

AWE, GOD, AND RIGHT-BRAIN RELIGION

Erev Yom Kippur 5778 (2017)  
Temple Emanu-El, Marblehead, MA

{Put on eclipse glasses.}

I bought these about nine months ago, because I was thinking that as the Total Solar Eclipse of this past summer would get closer, more folks would start thinking about it, and there could be a last-minute rush. So I was good to go on August 21<sup>st</sup> with several pairs at the ready when, as it turned out, something of a mad scramble for them went on at the last minute. A friend suggested that I should have ordered a couple thousand or so, and gone with the supply and demand opportunity. But I wasn't really thinking in those terms.

In fact, the date of the eclipse had been circled on my calendar for at least three years before, if not longer, and plans to head into the path of totality had been made well in advance. Imagine Marla's enthusiasm when I proposed – "Hey, let's go to St. Joseph, MO for our anniversary next year!"

The anticipation wasn't just a matter of either my own excitement or compulsiveness, but it was actually a religious obligation, a mitzvah! For our sages taught that anyone who knows how to calculate the celestial progressions of sun, moon and stars, but doesn't do so, it is as if they have disregarded the works of the Almighty. I wasn't really thinking in those terms, either, but it is true that Maimonides taught that missing such events amounts to a squandered opportunity to know and love God.

During the season of the eclipse, I was personally thrilled to see so many people around the country putting on those glasses and looking up, being amazed, experiencing that sense of awe – even those who at first were somewhat jaded as the momentum and hype built leading up to the four-hour window on August 21<sup>st</sup>. That day was an occasion for joining with others – finding good viewing spots, pulling to the side of the roads, or just leaving the meetings to go outside; to stop looking down at our tablets and phones, as all across the country, people were looking up to connect with the wonder of the universe. It was awesome!

Science writer, David Baron, speaking on the "CBS Sunday Morning" newsmagazine program of his total eclipse experience remarked, "It was THE most awe inspiring, I dare say

spiritual experience I have ever had - and I say this as a science journalist!"<sup>i</sup> With an apologetic tone in his voice, Baron was almost embarrassed to admit, as a rationalist, that his feeling of awe amounted to a spiritual encounter. But on this evening of Yom Kippur, I would urge all of us – people of faith, doubters, and non-believers alike to learn how we might develop the emotion of awe, in Hebrew, *yirah*, as a way of encountering the Divine.

Maybe that is why our Jewish story begins with God telling Abraham, “Look up! – Look up to the stars and count them, as if you could actually count them...”<sup>ii</sup> God tells Abraham that his descendants will become as numerous as those stars, but more importantly, in order to begin to come into a relationship and knowledge of God, Abraham had to take the time to look up and experience the awe. As Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, an awareness of the Divine begins with a sense of wonder.<sup>iii</sup>

The feeling of awe means recognizing being in the presence of something vast, beyond our human scale, transcending words and rational understandings. It is a right-brain activity. As was discovered more than two decades ago, we have two modes of coming to understand and interact with the world. The left side of our brain is the more rational, analytic way of knowing, and our right brain, which is the creative, feeling, intuitive, if you will, poetic aspect of knowing.<sup>iv</sup> Often, we seek to understand God through our left-brain mode of analytical explanation; through the reading of treatises of theology, through the formulation of a logical narrative, by seeking out proofs for God’s role in history and in our lives. At other times, we experience God through right-brain ways of knowing: intuition, wonder, reverence and awe for which words are neither sufficient nor necessary.<sup>v</sup>

According to Rabbi Arthur Green, our left-brain understanding of religion is a secondary step, emerging from the essentially unspoken and ineffable experience of wonder. He writes: “Religion begins not with doctrine, not with tradition, but with the need to pray. Theology only comes later, the mind’s reflection on what the heart already knows.”<sup>vi</sup>

Tonight, on this Kol Nidre evening, we seek to experience the Divine Presence in our lives – to feel God’s nearness, God’s grace and blessing. This is both the goal and meaning of Jewish spirituality – namely, living our human lives in the close presence of a God Who transcends all of creation. The various practices and disciplines of Jewish life are intended to enable and promote an awareness of God’s Presence.

But that's not always easy, or for many gathered here, not always possible, even on this holiest of days. I know through the conversations that I share with you, the challenges of life, the misfortunes we or our loved ones experience, losses which seem to make little sense, these leave us struggling to sense God, know God, or to use a much less satisfying term, to believe in a God who can seem so hidden, impossibly distant. Those are the times when we may find it most helpful to put our words away, to set aside narratives and explanations, and simply open our hearts to moments of wonder and awe.

Even in days of our Biblical ancestors following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, our people clearly struggled to sense the presence of God in the unfolding of history, trying to remain faithful even while grappling to make sense of all that had happened. Judea had been defeated by the Babylonian armies, her people sent into exile, the Temple and its services were no more. Jewish life as had been known for a thousand years it came to a crashing end. Knowing that the people felt distant from God, our Hebrew prophets turned to the wonders of Nature as the approach for experiencing God's enduring presence:

“Lift high your eyes and see: Who created these?

He who sends out their host by count

Who calls them each by name:

Because of His great might and vast power,

Not one fails to appear.

Why do you say, O Jacob,

Why declare, O Israel,

‘My way is hidden from the Lord,

My cause is ignored by my God’?”

