

## **String Theory: On Music, Cosmic Law, and a New Era of Temple Beth-El**

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

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This week's parashah begins with God saying, "If you follow my laws and faithfully observe my commandments" (*Lev. 26:3*), then good things will come your way.

The great medieval rabbis Abraham ibn Ezra and Maimonides taught that to truly understand God's laws, you have to study other fields of knowledge like science which provide critical insight into how the world works.

So, recently, I've been reading a great book about physics called *The Elegant Universe*, by Brian Greene—and I've been learning about something called String Theory.

Now, you may know something about this, but I used to zone out in science class so I'm learning about it for the first time.

According to String Theory, the building blocks of the universe are actually tiny, ultramicroscopic, vibrating strings.

As Greene explains, "What appear to be different elementary particles are actually different 'notes' on a fundamental string. The universe—being composed of an enormous number of vibrating strings—is akin to a cosmic symphony."<sup>1</sup>

This is something Judaism has understood since long before String Theory was developed. But whereas physics has demonstrated it through empirical data and mathematical equations, Judaism and Jewish culture have spoken about it through poetry, creativity, and imagination.

Kabbalah teaches that on the very first Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, all of creation—from the tallest mountain to the tiniest blade of grass—sang a majestic and beautiful song to God.

The 15th-century mystic Meir ibn Gabbai spoke of the spiritual "bedrock of the melody of the cosmic voice."<sup>2</sup>

In our own time, Leonard Cohen imagined that "there was a secret chord/that David played and it pleased the Lord."

The Polish Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Shapria, who was murdered in the Holocaust, invited us to "Take a musical phrase, turn your face to the wall, or simply close your eyes and remind yourself that you stand in the presence of God. With your heart breaking open, you are here to pour out your soul to God with music and melody, emerging from the depths of your heart.

"Inevitably, you will begin to feel the emergence of your spirit in great joy and delight. At first it was you singing to your soul to wake her up, but slowly you will feel your soul singing her own song."<sup>3</sup>

Susan Stumer understood this. When she sang, she was in tune with the universe, with God, and with her authentic self.

I don't know if she knew it from String Theory, or from Kabbalah, or from Julliard, or just from her kishkes, but she knew that music and art and beauty and the vibrations of instruments and the vibrations of the human soul are encoded in the laws of the universe.

In dedicating the Susan Stumer Cultural Arts Fund tonight, we are not only honoring her memory and her legacy, but we are embracing the ideals and the passion that animated her life.

And we are celebrating Mark's vision of making those things central to the life of this congregation.

Thank you, Mark, Scott, Allison, Ylana, and all of Susan's family and friends for so generously making this possible for our community.

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Tonight's service featuring Stephanie and The Shabbatones is just the beginning of what we will do thanks to the Susan Stumer Cultural Arts Fund.

Let me tell you what else we have planned.

First, I am delighted to announce that, thanks to the Stumer Fund, we have just hired Temple Beth-El's first-ever choir director, and she's here tonight: It's my honor to introduce you to Dr. Pam Levy. Dr. Levy is the music director at Great Neck North High School, and she'll be joining our team this summer.

Dr. Levy will conduct our choir for the High Holidays and MLK Shabbat, and she's also going to help us create new opportunities for the choir to sing both at TBE and out in the Great Neck community.

And we want more people to sing in our choir. Rabbi Joseph Karo said, "Whoever has a sweet voice, it is a mitzvah to honor God with your gift."<sup>4</sup>

So, on Monday, June 24, at 7 p.m., we're going to have an informational meeting where you can meet Dr. Levy, hear about our plans for the choir, share your ideas, and learn about how you can get involved.

The other exciting thing I want to announce is that we are creating a partnership between the Stumer Fund and the Gold Coast Arts Center here in Great Neck to bring a variety of cultural programs to TBE this year.

The Gold Coast's founder and director, Regina Keller Gil, and her team are working with our program director, Joy Allen, and a wonderful group of TBE members to design cultural arts programs that our members and the broader Great Neck community will be able to enjoy.

I want to recognize the members of our new Susan Stumer Cultural Arts planning committee: Sandy Lubert, Debbie Sutin, Mary Alice Dobbin, Len Schiff, Rob Yamins, and Lea Caplan.

Thank you all for being a part of this exciting effort.

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The future of Temple Beth-El is bright, and music and cultural arts are big reasons why.

Stephanie is awesome. Shy is awesome. Pam is awesome. We're going to do amazing things together.

A new era of music and culture is dawning at TBE, and I want to invite you all—everyone here tonight and everyone in our congregation—to be part of it.

Please consider supporting the Susan Stumer Cultural Arts Fund with your generosity. [You can donate here.](#)

Joey Weisenberg, one of the most influential Jewish musicians of today, says that "To sing is to be fully alive."<sup>5</sup>

So, we're going to sing, and we're going to pluck those cosmic strings, and we're going to bring good vibrations into the world.

Because our vivid vision is for TBE to be a place where you can be your authentic Jewish self—and music, embedded as it is in the foundations of the universe and the human soul, can help you tap into that authenticity.

To quote Stevie Wonder:

"Music is a world within itself  
With a language we all understand  
With an equal opportunity  
For all to sing, dance, and clap their hands."<sup>6</sup>

So, let's do it!

<sup>1</sup> Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*, 146

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Joey Weisenberg, *The Torah of Music*

<sup>3</sup> R. Kalonymos Kalman Shapira, "Essay on Niggun," quoted in Weisenberg, Appendix #179

<sup>4</sup> R. Joseph Karo, *Beit Yosef, Orach Hayim* 53 (as quoted in Weisenberg)

<sup>5</sup> Weisenberg, 3

<sup>6</sup> Stevie Wonder, "Sir Duke"