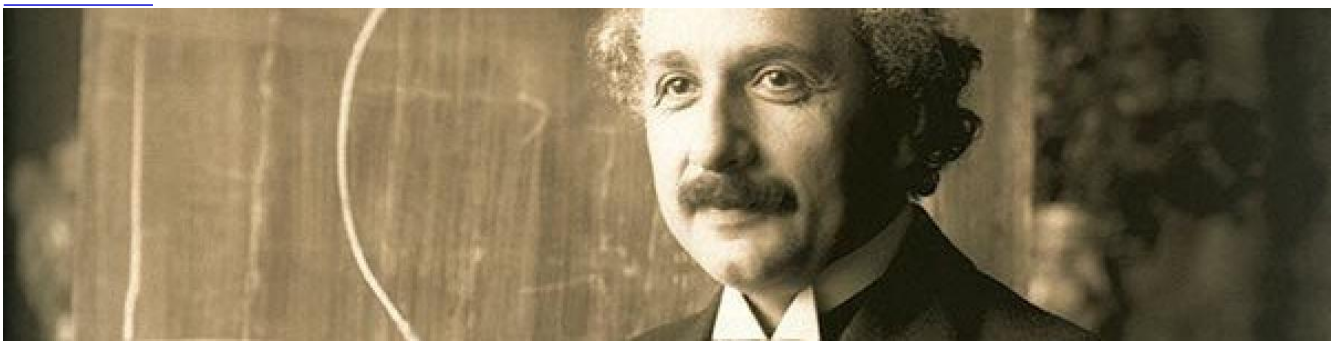
Thoughts on Albert Einstein

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When Albert Einstein was a little boy, his father showed him a compass. The needle pointed north no matter which way Einstein turned the compass around. This amazed the child. In his autobiography published in 1949, Einstein recalls his feelings on that occasion. “The needle behaved in such a determined way and did not fit into the usual explanation of how the world works. That is that you must touch something to move it. I still remember now, or I believe that I remember, that this experience made a deep and lasting impression on me. There must be something deeply hidden behind everything.”

But more than his amazement about the compass, Einstein gained another insight. “Why do we come, sometimes spontaneously, to wonder about something? I think that wondering to one’s self occurs when an experience conflicts with our fixed ways of seeing the world.”

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) was one of humanity’s greatest geniuses, a man whose mind plumbed the depths of universe. But his greatness transcended his being gifted with an extraordinary IQ: he had imagination; he wondered about things; he let his mind drift in new and unexpected pathways. He remarked: “Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world” (Einstein on Cosmic Religion, p. 97).

Einstein believed that the sense of wonder is an essential foundation for human creativity. “The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He

who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle" (The World as I See It, p. 7). In one of his famous aphorisms, he asserted: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

Although Einstein was a deeply religious man, but in his own sense of the word "religion." He believed in a cosmic religious sense. "This is hard to make clear to those who do not experience it, since it does not involve an anthropomorphic ideas of God; the individual feels the vanity of human desires and aims, and the nobility and marvelous order which are revealed in nature and in the world of thought" (Einstein on Cosmic Religion, p. 48). He did not subscribe to the classic dogmas and rituals of religion, but was drawn to a cosmic God who is manifested in the awesome orderliness and vastness of nature. "The basis of all scientific work is the conviction that the world is an ordered and comprehensive entity, which is a religious sentiment. My religious feeling is a humble amazement at the order revealed in the small patch of reality to which our feeble intelligence is equal" (Ibid., p. 98). He was convinced that "the cosmic religious experience is the strongest and noblest driving force behind scientific research. The only deeply religious people of our largely materialistic are the earnest men of research" (Ibid. pp. 52, 54).

He described his own understanding of religiosity: "A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms—it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man" (The World as I See It, p. 7).

Einstein, while proud of his Jewish identity, was not particularly observant of Jewish religious traditions. His religious focus remained "cosmic," not particularistic. He tended to view Judaism (and "organized" religion in general) as being bogged down in dogmas and rituals, not centered on cosmic religion. Einstein's cosmic religious sense infused his scientific work.

His papers on general and special relativity led to a dramatic revolution in scientific thought. In 1922 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his work in physics.

When Hitler came to power, Einstein realized there was no future for Jews in Germany. He settled in the United States, and was appointed head of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University. While philosophically aligned with pacifism, he played a significant role in having the United States develop atomic

weapons.

Along with his intellectual and scientific work, Einstein was famous for his advocacy of ethics, social justice, and human rights. He identified with the Zionist movement, which offered Jews the possibility of living in their own land of Israel. Given the prevalence of anti-Semitism, he understood that Jews needed a safe haven where they could live as dignified and free human beings. He lent his name to the establishment of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and was hopeful that the Jewish return to their ancient homeland would usher in a new era of Jewish creativity.

He became a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and campaigned for the civil rights movement in America. In 1946, Einstein was awarded an honorary degree by Lincoln University in Pennsylvania—a historically black college. In his address on that occasion, he spoke about the scourge of racism in America, stating that “I do not intend to be quiet about it.” And he wasn’t.

He viewed his Jewishness as a foundation of his humanitarian outlook. He noted: “The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence—these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my stars that I belong to it” (The World as I See It, p. 103). He believed that “the bond that has united the Jews for thousands of years and that unites them today is, above all, the democratic ideal of social justice, coupled with the ideal of mutual ad and tolerance among all men” (Ideas and Opinions, p. 195).

While stressing the long-standing Jewish commitment to social justice, Einstein lamented the general moral decay which he felt was setting into society. “One misses the elementary reaction against injustice and for justice—that reaction which in the long run represents man’s only protection against a relapse into barbarism” (Out of My Later Years, p. 10). He felt that technological advances gave humans great powers—but that if these powers were misused, then catastrophe would ensue. He was optimistic that humanity had the ability to achieve a better world. “If we desire sincerely and passionately the safety, the welfare and the free development of the talents of all men, we shall not be in want of the means to approach such a state” (Ibid., p. 113).

Einstein sought a Grand Unified Theory that would explain the workings of the universe in a comprehensive way. He was convinced of the ultimate orderliness and unity of nature. In spite of his mighty brain and his tremendous efforts, he

was unable to achieve his goal. But he pointed the way for others who would continue the search.

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When I was a student at Yeshiva College, I wanted to gain an understanding of Einstein's theories of relativity so I enrolled in a philosophy of science class. The professor was excellent; the readings were enlightening; the assignments were challenging. I was a diligent student—but I was unable to fully grasp Einstein's theories.

In the process of my readings for the class, I came across a passage from Einstein that was more important to me than my failed efforts to understand relativity. The passage reflected Einstein's genius, humility, and ultimate optimism. "Our lives are so small that we are too often in our solitude like children crying in the dark. Nevertheless our little solitude is a great and august solitude in which we can contemplate things that are greater than mankind."

And if that is all that I learned from the class, I have no complaints.

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