

Parallel Thinking Part 16: The Fabric of Reality 2

by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman, New West End United Synagogue



One of the most fundamental questions in Jewish thought relates to how an infinite God could create a finite world. One cannot add something finite to something infinite.

Perhaps an understanding of the fundamental building blocks of reality can shed light on this conundrum.

In the last article we noted that everything is made of atoms, which in turn are made of subatomic particles, such as electrons and quarks. However, if we try to investigate the subatomic particles even further, we hit a snag.

We can consider these subatomic particles as occupying a location in space, at a particular time. This point in Space-Time is a set of coordinates; three of these coordinates describe the point in three-dimensional space (x,y,z) and one coordinate determines the point in time (t). These coordinates are numbers which are objective and absolute; for example, the number 3 represents the same concept regardless of who you are, where you are or what it is that you are counting.

This objectivity, coupled with the fact that mathematics has an almost supernatural ability to describe and predict the physical world, leads some philosophers and scientists to believe that mathematics is the most fundamental entity in the universe.

But are numbers actually 'real'? Intuitively we view mathematics as merely a human concept we use to describe and model reality. Therefore mathematics itself originates in the human consciousness; therein lies the snag. Human consciousness is also part of the reality which mathematics is supposed to describe. How can the most fundamental element of reality arise in something that is part of that reality?

This paradox has led some to believe that consciousness itself arises from some deeper, fundamental source. One school of philosophy, known as Solipsism, believes that consciousness is in fact the only thing that is certain to exist at all.

If consciousness is the most fundamental element of the universe, how do we answer our initial question and bridge the gap between the mind and the physical world?

Man was created by God blowing into his nostrils, such that man became a *"nefesh chaya"* – a living soul (Bereishit 2:7). The Aramaic translator, Onkelos (d. 120) translates this as a "speaking spirit". Speech is not merely communication, which is not unique to humans. It is a higher expression of deep thought and contemplation. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin (d. 1821) explains that speech is fundamental to creation precisely because it bridges that gap between the spiritual and the physical worlds. This explains why the Mishnah teaches that God created the Universe with 10 utterances (Pirkei Avot 5:1). For example, "God said, 'Let there be light'" (ibid. 1:3).

We too can 'create through speech'; for example prayer and oaths have the power to create a new spiritual reality. By forming mankind in the image of God, the Almighty has given mankind speech, the most powerful creative tool which transforms thoughts into actions and helps to perfect the world in which we live.

