

Email Exchange between Rabbi Moshe Katz of CTN & Nobel Prize Winning Physicist Steven Weinberg

Hi Professor Weinberg,

Hope all is well.

Although I am a Rabbi, I am not writing to you about God. But rather about man!

I saw you quoted in yesterday's New York Times in a discussion about scientists and G-d.

Since I have tremendous respect for you as a scientist I was intrigued by your thoughts about religion and as a result, came across the following quoted in your name,

"Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."

I agree, Professor, that people acting in the name of religion can be an insult to human dignity.

But it seems to me that it is religion, or more specifically, our shared religious tradition that invented that concept!

And (no offense intended!) you speak in the name of human dignity only because of what Judaism taught the world.

I know you are a very busy person. And as a Rabbi, I value the work that you are busy with. But I would appreciate your taking out a few muntos to respond to the following.

I was once asked to speak for a group of kids in Sunday Hebrew School. They were, I was told, not at all interested in being there! And (no less than Professor Weinberg) were not at all interested in hearing some Rabbi. In addition, their minds were totally occupied with the Olympic Games taking place at the time.

I decided that the only chance I had of engaging them was to speak about the Olympic Games.

Here's what I did.

I asked them if they knew where the Olympic Games originated. Of course, they responded that they began in Ancient Greece. I then asked them if they were familiar with what we call Special Olympics. And they were.

In fact, they all agreed that Special Olympics were really more important and meaningful than the regular games, because they gave special kids a chance to participate.

Then I asked them a question:

"Were there Special Olympics in Ancient Greece?"

I told them that I could prove that there weren't.

One kid put it very well. "There wouldn't have been any participants, because handicapped children were left on a mountain to die!"

Then I asked them what happened. "Why are there Special Olympics today? And why does most of the world recognize their value?"

I'm wrapping up Professor Weinberg!

Then I told these kids that what happened was that the Jewish people changed the world with its Torah. It taught the world that EVERY human being is created in the Image of God and entitled to respect, dignity and of course to life!

And their physical "perfection" is not relevant.

Professor, I would appreciate your response to this story.

Do you believe that if you were in Ancient Greece, you would have stood up and protested in the name of human dignity?

Do you think that human values would have evolved to recognize the dignity of every human being?

In fact, the practice of letting handicapped children die was sanctioned by Aristotle and Plato. Two of the most brilliant human beings that ever lived!

And finally, Professor, were good people in Greece doing good or were they doing things that we now recognize as an affront to human dignity?

I look forward to your response.

All the best,
Moshe

Judaism has been one of the world's least destructive religions, because (like Hinduism or Shinto) it is the religion of a particular people, and has no aim to convert the world.

I also agree with you that there has been a gradual improvement in the world's ethical standards, or at least in the standards people are willing to make public. I just don't see much historical connection.

If the world learned anything from Judaism, it would have to have been through Christianity, whose overall moral record is pretty dismal. You can amuse yourself by identifying the good part of the Christian message as of Jewish origin, and ignoring the rest, but this seems to me like special pleading.

To my mind, the real moral improvement of mankind is much more due to the influence of the European enlightenment, in which science played an important part.

In a sense, this is all beside the point. If the substantive content of Judaism (or any other religion) is true, then that is something we should know, whatever moral effect it may have. But if it is not true, if God is just a myth, then to rely on His worship to teach morality is truly an insult to human dignity.

*All best,
Steven Weinberg*

Dear Professor Weinberg,

I want to assure you that I am not a “nudge” who’s going to be e-mailing you every day!

I really appreciate your getting back to me, despite your busy schedule (and I presume your share of mail from promoters of religion).

I found the thoughts of a scientist of your stature, on things related to morality and religion, fascinating.

I was honored by your reply. And I guess I feel a bond with a fellow Jew despite our differences!

If I could just share a few observations on your comments and ask you to once again share your thoughts.

I agree that your first paragraph dealing with religion and its impact on morality is beside the point, but I do think it’s relevant.

It surprised me that you don’t see a “historical connection” and rather attribute the moral advancement of mankind to the “European enlightenment, in which science played an important part”.

Professor Weinberg, what is the connection between science and morality? Would you say that scientists, as a group, are more moral than, say school teachers? Some of the best human beings I know are what we might call “simple people”.

And can the Enlightenment, fueled in part by science, be credited with the moral advancement of humanity?

Didn’t the Holocaust originate in a center of European enlightenment? Did the scientific community shine out in Nazi Germany as symbols of morality? Wasn’t the Soviet Union very scientifically advanced?

I think it is quite clear that the Western world’s moral values were shaped by scripture. Infanticide which as I said was common in Ancient Greece and Rome was regarded as wrong centuries before the Enlightenment!

Professor Weinberg, I think that many of your “issues” with religion are, as you said, not so much with the religious heritage we share, but with Christianity based on its moral record and with its lack of rationality.

In my mind, the Jewish people changed the world with its Torah, with the marketing assistance of Christianity. I don’t see it as special pleading to say that they helped spread the message that the Jewish people (believe they) received from God.

