

What Science Means to Me



I am not much of a scientist. The last time I was in a formal class of physics or chemistry was in 10th and 11th grade. But I have always been fascinated by the history of science and mathematics. I never excelled at calculus, but I have always been enchanted by books that discuss the history of calculus, as well as infinity and science in general. Don't ask me to do any calculations, but I'm happy to discuss the implications of the interaction between math and science on religious ideas.

This came to the fore when I was studying in Ner Yisroel. My friend, Dovid Weinberger, knew I was interested in how scientific and mathematical ideas differ from religious ideas and the system of Torah in general. He encouraged me to reach out to his Uncle Shmuel, a renowned mathematician and learned Jew, at the University of Chicago. We began corresponding. It's hard to remember what exactly we corresponded about—after hours of searching, it seems the emails got deleted from my old Yahoo email account. I even called Dr. Weinberger and while he remembers our conversations, he couldn't find the correspondence either. But I do remember the basic thrust of my questions. I wanted to understand how a seasoned mathematician relates to the rabbinic law. There is a rigor and a sequentiality to math that I always found intimidating and maybe even a drop more “true” than halakhic and Torah reasoning. What implications, if any, I remember asking him, does Gödel's incompleteness theorem have for the system of halakha? As a mathematician, what do you think when we say that the wisdom of Torah is infinite? Are your math colleagues smarter than rabbis? How does the development of Torah differ from the innovations of science?

The joy of life is not found pitting the books against one another, but having them both open—text and commentary—and discovering the sublime joy of finding purpose in this mysterious world.

Overall, looking back I think there was an element of immaturity involved. When you're younger, you tend to think that the smartest person in the room—the one with the highest SAT scores, the one in the higher level math class—is probably the correct person in the room. We tend to think that the discipline that attracts people with the highest IQ's probably has all the right answers on how to live your life. It reminds me of an exchange between Stephen Colbert (a devout Catholic) and Ricky Gervais (an agnostic atheist). Ricky poses the following thought experiment:

Science is constantly proven over time. You see, if we would take something like fiction or any other holy book and destroyed it—in a thousand years time it wouldn't come back just as it was. But if you took every science book and every fact and destroyed them all—in a thousand years they would all be back because every test would be the same result.

It's a fascinating exchange to watch in whole.