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## In Search of the Meaning of Life

Opinion

**Howard Smith** | Fri. May 25, 2007

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I love being an astronomer, especially at times like the midnight of Shavuot when, according to mystical tradition, people who look skyward are rewarded with a taste of the revelation that occurred at Sinai.

The kabbalists of 16th-century Safed innovated the concept of all-night Torah study on Shavuot, because on this night of revelation God and Israel come together as lovers. Called *tikkun leil Shavuot*, the all-night custom blends study and spirit, the rational and the emotional, the mind and heart — and even science and religion.

We of the 21st-century live in an extraordinary time in which seemingly every mystery has become or is becoming intelligible, thanks to science. We no longer need to invoke God to explain the unknown, even that archetypical riddle: the origin of the universe. Astronomers today can measure the consequences of its birth 13.7 billion years ago, and modern physics can describe its “big bang” creation with both accuracy and precision.

But science in our miraculous era, although it refashions the inscrutable into the comprehensible, simultaneously transmutes the mundane into the wonderful — and God is a deity of wonder as much as a deity of mystery. We need only to open our eyes and minds.

Both religion and science try to make sense of the world. They should be joint sources of celebration, but sadly these days the deep harmony between their perspectives is often lost in confrontations between groups who feel besieged.

Surveys conducted by the National Science Foundation found that 83% of Americans believe that scientific research which advances the frontiers of knowledge is necessary and should be supported by the federal government, even if it brings no immediate benefits. At the same time, 64% of Americans consider religion to be very important to them, according to the Pew Research Center.

The bottom line is that the vast majority of people trust both religion and science, although they may not know all that much about them. Looking up at the night sky, it is easy to see why people are both spiritually and scientifically inspired.

The nature of the universe and its creation pose intellectually fascinating questions: Where did we come from, and where are we going? These are questions cosmology can address.

But we are also moved, like lovers, by the awesome power of the vision, and religion speaks to that mystery. People, whatever their scientific literacy or religious perspective, are fascinated by cosmology because it helps to frame the context of meaning in life.

As Stephen Hawking opines, “We want to make sense of what we see around us and to ask: what is the nature of the universe.... [W]here did it and we come from?”

We also care because context carries ethical implications. The rabbis had a long tradition of deriving moral lessons from cosmology. The story of Adam and Eve, for instance, teaches that God made all humans related, descendants of one couple.

The kabbalists, like modern astronomers, taught that the cosmos was born in a unique moment and has changed ever since. The contrasting, predominant view of cosmology — a static and eternal universe — existed from the time of the Greeks until it was discredited by science in the last century. The kabbalists derived a cosmic lesson from their insight: Humanity can affect that change. Righteous deeds, *tikkun olam*, heal the fabric of creation. A static universe lacks this ethical imperative.

Atheism also prompts a cosmological ethic. Richard Dawkins, in “The God Delusion,” argues for replacing righteousness

with a blend of Darwinian personal ethos and rational calculation. Unfortunately, he makes his case with boundless hubris and an indifferent reductionist philosophy that peremptorily discards the morality of religion.

Dawkins's book attempts to quantify human attitudes and rationalize human spirit, but in so doing it presents the creation without an ethical context and leaves thoughtful religious believers — those 64% of Americans — dismayed if not bewildered. Can one honestly be both spiritually engaged and scientifically sophisticated?

*Tikkun leil Shavuot* answers this question with a resounding “yes.” To be open to the wonders of the world, to the night sky, to a lover's embrace, to cosmic light 13 billion years old, is to welcome both revelation and analysis, inspiration and deduction, emotion and thought.

We are seekers. Honest, open seekers can appreciate both the insights of religion and the lessons of science. Cosmology and Kabbalah illustrate that science and religion, presupposed opposites, speak to the same mysteries, and can learn from one another. The Creation is not the only such marvel: Consciousness, free will and the quantum nature of the world are but three other examples.

The perspectives of science and religion are different, but they are not necessarily contradictory. Their moral imperatives can enrich and motivate both rational and righteous behavior.

When our eyes are open, the night sky of modern science has other lessons to impart. Newly uncovered puzzles, such as the possibility of dark matter in the universe, teach us humility.

We do not know it all. Let's try to stay awake.

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