Their problem is that they came up with a bizarre theological belief that God had a Son and denying that belief dooms someone to be beyond salvation!

And the shedding of blood done in the name of that belief must be totally rejected!

Finally, Professor, just a few comments on what you referred to as the core issue.

You said, if the content of Judaism is true, then that is something we should know. But if God is just a myth, then to rely on His worship to teach morality is an insult to human dignity.

If there is a God and He did communicate to us the purpose of life, isn't ignoring that and seeing ourselves as accidents without a purpose, also an insult to our true dignity?

And shouldn't this question of whether Judaism is true be of huge concern to us? The NY Times quoted you as saying, "The experience of being a scientist makes religion seem fairly irrelevant. Most scientists I know don't think about it much".

Shouldn't a scientist be concerned with whether we're here for a purpose or not?

And finally, Professor, and perhaps in my mind the most fundamental question;

If God is a myth and we are here by accident, why do we have "human dignity"?

You know much better than I do that not only are we just specks in the universe, but we are a speck on a speck, because Earth is also a speck in the universe.

So why are we important? And why do we have inherent dignity?

Your thoughts would be very appreciated. And I promise, this will be it.

Unless, of course, you beg me to continue writing!

All the best and Shabbat Shalom,
Moshe

Dear Rabbi,

Well, we agree that it is important to decide (or at least guess) whether the teachings of Judaism or other religions about God are true.

Of course, I could ask which teachings. The Hebrew Bible like the Christian Bible is full of nonsense, which millennia of rabbis have argued away as metaphorical or symbolic.

What you probably mean is a refined Judaism, which views God as something almost unknowable, not the monster who tortured Job and tested Abraham.

But even then, the idea of even such a transcendent God seems to me just silly. I can't prove that there is no tooth fairy, either; it is just one of those things I can't take seriously.

About history, we could argue endlessly, so let's not.

*Best,
Steven Weinberg*

Dear Professor Weinberg,

Thank you, Professor.

You may not be religious, but you are a mensch!

While you are at your computer, could you please respond to my last two questions?

And with this, I will say Shalom and thank you!

All the best,

Moshe

1) Professor Weinberg, what is the connection between science and morality? Would you say that scientists, as a group, are more moral than, say school teachers? Some of the best human beings I know are what we might call "simple people".

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All the best and Shabbat Shalom,
Moshe

Sorry, no more time. SW

Hi Professor,

Hope all is well.

I am leading a discussion group based on our fascinating e-mail exchange.

A question that came up is, if we are here by accident, why are we important?

Why is it important to respect a speck on a speck in the universe?

No one in the group was able to answer this question, and we would be delighted if you took just a few minutes to respond.

All the best,
Moshe

We invent our own importance, which is hard and therefore all the more admirable. SW

Hi Professor Weinberg,

I hope you can honor me with two minutes of your time.

I am leading a discussion related to a brief, but fascinating, exchange I had with you a while back, regarding religion, moral values and meaning in life.

This particular group is comprised of very bright and intellectually challenging Russian Jews.

The question that I know will come up, because it comes up whenever I share parts of our exchange with bright and inquisitive young people, is the following.

You have been quoted as saying that "The more I learn about the universe, the more I'm convinced that it is meaningless".

It seems that people took your comment to imply that we are doomed to a life devoid of meaning.

However, you are quoted by Dick Teresi as saying, "While the universe suggests no point, we humans can find purpose in our lives, including trying to understand the universe".

I would greatly appreciate your response to the following question that ALWAYS comes up.

If the universe is purposeless, why is it meaningful to try to understand it?

Professor Weinberg, I'm sure that your response will add depth to my discussion as well as satisfy my intellectual curiosity.

I look forward to your response.

Thank you so much,
(Rabbi) Moshe Katz

Second, you seem to feel that nothing positive has come from religion.

Jews comprise less than two percent of the American population, but the Jewish Federation is the third largest charity in the country. My explanation is that Jews have been molded by the Torah that made charity a moral and religious obligation.

In Jewish tradition, not giving charity is considered unjust (hence the word Tzedakah, justice!)

What is your take on that?

And do you consider it a moral obligation to give charity?

Once again, I am truly honored to "speak" with you!

All the best,
Moshe

Hi Rabbi Katz,

What I meant in my much-quoted remark is that there is nothing discovered in the universe that suggests any objective point or purpose for us. We have to invent it ourselves. Why should we? It seems to me a better way to live. Anyway, why not?

As to the second question, I think Jews only began their great contributions to civilization when they freed themselves from obsession with Talmud and Torah. SW

Hi Professor Weinberg,

Hope all is well.

I know that today is a very exciting day for scientists like your self.

But I wanted to catch you before you are immersed in interpreting the results of the Hadron Collider.

Two questions come up often when I discuss our previous exchanges with highly intelligent people.

I would really appreciate if you could once again take a few minutes to respond.

You say often that human beings need to invent our importance, or purpose.

You give examples like, "By loving each other, creating beautiful things and exploring the universe."

Question one: What is the status of a person who does none of the things you consider meaningful. Say, a homeless person who loves no one, is not loved by anyone, has no intellectual curiosity and no appreciation of art.

