

Looking for What is Awesome and Amazing

Yom Kippur 5784 - Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe

What does the server ask the family who is having dinner at the local Jewish restaurant? “Is anything OK?”

Jews do like to *kvetch*. But I love this joke for the question itself, totally separate from its answer. Is anything OK? We all have days when it feels like everything’s gone wrong. For sure, if you read the news, sometimes it feels like we are living in what the ancient rabbis called an *olam hafuch*, an upside-down world, where so many things are amiss that we are collectively out of balance: wildfires, heat waves and storms all over the earth; political and social conflict, and food insecurity that still affects so much of the world. There is a lot that is wrong, and if we allow ourselves to dwell in that place, it might feel like nothing is OK.

I also love this joke for the utter *ridiculousness* of the question. When I think of this family of *kvetchers*, I see people staring down at the table, unable to see anything but the their pasta sauce running into their salad. I like to think I might be looking around and noticing all the things that are so much more than ok, like the faces of my family; being in our favorite restaurant, the sounds of laughter and conversation in the room. I would hope I would say to the server, “Everything is fantastic!” But I know we all have moments when we are just like this family, complaining, or maybe even worse, just responding, “yeah, it’s fine.”

The Days of Awe are the time to LOOK UP, not only to look back over the last year and forward to the next, but to look around, to take in the wider picture we are usually too busy to notice. To see what is awesome and amazing. When Abraham is first called into the covenant, God invites him, “*Habet na hashamayma*, Look up at the heavens and count the stars if you can.” If you have ever spent a night in the true outdoors, you know the spectacular image Abraham would have seen, thousands of shining stars stretched across the black sky. God wanted him not only to count his future progeny like the number of the stars, but to see the wonder and size of God’s creation and his tiny place in it. This summer, I spent the night about 50 miles from that spot, the Terebinths of Mamre. My family stayed in a tiny hut, after our camel ride. We ate on the floor with a few pillows. It was by far our least fancy accommodations during our month in Israel, but if you asked

my kids, they would say it was a highlight. It was so dark, but we didn't want to use flashlights. There was something about just barely being able to see the mountains and rock formations that surrounded us in every direction, to hear each sound echoing through the vast space, the camels shuffling their feet as they ate their dinner, feeling at once alone, and, deeply connected to the earth, the sky and the origins of our people.

Seeking out these kinds of opportunities to take in the wonders of the world is actually an important obligation of Jewish tradition, even though for a commandment, it's relatively new. A story is told about Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of the 19th Century German leaders of what is now called Orthodox Judaism. At the end of his life, he surprised his students by traveling to Switzerland. He explained, "Soon, I will stand before God. ... What will I say when I am asked, 'Shimshon, you performed many mitzvot. But did you also remember to see my Alps?'" This is Rabbi Hirsch's new-ish interpretation of the commandment to feel *Yir'at Adonai*, awe of God. This word for awe is also used referring to these Days of Awe, *yamim nora'im*, and we hear it when Jacob wakes up all alone in the desert and notices, "*Mah norah hamakom hazeh*, How awesome is this place!" Still, Hirsch's idea of visiting the Alps must have been revolutionary 150 years ago, for a rabbi who spent much of his life sitting indoors and studying Torah to affirm that we should all get outside, even travel to see the world's wonders – that there is wisdom to be found there that can't be read in a book.

In the 20th Century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is really the one who taught us that awe is one of Judaism's great ideas. He wrote, "Awe is more than an emotion; it is a way of understanding. Awe is itself an act of insight into a meaning greater than ourselves."ⁱ Heschel taught that feeling awe is the key to awareness of the divine and to living righteously in the world.

Many of us have been experiencing moments of awe during the High Holy Days: the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer we hear only at this time of year, with its urgent cry and its majestic music; the blast of the shofar; all of us praying in unison; and the beautiful spaces in which we are lucky to worship. This month, I was at Wolf Trap when James Taylor, who is now 75, sang "Fire and Rain" and "Sweet Baby James." A lot of you were there, too. I am a lifelong JT fan and have played some of those songs hundreds of times on my guitar. I was overcome, very much in awe of this

man who originated that guitar sound, lifting his finger and hammering it back down, in and out of his D chord and his A chord. It lifted me up. I also felt a part of something, sitting with thousands of others, moving to the music. I came home feeling full, energized, and remembering anew how deeply music speaks to me.

You may have other ways of finding awe, like being at the US Open watching tennis. Everyone cheers for their player, but then there are those incredible shots between the legs or stretched all the way out, the ones that are impossible to get but still, Coco gets it. Then the entire crowd rises in appreciation for the talent, focus, and discipline both players are bringing to that moment.

So we see that awe is not just about being in nature. Dacher Keltner, a psychological researcher, finds eight wonders of life that people report can elicit awe: 1. nature 2. music 3. visual design 4. spirituality and religion 5. life and death 6. collective effervescence – that’s the sports event and concert, but could also be dancing at a rave; 7. epiphany, meaning some new discovery that changes your perspective; 8. and finally, **moral beauty**, being inspired by a courageous or generous act by another person. As a rabbi, I am blessed to see a lot of courage and selflessness. Someone living with a painful or life-threatening condition. A person acting with unfailing love towards a partner, parent or child who needs constant care. People spending hours of every day volunteering their time to help others or work for change. I invite you to think for a moment about how the actions of others have caused you to feel awe.

