

Understanding the Physics of God

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Understanding the physics of God,
God's Indivisible Nature,
Makes every universe and atom confess:
I am just a helpless puppet that cannot dance
Without the movement of God's hand.

Those words were written by Hafiz, a Persian poet and Muslim mystic.

For millennia, the pious have sought to understand the physics of God. Only recently have human beings decided that physics and God are unrelated.

In twenty-first-century America, popular culture declares that there is an inherent conflict between science and religion. We have allowed secular voices on the one extreme and fundamentalist voices on the other extreme to set up a false debate. Meanwhile we have remained silent, at least in the popular media most American Jews read. Contemporary Jewish education has completely failed to properly address science in its teaching of Jewish belief and practice.

It should have been much bigger news than it was. The NY Times, The Huffington Post, and most every major publication ran a story or an interview. But in the end, we all went back to talk of war and economic crisis, so perhaps you missed it. The headline read, "Science Disproves Need of God." It was almost exactly three years ago, and Dr. Stephen Hawking had written a new book called The Grand Design. But nobody really cared about the book. They only cared about the brilliant physicist's new pronouncement. Provocatively, he had declared, "One cannot disprove that God exists, but science makes God unnecessary."

Orthodox Rabbi Jonathan Saks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain responded to Dr. Hawkings in a piece entitled “Even great science tells us nothing about G-d.” Rabbi Saks writes: “the mutual hostility between science and religion is one of the curses of our age, and it is damaging to religion and science in equal measure.” (Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Saks, The Times, Sept. 3, 2010)

I read Rabbi Saks’s article and thought, I should give a sermon on that, but I never did. Until now, at least.

On July 4th 2012, the same science versus God debate was reignited by the discovery of the Higgs-Boson, popularly known as the God-particle. The Higgs-Boson is what gives the universe mass, and therefore enables existence as we know it. Once again, I thought “I should give a sermon about that,” but I didn’t.

This spring, as I prepared to say goodbye to my former congregation, there were only two things I really wanted to do before leaving Buffalo. The first was to bless the first child of dear friends. The other was to make a Jew of a man I’d been studying with. Whether babies or adults, entering people into the covenant happens on God’s time, not ours, so I just had to wait and hope that God allowed me the honor of being the vehicle that sanctifies such moments. I am indeed blessed to do this job, because miraculously, for once, God’s timetable conveniently coincided with mine.

I have studied with many Jews-By-Choice over the years, and signed my share of conversion certificates, but this one was different. He may be the most spiritual agnostic I’ve ever met. His childhood taught him that organized religion was the source of the world’s problems, so being a good California boy, he declared himself agnostic, leaning atheist, and explored yoga and meditation. This being Northern California, I don’t think the cognitive dissonance of an atheist yogi really registered. When I asked him, “so what do you believe?,” he waxed poetic about meditation and the grandeur of the universe. Though I don’t think he’d had much of a meditation practice in a long time, I was astounded this guy could be an agnostic. But that’s why he’s the perfect example of our contemporary spiritual confusion.

He found his way to me because he met his wife. He was madly in love with her, and she was madly in love with Judaism, so he started going to synagogue to win her over. A man in love cares little for logic, even if he is an agnostic who hates organized religion. He would have done pretty much anything for her. And then somehow, despite himself, he realized that he loved Torah almost as much as he loved her.

And so I asked the question. The only one we rabbis really need to know the answer to. “So,” I inquired, “exactly when and why did this stop being for her and start being about you?” “The first day of the Intro to Judaism class,” he said, “when the rabbi told us that you don’t have to believe in God to

be Jewish. That Judaism is about action, not belief. That Judaism is about questions, not answers. That's what I've always been looking for. Questions. You won't kick me out for disagreeing? That's my kind of religion."

Such a Jewish answer, he was ready to join all the other Jewish agnostics.

On his first Shabbos as a Jew I had the honor of offering him a special blessing. In preparation, I had written a blessing based on his Hebrew name, but I had no idea how to end it. I am never at a loss for what to say, at least not in the blessing department, but I was really stuck. That pesky God language problem seemed unresolvable. It had to be Jewishly and liturgically authentic, but real for him. I wasn't going to ruin his moment by wrapping it in God-language that would be empty or even offensive to him. But I don't know how to bless somebody without God in the equation. So I went back through my notes and realized that, not only had he told me his theology, he'd practically written his own blessing for me. All I had to do was replace the word God with that he said he believed in. And so the blessing ended:

May the Source of Goodness bless you and keep you.

May the Miracles of everyday be good and gracious unto you.

May the One who was, is, and will be shine its countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Standing beside the Torah, he was beaming, and the laws of physics couldn't explain it.

I thought about all the Jewish agnostics I know. I thought about all the other agnostics out there who were potential Jews, and I thought. "I should really give a sermon about that."

If this story demonstrates anything, let it be this. Doubt needn't put a stop to our search. You too can be a spiritual atheist.

In a few weeks, I begin working for the Institute for Science and Judaism. I interviewed with a board full of scientists – NIH, NASA, an intimidating bunch. After having covered all the usual interview topics a man said to me, "Rabbi, you're not a scientist. You don't really understand what we're talking about. Why would you want to be part of our organization?"

My answer was a shortened form of this sermon, and in that moment I decided to finally give this sermon. So why did I wait this long?

Perhaps it's simply self-evident to me and most liberal rabbis that science and religion are both great Jewish traditions. Perhaps it's self-evident to you. But it's not so clear to many of us.