Is his life meaningful? Is it (to use the word VERY loosely!) sacred?

Suppose a child chose to save his beloved pet over this homeless person. Would you consider that immoral?

Question two: Francis Crick (an atheist) suggested that we no longer consider all life sacred. That we redefine life and death and declare a child "alive" only after two days and a person dead after the age of 80 or 85.

What is your reaction to such an idea?

Do you agree? Do you consider it immoral? And if yes, on what grounds?

Thank you so much and good luck with the Collider!

All the best,
Moshe Katz

Dear Rabbi Katz,

- 1) The homeless person's life may well be meaningful to him. Just being able to look at the sky is enough to make life worth while. A child who prefers the life of his pet is childish.*
- 2) I don't agree with Crick about the old, and about the young, although a child several days old does not know enough to expect long life, we need a bright line at which to begin to respect human life, and birth seems like the obvious choice.*

Steven Weinberg

Hi Professor Weinberg,

Hope all is well.

You have been quoted as saying that one of the great accomplishments of religion is that it has made it possible NOT to be religious, by explaining the world.

My understanding is that there is still a large gap in science's explanation of the world.

Do you agree with Stephen Hawking that, "The point of creation lies outside the scope of presently known laws of physics"?

Have we made any progress in understanding how the Big Bang happened?

Thank you so much.

All the best,
Moshe Katz

We don't even know that there was a point of creation. But the question does not seem outside the scope of future scientific explanation. SW

Hi Professor,

Thanks so much for your prompt response!

If I can impose on you a few more minutes of your time?

I am very interested in the science totally separate of religious or theological implications.

(My understanding of Jewish tradition supports that interest.)

Since I have a chance to "go to the top" please clarify for a scientific lay person as myself.

From my reading, I am under the impression that the scientific community is in consensus that the universe is expanding and, from that it follows that there was a "beginning".

And isn't your book an attempt to describe what happened in the first three minutes AFTER the Big Bang?

As a Rabbi, I know how easy it is to get frustrated with questions of the novice, so please have patience with me!

Thank you so much!

All the best,
Moshe Katz

The universe is certainly expanding, but that doesn't necessarily mean it had a beginning. When we talk about the first three minutes, or the first ten billion years, we are referring to the present phase of expansion of the universe, in which the dynamics of the expansion was dominated by the energy and pressure of radiation and matter (and,

more recently, so-called dark energy). Before that it seems there was a period of inflation, which we are just now learning about, which might have lasted forever, only speeding up toward the end. But what is more likely is that this period of inflation did have a beginning at a definite time in the past.

What I was referring to in my previous message is the possibility that this whole history of inflation followed by matter and radiation dominated expansion is just one episode, like a bubble in a boiling pot of water, with countless other such episodes having occurred again and again in the past, and likewise in the future. This is the so-called chaotic inflation theory, largely due to Andrei Linde of Stanford, and it has much to recommend it, but it remains a speculation. SW

Hi Professor,

Hope all is well.

As per your response to my last message regarding Hawking's book, I waited for your review to appear in NY review. (I gladly paid \$6 for it!)

I wanted to ask you something regarding the issue you took with Hawking related to "philosophical questions".

Regarding free will, you assert that while "physical laws make it inevitable that I want to make these decisions", unlike thunderstorms, "I have the conscious experience of deciding what to do."

My question is, how do you understand the "moral" responsibility for our decisions if they are, due to physical laws, inevitable?

Aren't you basically saying that we feel as if we are deciding, but in act are not?

I ask this question especially because I know and respect your moral sensitivities.

I hope that despite your very busy schedule, you will "decide" to honor me with a response!

Thanks and all the best,
Moshe

No, we are really deciding. We can not always know what makes us want to decide the way we do, but it is the act of deciding that creates moral responsibility.

It may be that Hitler made evil decisions because his father beat him when he was young, but for whatever reason he had become evil, and deserved punishment (worse than he got).

*Best,
Steven Weinberg*

Hi Professor,

Please excuse me, but I am, after all, a student of the Talmud, and can't help but analyze your wording regarding free will.

You wrote, ..."Free will is... conscious experience of deciding what to do... and this experience is not invalidated by the reflection that physical laws made it **inevitable** that I would want to make these decisions."

Hitler is a tough example because everyone has an instinctive sense that he was evil.

But let's take some less extreme examples:

1) If Steve is attracted to his beautiful secretary and is unfaithful to his wife, did physical laws make it **inevitable** that he do so, in which case he is not morally responsible for the act, or did he really choose to be unfaithful.?

2) If Steve decides to set aside a portion of his income for charity and Alan does not, does Steve, as opposed to Alan, deserve admiration or is each responding in a way that was made inevitable by physical laws?

3) Finally, even in the case of Hitler?

If a bear attacks and kills a hiker, we put it to sleep to save other people from it, not because it was evil, it was merely following its instincts.

Clearly Hitler had to be destroyed because he was a threat to humanity. But why is he, as opposed to the bear, "evil"?

I would greatly appreciate your "choosing" to respond!

All the best,
Moshe

Professor Weinberg did not respond.