Science has also shown that what’s good for our souls is good for our bodies. Feeling awe has been found to limit the risk of type 2 diabetes, clinical depression, heart disease, and even arthritis. But the most important lesson these studies have brought us is that spending time in a state of wonder also affects people’s thoughts and actions. Researchers separated people feeling awe, for example from hiking at Yosemite or looking at a dinosaur skeleton, from control groups. Then they performed tests on these groups. They found that awe caused people to identify more with others, rather than individually, to see themselves less at the center of their universe, and even to be more willing to share what they had.ⁱⁱ There is something about witnessing beauty, or reflecting on a mystery we can hardly fathom, that fosters humility, generosity, and human connection.

Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebecca, had a jealous childhood and always felt there wouldn't be enough. This negative and fearful outlook led him to always be listening for his chance to take what should be his, and finally to trick his old and vulnerable father into giving him his twin brother Esau's birthright. Now, twenty years later, after raising his own family, he crosses paths with his brother again. This time is different. Jacob is no longer sneaking around. He has decided to face Esau all alone, even though Esau is coming with an army and can even kill him if he chooses. Jacob is ready to face his consequences.

He waits, and when the moment comes, he bows in submission, staring at the ground, afraid. When he looks up, will he see his old rival, angry and now in control? But when he stands, he sees a look of love and forgiveness. They embrace. Overcome with emotion, Jacob says to Esau, "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God." This is an epiphany for him. He has come to understand that his life is not a competition, that his brother is a beautiful work of God's creation, a source of inspiration and joy. What the Torah is teaching us is that forgiveness and love, awe and wonder are things we need in life, and they go together.

This biblical story is happy, but it has a disappointing conclusion. Esau and Jacob do not stay together. They go back to their separate paths. I have always been saddened by this. But it *is* a reminder of how quickly our awe can fade, our appreciation for another person, for the power of a moment, for the significance of what we see in front of us. It teaches us that that family in the Jewish restaurant really is us, they are just showing a little more theatrically what we all struggle with: how hard it is to hold onto a sense of awe about the world. We sit in the window seat as the plane prepares to land, and we're just looking for our things. We taste a delicious orange, and we are thinking about all the dishes we have to wash. It makes sense; we need to clean the dishes, but what we are missing out on is the greatest source of wisdom that exists.

This is what Jewish tradition tries to instill, giving us a blessing for everything you could imagine: every kind of food, for the sunrise and sunset. There is even a blessing for the ability to open our eyes in the morning. There's a blessing over going to the bathroom that thanks God for all of our many openings and hollow spaces. Everything that happens to us, everything we see and have the

opportunity to appreciate, our tradition seeks to help us take that moment and feel a little bit of wonder.

Perhaps blessings work for us, and perhaps not. But Judaism teaches that we cannot wait for our trip to the Alps or the US Open. We have to find ways to be awestruck by our world all the time. Heschel writes, “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

Years ago, after finishing college, I lived in a group house with a bunch of other recent grads in Upper Northwest, DC. We were each starting our first jobs or going to graduate school at American University down the street. One of my new housemates, Jeremy, puzzled me. Every morning, we got up around the same time and would run into each other in the kitchen. I’d ask him how he was doing. He’d rub his eyes, looking like morning wasn’t his best time of day, and then he’d grin at me and say, “Spectacular!” I felt at first like he was being a little phony. But over the next year, we became close friends. I learned that Jeremy had been through some difficult things at his young age. His father had died from a heart attack; his mother had some mental health issues and wasn’t there for him, and he was really just trying to figure things out. He shared with me that he had decided even if some things in his life were lacking, there was also a lot to be grateful for. He made a concerted effort to look for what inspired him and made him feel wonder. When I asked him how he was, he thought to himself, I am alive. I have a car parked outside that will take me to work, a friend who is interested in how I am doing. How amazing! He realized nobody was going to help him notice these blessings except himself.

Our matriarch Leah, is unhappy, and she expresses this through the names of her sons. Now, in Genesis, the names given to babies are often quirky. Perez means breaking out, because he raced out of the womb ahead of his twin brother, Zerach. Esau means Hairy, because, well, he was hairy. But Leah’s sons’ names are about her unhappiness. Re’uven means God has seen my affliction; Shim’on, God has heard my pain. By her fourth child, she learns an essential lesson. She names this son, saying, “This time I will praise God.” Despite whatever struggles she may be experiencing, she is finally able to take delight in those tiny fingers, the first

cry, the beautiful life that has come from within her. To understand that this little boy needs her to see him for the miracle he is. “This time I will praise God.” Praise. Yehudah. Judaism gets its name from the realization that the spectacular surprises of the world are right in front of us. To look past them is human, but to appreciate them and allow ourselves to be filled with wonder is the natural and right way.

This Yom Kippur, as we seek new insight, allow me to challenge us all to look not for what’s ok, but what’s amazing. Find the awe in something around us a couple of times a day and let it bring us closer to others, wanting to give. This is how we begin, ever so slowly, to turn our upside-down world upright again. Let’s look with wonder at the people and the world around us. Let’s open our eyes and see something sacred can be found in every moment.”

ⁱ Heschel, *Who is Man?*

ⁱⁱ Dacher Keltner, *Awe*