

28 Kislev – Chanukah – 5765
December 11, '04

Miketz

On Chanukah, Dream Interpretation, and String Theory

I was left a little confused by an article in the *Science Times* this week. A number of researchers from prestigious universities are celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the discovery of “a single equation that could explain all the laws of physics.” “String theory,” which “has become a major branch of physics,” maintains that the varied constituents of nature are not “independent points,” as was previously believed, but are more like a series of strings, playing “different notes on G-d’s guitar.” They are all interrelated. The discovery of this unified theory of nature is supposed to be able to answer all sorts of different mysteries, and it is considered one of the most significant recent findings in the world of physics.

But, at the same time, the article reports that “even as they ate cake and drank wine, the string theorists admitted that after 20 years, they still did not know how to test string theory, or even **what it meant.**”

It would be nice to have a theory that could explain everything we witness. Our minds tend to process information only by discerning a common theme among disparate elements. The items that bear the common thread are incorporated and remembered. The others are discarded and forgotten.

But perhaps we are missing something.

When Pharaoh recounts his dreams to Yosef in this week’s parsha, he, perhaps unknowingly, omits certain details. The fact, for instance, that he was standing “on” the Nile, and not “by” it - i.e., with the Nile as mere scenery -- may have seemed insignificant to Pharaoh. But this was, in fact, the indicator (as Rav Hirsch explains so eloquently) that this dream was not about Pharaoh’s personal life (his wise men had interpreted the dream to refer to seven daughters whom he would have and later bury) but about the well-being of the entire land of Egypt. (The Nile, which watered Egypt’s crops, symbolized Egyptian sustenance.) Pharaoh glossed over a detail that didn’t register in his perception of the dream’s meaning. But Yosef recognized that the dream was conveying a much grander message than Pharaoh thought, and Yosef understood that all of the minutiae of the dream had symbolism and significance. The wise Yosef had the string theory equation.

The Rambam introduces the laws of Chanuka with a brief account of the Chanuka story. Roughly: “The Greeks afflicted the Jews; Hashem had mercy on us and helped us beat them; a one-day cruse of oil was found and miraculously burned for eight days.” Many have pointed out that it is rather anomalous for the Rambam to engage in narration. His book is an halachic one, and he does not often stray from pure halachic presentation.

But the reason for the Rambam’s recounting of the story may be that in the absence of a Scriptural record of the events (there is no “Megilla” for Chanukah since

these events took place after the cessation of prophecy) we might not have known what the key elements of the Chanukah miracle were.

If the New York Times had reported on the Chanukah story, one can be sure that the presentation would have looked very different from the Rambam's. The military victory would have been on page one, with various pundits proffering expert insights into why the unfavored Jewish army beat the Greeks, and what tactical errors the latter had made that cost them the war. The name of G-d, to be sure, would have been absent from the report, as would the miracle of the oil. If the oil miracle would have appeared in the paper at all, it would have been in a separate section, unrelated to the war. Perhaps it would have appeared as a human interest story, if it weren't trumped by something more impressive (like a talking fish in Squaratown).

But the Rambam, echoing the sentiments of our Chachamim, is telling us that it is all one story. A one-day cruse of oil doesn't burn for eight days unless Hashem is sending a message to His people, that despite all opposition and against all odds, He will keep the flame of the Jewish Nation aglow.

And that's the only explanation for the war. It's all one story. All the events are related. You just have to have the string theory equation.

As we contemplate Chanukah and Parshas Miketz, we should contemplate our own lives, as well. We should recognize that there are things that happen in our world that, at first blush, we have no explanation for. They therefore don't have any meaning to us. But that might be only because we don't have Yosef showing us the grandness of our role and we don't have the Chanukah light showing us Hashem's Providence in our existence. We don't have the string theory.

We really should strive to discover the equation that accounts for everything we witness...because it doesn't seem that we can expect it from the physicists anytime soon.