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Voyage of the Bagel

An interesting effort to insult Darwin uses a cream cheese smear

In late October the *Financial Times* published a report about an interesting pedagogical exercise being perpetrated by creationists in Turkey: “A series of books for primary schoolchildren, describing Charles Darwin as a Jew with a big nose who kept the company of monkeys and other historical figures in anti-Semitic terms, has caused outrage in Turkey amid fears of rising religious intolerance.”

This attempt to insult Darwin by categorizing him as Jewish surprised me because I thought everyone always knew Darwin was “a member of the tribe.” I attended Hebrew school in preparation for my bar mitzvah, and the classroom featured pictures of our top-three historical figures: Abraham, Moses and Darwin. (There was also a small photograph of Paul Newman, who was half-Jewish.) We learned how Darwin received a fantastic bar mitzvah gift of a five-year ocean cruise on the HMS *Beagle*. I got savings bonds.

Though common knowledge in the Jewish community, Darwin’s Judaic background seems to be a shock to many non-Jews. I have only just learned, for example, that most readers of Darwin’s many publications do not know that the versions with which they are familiar are highly edited. The great evolutionist

wrote in a very particular Jewish style, which his Victorian publisher then revised into highbrow 19th-century English.

For example, Darwin’s printed autobiography includes these lines about the captain of the *Beagle*: “Fitzroy’s temper was a most unfortunate one. It was usually worst in the early morning, and with his eagle eye he could generally detect something amiss about the ship, and was then unsparing in his blame.” But Darwin’s original version, written on cocktail napkins during meetings of the Shrewsbury Beth Israel synagogue’s building committee, reads: “Don’t get me started on Fitzroy and his meshuggaas. This meshuggener had a bed with only a wrong side because that’s what he always woke up on. Always looking for tsuris. What a schmuck.”

The Voyage of the Beagle, Darwin’s account of the cruise, includes this passage: “The different islands to a considerable extent are inhabited by a different set of beings. My attention was first called to this fact by the Vice-Governor, Mr. Lawson, declaring that the tortoises differed from the different islands, and that he could with certainty tell from which island any one was brought.” The original writing, scratched out on sheets listing the ship’s leisure activities, reads: “I listened to Lawson’s whole spiel, and he says if you show him a turtle, abracadabra, he’ll tell you its shtetl. I buy it.”

Perhaps the most famous passage in all of Darwinia is at the end of the first edition of *On the Origin of Species*: “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

In his manuscript for the book, which had been entitled *L’Chaim: The Whole Megillah*, Darwin concludes: “Such nachas I get when I wander around and look at turtles and birds, let me tell you. It is not a waste of time that could be spent doing something more productive. What, you think I schlepped up mountains in South America glomming insects for my health? And so the planet spins no matter what plans you had for it, big shot. And you start with a few things that are maybe a little mieskeit, but then, be patient. What, you have somewhere to be? So you wait until genug iz genug, and, guess what, you wind up with new things, some of which are really nice, with a shayna punim. Why that should be a problem, I don’t know.”

So of course, Darwin was Jewish. Why that fact should in any way diminish the intellectual achievement of his evolution insights is beyond me. His ideas stand on their own merits and would be no less brilliant were he, say, Anglican, or someone who came to hold no religious beliefs at all. ■

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN ONLINE

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