is not just the authors, it is also the organization.

An example of this is the biography of the previous Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson *ztz"l*. *B'Or Ha'Torah* gives fairly detailed biographies of its authors, a feature that I personally like. In Volume 18 they published an exchange between the previous Rebbe and Prof. Cyril Domb, and include a biography of each. The impressive biography of Prof. Domb is, I assume, accurate as he is, thank God, alive and well and presumably reviewed it. The biography of the Rebbe, who died a decade before it was published, states that, as “a young man Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson received doctoral degrees in the natural sciences, engineering, and philosophy from the Sorbonne, the Polytechnic Institute of Paris, and the University of Berlin.” The Rebbe *zt"l* needs no biography, and any such attempt only detracts from him. But what is written is an embarrassment. The historical record seems to be that he earned no degrees from the University of Berlin, where he studied for a short time as a non-degree student, nor from the Sorbonne, and he received a technical license and not a doctoral degree from the Polytechnic Institute of Paris, a vocational rather than research institution. In the 1976 book *Challenge*, of which Cyril Domb was one of the editors, the biography of the then still alive seventh Lubovitcher Rabbi stated simply that he “studied at the University of Berlin and at the Sorbonne in Paris.”¹ The fact that Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach did not have academic degrees does detract from their greatness, as Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik and Rav Aaron Lichtenstein having them does not diminish their stature as Torah giants. The Lubavitcher Rebbe was one of the unquestioned leaders of 20th-century Jewry, and his lack of a Ph.D. does not diminish his stature. Claiming he had three when he had none does make one question the judgment of the editors. All of that being stated, the publishing of the exchange of letters, which offers to the public the Rebbe’s views on science and gives, via Prof. Domb’s letters, a window into the state of Orthodox Anglo-Jewry in the early 1960s, is an important service to the readership interested in Torah and Science.

In recent years, *Torah u'madda* often contracts to and equals medical ethics. *B'Or Ha'Torah* has avoided that problem, and, in recent years, has published several interesting articles related to psychology. In Volume 18, Dr. Seymour Hoffman presented an interesting selection of rabbinic comments about psychology, and pointed out how some are receptive to modern psychology and others are antagonistic to it. Rabbi Mois Navon analyzed what lies behind the talmudic principle of *gadol ha'metzuve*, and Dr. Judith S. Bendheim Guedalia, an expert in

1 A. Carmel, C. Domb (eds.), *Challenge, Torah Views on Science and its Problems* (Jerusalem: Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists, 2000), p. 142.

the psychology of trauma, looks at how *birkhat hagomel* can be part of a post-trauma treatment technique. Medical issues are not ignored, and important topics have been addressed in recent issues. Rabbi Aaron Eli Glatt, MD, discussed (Vol. 16) the halakhic implication of the life-saving question of organ transplantation from a living donor while including up-to-date medical facts; two issues later he tackled the timely topic of the *metzitzah* controversy. Rabbi Barry M. Kinzbrunner, MD, discussed (Vol. 18) the Terri Schiavo case from an halakhic perspective, and the brilliant physicist Dr. Lee M. Spetner addressed (Vol. 17) how evolution should be taught in Jewish schools. And, of course, the hard sciences are addressed by leaders in the field. World renowned Bar-Ilan physicist Professor Nathan Aviezer addressed a topic for which he is well known, the creation of the universe (Vol. 18), as well as the anthropic principle (Vol. 17).

But not all the articles would pass muster by a scientific committee. Unfortunately, *B'Or Ha'Torah* includes much that appears to be pseudo-medicine, spiritual healing, alternative medicine, and the like, some of it written by “real” doctors and scientists. It is material that I don’t understand, and in which I see neither the Torah nor science. Yakir Kaufman, MD, has an article (Vol. 16) entitled “Psychoneuroimmunology, Spirituality, Religiosity, and Health.” Maybe it is just me, but I don’t follow where he is going. Sarah Yehudit Schneider has an article (Vol. 18) called “The Evolving Feminine: An Enlightened View of Kabbalah,” replete with amazing tables, graphs, and figures (such as “the three-phase sequence of creation” showing the “bound world,” the “circle world,” and the “linear world”). Articles such as these, of which there are unfortunately more than a few in *B'Or Ha'Torah*, do a disservice to the enterprise of Torah and science, and cause the reader to lose sight of the worthwhile articles found in *B'Or Ha'Torah*.

Unlike other similar journals, *B'Or Ha'Torah* also publishes creative poetry and fiction, life stories, artwork, and nature photography. Many of these are well done, but their place in a serious journal is unclear.

Despite the mentioned serious drawbacks of *B'Or Ha'Torah*, every issue contains articles of value, on important topics, by leading researchers, and these should not be obscured by the thick cloud of extraneous material, Lubavitcher oddities, and pseudo-science articles.

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