

Reflections on Science and Jewish Tradition

Speaker: Roald Hoffmann
Date: Sunday, February 26, 2017
Time: 7:00 – 8:30 p.m.
Location: Adas Kodesch Shel Emeth Synagogue (AKSE)
4412 Washington Blvd.
Wilmington, DE 19802

Registration: Not required. Free and open to the public.
More information: Contact Mark Wagman at 302.475.8351 or mewag1@comcast.net.



Abstract:

“That science and religion only contend, or that they occupy separate compartments in our minds, one unrelated to the other—these are both such impoverishing views. Scientific knowledge, aesthetics, and faith cohabit. They speak to one another in the human soul—yes, sometimes their dialogue is uneasy. But it is their intertwined voices which shape true human understanding.” In their book, *Old Wine, New Flasks: Reflections on Science and Jewish Tradition*, Roald Hoffmann and Shira Leibowitz Schmidt further represent “true human understanding” as a jigsaw puzzle, with the pieces widely dispersed, and they proceed to assemble them—some from science and some from religion.

In his lecture Hoffmann explores this metaphor. “The religious setting is that of Jewish tradition. The science is mainly the central one, chemistry. Some stories will be told, digressive the way real life is, of how science, religion and art look at pieces of the world. One such story will feature an ancient pigment, Tyrian purple, which also played a ritual role in Jewish religious practice. And in an American contribution to world culture, blue jeans.”

Hoffmann’s lecture is the kickoff event of a project at AKSE that seeks to engage science with Jewish tradition to illuminate the theme of Natural and Man-made. The theme itself was inspired by some of his writing, and part of his lecture will introduce the theme. In three subsequent events, on April 2, April 23 and May 7, the perspectives of science and Judaism will be developed and brought to bear on intriguing questions such as “Are humans a part of nature, or apart from nature?”, “How and why do we distinguish between the natural and the man-made?” and “Is natural ‘better’?” The project is supported by a grant from Scientists in Synagogues, a program of Sinai and Synapses, and funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

Biography:

Born in 1937 in Zloczow, Poland (now Ukraine), Roald Hoffmann writes that he “came to a happy Jewish family in dark days in Europe.” Most of his family, including his father, were killed by the Nazis and their helpers. He survived along with his mother and a handful of relatives and, in 1949, came to the United States. Since 1965 Hoffmann has been at Cornell University, where he is now the Frank H. T. Rhodes Professor of Humane Letters Emeritus. A self-described “applied theoretical chemist,” he has received virtually all the honors of his profession, including the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1981, shared with Kenichi Fukui for the independent work of each on theories of the conservation of orbital symmetry in chemical reactions. Yet he is equally comfortable working across disciplines in a “land between science, poetry and philosophy.” Hoffmann is notable also for reaching out to the general public. He has published several poetry collections and plays. His book *Chemistry Imagined* explores the creative and humanistic aspects of chemistry. He presented *The World of Chemistry* series on PBS and runs a monthly cabaret, *Entertaining Science*, in Greenwich Village.