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The LORD is God from of old,

Creator of the earth from end to end...<sup>vii</sup>

So, too we find in the Biblical Book of Job, the story – complex to sure – of a man who suffers in his life absolutely undeserved trials and tribulations, and finds himself uncertain of the very existence of God. Answering Job from the dramatic venue of a tornado, God challenges

Job to find his answers through the emotion of awe; if we might be anachronistic, from his right-brain experience of transcendence. God tells Job:

“Were you there when I wrapped the ocean in clouds and swaddled the sea in shadows? When I closed it in with barriers and set its boundaries saying, ‘Here you may come, but no farther; here shall your proud waves break...’ Have you ever commanded morning or guided dawn to its place – to hold the corners of the sky and shake off the last few stars? ...Have you walked through the depths of the ocean or dived to the floor of the sea? Have you seen to the edge of the universe?”<sup>viii</sup>

The emotion of awe, according to recent research turns out to be widely beneficial in an unexpected variety of ways. Experiencing awe strengthens interpersonal connections, as when facing a great vista or a starry sky we realize we are all a small part of something much larger. Our thinking shifts from *me* to *we*. We have heard that astronauts feel this in the extreme. They often report an intense state of oneness with humanity when looking back at Earth, a feeling called the “overview effect,” Our pale blue dot looks small against the vastness of space and yet represents all that we hold meaningful.<sup>ix</sup>

In addition, researchers now focusing on the emotion tell us that awe makes us both kinder and happier. It prompts us act more generously, ethically and fairly. Awe even alters our bodies. Awe is the positive emotion that most strongly predicts reduced blood pressure, stronger immune systems, and resistance to depression.<sup>x</sup>

The grand wonders of nature evoke in us that sense of awe, through which we might come close to their Source, needing no words or explanations. But we needn't only “look up” to nature to experience awe – it can be accessible at moments very near to us, and I've seen it happen quite often. Two years ago, more than four hundred men, women and children took part in scribing of a letter in our new, 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Torah Scroll. What struck me then was how repeatedly - over and over again -- people sat down to dip the quill into the ink, and filling in the spaces in the outlined area, became speechless, broke into unexpected tears, or told me “this is awesome!” It was a moment in which they tapped into the holiest realm of their faith and identity, in a way that created a sense of connection with generations past and future. I hesitate to go any further to try and explain, because it was for every one of them a right-brain way of entering Jewish sacred dimensions, the Presence of God, for which words could never be sufficient. The tears that were shed spoke volumes.

More times than I could count, as young men and women step up to the Torah for the first time, I see their parents' faces expressing that awesome sense of "how did this happen so fast?" And generally, the tears come as well; tears of joy, sadness, pride, connection, and hope – a feeling so overwhelming that often it takes parents and grandparents and friends by complete surprise, and occasionally, the young celebrant as well.

Have you ever received a generous gift from a friend that went so above and beyond any expectations that you struggled to stammer out words of gratitude? Were you ever touched by an expression of support at a dark time which was so unexpected or sincere that you were at a loss for how to say thanks? Have you ever looked around your dining room table filled with children, elders, friends and loved ones and felt that sense of the awesome nature of the moment? Sometimes, it is the feeling that comes over me looking out at this sea of men, women and children who create a community of faith, commitment, and devotion; the congregation whom I love.

Please don't misunderstand – Judaism as a culture and faith relies heavily on our left-brain ways of knowing. Study and learning, dialogue and debate, reading and interpretations – these are central to our spiritual practices. And given that we will share in services all day tomorrow, covering many pages of our prayerbook, it may seem strange that I encourage us to take the time to set the words aside. However, this season of the year is known as *yamim noraim*, "The Days of Awe". As a spiritual discipline for these days and the year to come, I encourage you to allow the wonder of life to fill you with awe that need not be analyzed or explained. It's the religion of the right-brain! And in those moments, perhaps you will discover the nearness of the One whom our tradition teaches both fills and transcends the universe.

I would conclude by sharing an experience of the total solar eclipse, as expressed through another scientist's perspective, that of Dr. William Rosenzweig, a physician from California.

"The sky got very dark, the horns of the crescent sun shrank together...as the sun disappeared, and the leading edge of the moon's shadow swept over them at 1,500 miles an hour...They put away their filters and looked up at a blank circle surrounded by a pure white ring of light, the corona formed by the sun's atmosphere... Dr. Rosenzweig, was having trouble looking through his viewfinder. "I've been crying for four minutes," he said. "I haven't taken any...pictures because I just forgot about it. I'm absolutely awed..."

Dr. Rosenzweig stood up and started clapping. “Encore! Encore!” he shouted. And then upon reflection, “Author! Author!”<sup>xi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> “CBS This Morning”, August 16, 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 15:5.

<sup>iii</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), pp. 45-46.

<sup>iv</sup> See Betty Edwards, Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain (New York: Penguin Putnum, 1999).

<sup>v</sup> See also Adam D. Fisher, “Two Ways to a Belief in God”, CCAR Journal (The Reform Jewish Quarterly), Summer 2017, pp.77ff.

<sup>vi</sup> Arthur Green, Seek My Face – Speak My Name, ( ), p. xxii.

<sup>vii</sup> Isaiah 40:26-28.

<sup>viii</sup> Job 38:4-18.

<sup>ix</sup> Paula Spencer, “Feeling Awe May Be the Secret to Health and Happiness”, Parade, October 7, 2016.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> New York Times, July, 1991.