

Kol Ha-Rav

Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) was a Nobel prize-winning German physicist who discovered that precise measurements are impossible when it comes to the itty-bitty, miniscule measurements that physicists revel in. For example, consider a beam of light. Suppose we were to cut up that beam of light into its tiniest components. The tiniest component within a beam of light is a photon and one would assume that at any given point, that photon has a location and a momentum. According to Heisenberg: the more accurate the read of the photon's location, the less accurate the read of its momentum. And the inverse is also true: the more accurate the read of its momentum, the less accurate the read of its location.

You may be thinking—this really doesn't sound quite right. After all, the location and speed of a moving object, say a car, can be measured with considerable accuracy. And that is true enough, but the operative word in that previous statement is "considerable." The real question that Heisenberg would ask is this: Can we measure the location and speed of the car with absolute accuracy? If a car is in motion, how then can one identify its definitive location? And in pinning down its precise location, how then can one quantify its speed? The physicists of the 20th century included some of the greatest minds ever to ponder the mysteries of science—Max Planck, Niels Bohr, Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg—and their collective work created a paradigm shift in how we view the universe. Their intellectual and professional grandfather, Isaac Newton (1643-1727), had created a world that was mechanical, predictable and certain. But the progenitors of the new physics called quantum physics or quantum mechanics (quanta is Latin for "how much" which points to the central concern of the new physics) left us with a world that was much more organic, relative and uncertain, all of which leads to some old questions about God.

What can we know with certainty about God? The answer is very little. If God is as incomprehensible and immense as we assume God to be, and if we are as tiny and limited as we know ourselves to be, then what we can know of God is very little indeed. And yet, many rabbis would claim that we do know, in the very least, what God demands of us via the Bible. For if the Bible is a sacred record of the Jewish people's encounter with God, and if God is by definition incomprehensible, then I must assume that the biblical record of God is also uncertain. The fundamentalists do not want to believe that. They see the Bible as literal and definitive. They maintain that the ancient rabbis' interpretation of the Bible is a definitive interpretation of God's will.

The difference between Orthodoxy and Conservative Judaism is this: Orthodoxy is Newtonian—mechanical, predictable and certain—while Conservative Judaism is quantum—organic, relative and uncertain. Conservative Judaism will never appeal to anyone who is seeking definitive answers. That kind of person needs the certainty provided for by Orthodoxy. But for someone who can live with the uncertainty, or whose philosophical outlook acknowledges the uncertainty of the universe, Conservative Judaism is not only appealing, but it is a faithful Jewish representation of reality as modern Jewish men and women have come to know it.

I often end up giving lengthy answers to questions that seem easy or straightforward. Truth, in an uncertain world, is often complicated and rarely, if ever, black and white. And so a single question gives rise to multiple answers, and each answer is correct given varying circumstances. It is, as Heisenberg taught, almost impossible to arrive at a single answer that is in and of itself precise, and so we resort to multiple answers in order to achieve the truth. And the Lord your God, as we say in this tradition, is truth. Quantum Judaism = Conservative Judaism and Conservative Judaism is a unique expression of the truths that Jews have discovered as God has revealed them to us within the universe.

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