

Awe, Wonder, and the Cosmos

Shanah tovah friends. Welcome to the year 5783. No, you have not just beamed into the future. This *is* the current Jewish year. For the first time I figured out what year equates to Year One of our tradition and for those who might be wondering, creation began way back in 3761 BCE.

On Rosh Hashanah we hear the words from Genesis 1:1 referring to this moment in time:

Bereshit bara elohim, et ha'shamyaim v'et ha-aretz, v'ha-aretz hayta tohu vavohu... “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the earth being unformed and void.”

We all know the cosmos and everything in it did not come to being a little less than 6000 years ago and with the new images from the James Webb space telescope that we have been fortunate to view over the past few months, it is clear that the beginning is a lot closer to 15 billion years ago. That number is mind-boggling. We can now see further back in time than ever before. In essence, with the James Webb telescope, we are able to peer back to a time not long after *tohu vavohu*—when all was formless and dark.

I have always had a fascination with the cosmos. I love looking up at the night sky with my star app. I find it fascinating to think about us traveling at incredible speeds through space, all the while orbiting a massive black hole. (Anyone else with me?) And Carl Sagan's simple, yet profound teaching that “we are made of star stuff” just blows my mind. When I was contemplating leaving a career in the business world my sister asked me what I wanted to do. At that moment I had no idea. This was before I thought about becoming a Jewish professional. I answered, half jokingly, “Look at deep space through a telescope.” My inability to comprehend post high-school math shot down this dream real fast. While a rabbi and an astrophysicist might not have that much in common, one thing I have learned and appreciated about the Jewish tradition is our relationship with awe and wonder. We are a people encouraged to look up into the night sky or down at a blade of grass and recite blessings of gratitude as we marvel

at God's creations. Anyone who looks into the vast cosmos must understand those feelings.

This past summer when I saw the first pictures from Webb I knew I had to talk about awe and wonder, especially on the birthday of the world. Especially during the *yamim noraim*, or Days of Awe.

Any Hebrew-English dictionary will translate "awe" into the Hebrew *yirah*. There are multiple translations, however, including "fear." Are we to simultaneously understand these High Holy Days as the "Days of Fear?" This sounds like a horror movie. Can you imagine if that's how we advertised the holiday? And yet, with liturgy depicting a God who decides our destiny for this year in lines such as, "who shall live and who shall die," "fear" seems more appropriate than "awe."

Perhaps the point of calling this festival cycle *yamim noraim* is so we might view this period of time as both "Days of Awe" and "Days of Fear." In fact, when we look at some of our most famous stories in the Torah where *yirah* is written in the text, both translations can work interchangeably.

In Genesis 28:16-17, we find Jacob waking up after dreaming of a ladder to heaven with angels going up and down and God speaking to him. It reads, "Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely God is present in this place, and I did not know it!' He was afraid/in awe, he said, 'How awesome/frightening is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.'"

In this case and elsewhere, *yirah* is most closely associated with encountering God. Therefore, "fear" and "awe," represent different sides of the same experience. They are linked with the power of God and the awesome experience of the Divine.

When we look at pictures of deep space through Webb and understand with more clarity than ever before how infinite the cosmos is, how insignificant our mediocre sun is, and how small the pale blue dot of a world we live on is, we sense that the edge between awe and fear is razor thin. We can appreciate the splendor and mystery of creation and also feel alone and vulnerable as we soar through nothingness. How awesome and frightening is this place!

For many of us, thinking too much about space and our place in the universe is a waste of time. There is enough on our plates already with simply trying to navigate our way through this life on this planet. But, our Jewish tradition encourages us to look up and express awe.

In the Talmud we read, “Anyone who knows how to calculate astronomical seasons and the movement of constellations and does not do so, the verse says about him: ‘They do not take notice of the work of God, and they do not see God’s handiwork’”¹ (Isaiah 5:12). In other words, our sages teach that everything around us, both right here on earth and as far as the most distant galaxies, are works of divine art. It might be scary to think how vast and dangerous it is up in the heavens, but we should try to cultivate a sense of awe instead. Imagine noticing the many patterns of beauty around us. How could this not enrich our appreciation of all that is. How might life be different if we seek out the “wow!” factor in all that we see?

One midrash teaches us how Adam spent his free time admiring the work of creation.² It reads, “In that first week following creation, after the work of naming the animals, what did Adam do? Overwhelmed to his very core, Adam stood silent on the shores of the sea, contemplating the majesty around him. Then he lifted up his voice to extol God, saying: *Mah rabu ma’asecha Adonai* – How great are your works, O Eternal Creator!”³ Adam looked around with a deep sense of awe and gratitude.

Abraham Joshua Heschel taught the world a great deal about awe. In his book, *God in Search of Man*, he writes, “The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.”⁴ As we enter a new year, with cycles of the moon and solar system impacting nearly

¹ BT Shabbat 75a

² I learned this teaching from Rabbi Paul Kipnes

³ Midrash Tanhuma Pekudei 3

⁴ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1955. p. 46

everything we do, I encourage you to open yourselves up to a life filled with a deeper will to wonder. It just might lead to a happier life.

When I re-read *God in Search of Man* my highlighter lost ink quickly. Here is another gem from Heschel: “Awe is a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality...The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal...”⁵ *Yirah* might lead to a happier life according to Heschel, and to God as well. Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. Our own Jewish spiritual practice, however it manifests in each of our lives, must be rooted in and guided by awe and wonder.

Rabbi Heschel was one of the great theologians of the modern era and so maybe he overemphasized *yirah* as it relates to our connection to God. I am quite certain that some of us have reservations about God or feel confident there is no such thing. Where’s the scientific evidence? you might ask. I get that a lot from my b’nei mitzvah students. I want to share some wisdom from Carl Sagan that I believe complements Heschel. He wrote, “Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual.”⁶

Both Heschel and Sagan have taught me that we are constantly surrounded by the grandeur, secrets, and beauty of all reality, space, and time. It’s just a matter of whether we acknowledge it or not. And if we do, our physical and spiritual lives will be fuller.

The question then becomes: How do we acknowledge and foster a sense of awe in our daily lives? First, I can’t emphasize enough looking at the

⁵ *ibid*, p. 74

⁶ Sagan, Carl. *The Demon-haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark*. 1st Ballantine Books ed. New York, Ballantine Books, 1997

James Webb telescope photographs of deep space and thinking about God as the ultimate creator and artist. Second, wherever you find yourself, inside, outside, in the city, or out in nature, find moments to open yourself to experience the wonders of creation and the world. Try to put yourself in places that bring out the sense of awe in you. And third, on a more spiritual/religious level, Jews respond with blessings. Whether we observe something mundane as a budding flower or beautiful as an imposing mountain peak, our tradition guides us to speak words of blessing. *Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha-olam*, “We bless you our God, creator of the Cosmos for...” fill in the blank. We even say *brachot* to acknowledge the inner workings of our bodies and before we eat and fuel ourselves. All blessings lead to a sense of humility in the presence of mystery. But perhaps most important of all, saying a blessing leads to gratitude. Awe leads to a grateful life.

As science continues to reveal new secrets of the universe, I hope that 5783 evokes a renewed sense of *yirah* in each of our lives. May we forever be awed by the harmony and elegance of it all.

Ma gadlu ma'asecha adonai me-od amku mach'sh'votecha
“How great are Your works, O Eternal, how very profound Your designs!”⁷

⁷ Psalm 92:6