Whether we are Jewish or not, many of us have world-class educations in science, and poor knowledge of religion, even our own. Some of us have the opposite challenge. Some have a working lay-person's knowledge of both, but never really bother to integrate the two. Too many Jews tell me that they aren't "religious" anymore because they believe in science, and therefore don't have time for Shabbat and synagogue and other childish, irrational Jewish things.

To be fair, there are good reasons why so many of us are skeptical of organized religion and its claims to know the One Truth. I'm certain I don't need to explain to this crowd that God and God's truth have been used and abused to use and abuse others for millennia. Many of us have good reason to be uncomfortable with God language. From the juvenile to the patriarchal to the cruel, much of the God-language we have been taught is, at best, ridiculous, and often dangerous or painful.

But please, don't let the pitfalls of God language stand in the way of your spiritual path. Call it what you want. Call it nothing at all. Just seek the something that can't be named.

My teacher, Rabbi Larry Kushner, wrote the following:

In order to study the work of creation we shall need to learn from humanity's two great truth traditions: science and religion. Their apparent disagreement is only the inevitable outcome of their different goals. Science tries to tell "what" and religion tries to answer "what for."...

Science moves forward. Religion backward. Science grows by integrating more and more information... Religion, on the other hand, eternally rediscovers the ancient truth...which over the generations has become increasingly obscured, concealed or encrusted.

...in telling "what," one cannot avoid answering "why," just as in answering "why," one necessarily implicates "what." And so it is that the traditions are very close.

The opening chapter of Genesis is...restored to its proper place of 'religion's importance if we permit it to answer the question of the purpose of human existence or the meaning of life....It does not aim to offer a 'scientific' account of creation. It is unconcerned with what actually happened. And yet, by teaching the purpose of being, it betrays a surprisingly accurate...memory of events it could not have possibly witnessed. (The River of Light, p.96-7)

Though some have suggested that science and religion are completely compatible, that is not what I am suggesting, nor do I believe it is what Rabbi Kushner is implying. Indeed, science and religion offer different worldviews which are largely irreconcilable. To pretend that science and spirituality are the same is to insult both science and religion. Yet, to presume that the two are hopelessly at loggerheads, and that we must entirely reject all the wisdom of one or the other is equally absurd. There is much we can learn from both disciplines.

It has been said that religion is for people who don't know physics. I propose just the opposite. Religion is for people who know physics and seek to connect with that expanding universe that is bigger than themselves.

I don't believe in a sky-wizard or a puppet master pulling our strings or a king on a thrown plotting who shall live and who shall die.

I do believe in God, in science, and in Truth with a capital T.

Science tells me that when I pray my brain has altered perception. The research is new and in progress, but indeed neurologists are discovering the unique impacts of prayer on human cognition. I don't know how prayer works, but I believe that our brains were designed that way for some reason that I don't understand.

Science tells me that life began over three billion years ago when simple gases synthesized into amino acids. I don't know why we exist, but I believe that life has meaning and purpose.

Science tells me the universe began with a Big Bang and whatever caused that Big Bang is what I choose to call God.

I believe that there is something that inspires us to do good, to make *teshuvah*, and to engage in the work of repairing this broken world. And I choose to call that God.

We seek something. We know it's not about crystals or Jerusalem store, no matter how mysterious the vortexes or beautiful the ancient walls. We know it's not about gurus or priestesses or rabbis, no matter how brilliant or inspiring they might be.

We know it's not about us, no matter how desperately we need it.

We know it's about more than us, more than this life, more than this universe.

To listen to the anti-religious nuts is perhaps as dangerous as to listen to the religious nuts. They are as foolish, extremist and destructive. If we listen to those who deny the spiritual, we will deny ourselves the spiritual sustenance we so desperately need. We will sell our souls to the anti-religious extremists as surely as we might sell our souls to the religious right.

I'm no physicist. And though I'm a rabbi, I make no claims of knowing God. So in conclusion, I share with you the combined wisdom of three of the greatest minds in Jewish history.

Einstein said, "I want to know God's thoughts. The rest are details."

Long before Einstein sought to know God's thoughts, another great Jewish scientist and seeker did the same. In his introduction to his most famous book, Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides argues that Torah must be based in reason and that the religious sciences can only be understood after studying the physical sciences. As Maimonides explained, "You will certainly not doubt the necessity of studying

astronomy and physics, if you are desirous of comprehending the relation between the world and Providence as it is in reality, and not according to imagination.” (Maimonides, Great-Quotes.com, Gledhill Enterprises, 2011, <http://www.great-quotes.com/quote/1442358> (accessed June 24, 2011)).ⁱ

Maimonides understood that without scientific knowledge we cannot have wisdom. But, as Rabbi Saks writes:

there is more to wisdom than science. It cannot tell us why we are here
or how we should live. Science masquerading as religion is as unseemly
as religion masquerading as science. I will continue to believe that God who
created one or an infinity of universes in love and forgiveness continues to ask
us to create, to love, and to forgive. (Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Saks, The Times, Sept. 3, 2010)

I couldn't care less how old the universe is. Jews have one calendar. The Chinese have another. The physicists another. I do care that the universe is here, and we are here, on Rosh Hashanah, hayom harat olam, the birthday of the world.

I can't prove it. I simply choose to believe it. I choose to believe that five thousand seven hundred seventy four years ago, a loving, forgiving God created the universe, and that every day, in God's great goodness, God sustains us, and loves us, and forgives us, and the world keeps turning.

May 5774 be a year of wisdom and love and forgiveness and sustenance.

This year, may we all come a bit closer to knowing God's thoughts. Perhaps it is the only knowledge that matters. The rest are details.

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