

Judaism

Stephen Hawking's cosmology, the birthday of the world and our struggles to be faithful

The questions that confront us on Rosh Hashanah can seem overwhelming, but our liturgy offers the reassuring image of God as a loving parent

By

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Hayom harat olam, “Today is the birthday of the world” – a notion that Stephen Hawking, the famous theoretical physicist and cosmologist (who died in 2018), would have found unacceptable, if not ludicrous.

Ironically, however, the publication of his ground-breaking book, *A Brief History of Time* (1988), succeeded admirably in focusing minds directly on God and creation, the core themes of our Rosh Hashanah festival. The only difference is that our purpose at this time is not to discount that cause-and-effect relationship but to affirm and celebrate it.

But his work also dealt with faith and doubt, and many High Holy-Day worshippers will inevitably find themselves pondering which of the two has primacy in their thoughts.

Such an exercise may be futile however, for it is posited on the assumption that the two are mutually exclusive. However, once we take account of the emotional dimension of faith – referred to within psychology as “emotional intelligence” – we recognise

that the propensity to embrace faith is not necessarily or wholly a question of choice but is equally conditioned by our body's hormonal responsiveness as well as other external influences.

Hence, we experience periods and levels of faith or doubt; though, especially with the latter, we may make subconscious efforts to sublimate them. The corollary of this is that those who find belief in the goodness of God contradicted by traumatic personal experiences, or contemplation of national tragedies such as the Holocaust or October 7, should not be dubbed atheists or agnostics, but categorised rather as those still struggling with their faith.

A precedent for that state was Abraham, who, on hearing of God's intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, cried out in defence of their inhabitants, "Shall the judge of the entire earth not judge righteously?" (Genesis 18:25).

Interestingly, Hawking also observed that one can't prove that God doesn't exist, but science makes God unnecessary. We cannot quibble with the former statement; but the world, over countless generations, would never have progressed in its moral and ethical journey without the Torah's code – and the codes of the other major religions inspired by it. Science certainly did not make God unnecessary!

In many passages, Hawking affirms that it does not contradict the laws of science to affirm that the world may have been created out of nothing, a process he attributes to gravity: "Whoever said, 'One can't get something from nothing,' must never have learned quantum physics, for, as long as one has empty space – the ultimate in physical nothingness – simply manipulating it in the right way will inevitably cause something to emerge."

The references in Genesis 1:2 to the earth as "unformed and void," and "the Spirit of God hovering upon the surface of the

waters,” may thus be viewed as providing a clear description of both “empty space” and God “manipulating it in the right way” – in precise conformity with Hawking’s account of how creation might have begun.

Hawking also states that science predicts many different universes as being spontaneously created out of nothing, and that which one we are in as a matter of chance. Curiously, the Midrash echoes this very concept in its statement that, ‘God kept on creating worlds and destroying them, until He said, “This one suits Me; they did not.”’

The mystery of faith is alluded to in the verse, “And I shall wholly hide My face on that day” (Deuteronomy 31:18), a sentiment especially apposite to this High Holy-Day period when, as with voices crying out in the wilderness, we raise our voices in prayer that God might shed His obscurity and reveal His purpose to our people.

For the believer there are no questions and for the non-believer no answers

God describes Israel as “My child, My firstborn” (Exodus 4:22). Viewing ourselves as a strong-willed, self-centred child, testing our heavenly Parent to the very limit of His patience, we are nevertheless confident that His love for us will ultimately prevail, and that our complex and fraught relationship as avinu and malkeinu – at times the indulgent father, and at others, the uncompromising disciplinarian – will secure for us His forgiveness and blessing.

In a beautiful passage from Jeremiah that we recite to the Rosh Hashanah Musaph, the imagery of Israel goes beyond that of a firstborn child to that of the cherished babe: “*Haben yakir li Ephraim im yeled sha'ashu'im*” – “Truly Ephraim is my darling son, a child that is dandled on the knee. Whenever I

“speak of him, my thoughts dwell long on him, and my heart yearns for him, so that I shall receive him back in love” (Jeremiah 31:20).

It has been said, “For the believer there are no questions and for the non-believer no answers.” The validity of this should be challenged, however, for it is the mission of the believer to probe the ways of God every day of his life, as it states, “In all your ways [seek to] know Him” (Proverbs 3:6).

Such an exercise will inevitably throw up numerous mind-troubling questions and dilemmas. We have only to reflect on how readily faith may be challenged as we struggle to make sense of the multitude of natural disasters, and the magnitude of hatred, violence, and terrorism – ostensibly in the name of religion – that stalks our world.

And if illness, death, or loss of livelihood is encountered close to home, even believers frequently discover questions.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that doubt is also an element in the urge to sin. For it is that lurking doubt about God's existence and His ability to punish that emboldens us to follow that direction. And that is, perhaps, why Rosh Hashanah is celebrated as both the festival of Creation and the time to petition for repentance. For, if we were indubitably certain of the existence of the Creator, we would never have had the temerity to sin.

If we are but God's infant playthings, and if erring humankind is indeed still in its infancy, morally, ethically, and spiritually – and what, after all, is 5,785 years in the overall scheme of Creation? – we might take heart and offer the optimistic prayer for Him to continue to show that characteristic indulgence and love for us, nurturing us to maturity in a world that will indeed become wiser, safer, and more peaceful, with each passing year.

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