

Beyond Our Daze of Awe: Rosh Hashanah 5784

Rabbi Matthew V. Soffer

Judea Reform Congregation

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“This is not a hoax.” That was the message that the European Space Agency issued to reporters, when asked to comment on an astonishing image spotted by the James Webb Telescope. The image itself? A question mark, and a perfectly shaped one. No offense to our friendly constellations like Orion or Leo, which might strain the naked eye. No, this was an indisputable question mark, and this was not a hoax.

Trending at light speed, the image memed on social media. And thank goodness for that because how else would we have learned the truth of this question mark? As one Reddit user clarified: “the aliens know we’ve found them, and now they’re just messing with us.”

If this was, in fact, a prank by aliens set on click-baiting curious earthlings, then it worked on this one. As the headline caught my eye, I confess, I scrolled past all the other articles— scroll, scroll, and click.

Reports across all major media provided plenty of scientific insight into this question mark. But none of them answered the question that lingered most uncomfortably in my gut. Of all the news on the page, why did I aim *my* telescope on that question mark?

The simplest answer might be our innate amazement with amazement— the allure of awe, or what we call in Hebrew, *nora*. We call these ten days, from the start of Rosh Hashanah to the end of Yom Kippur, *Yamim Hanora'im*, the Days of Awe. So perhaps it’s the perfect time for us to investigate our relationship to this awesome sense of reality.

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Arguably, the sense of *nora* is what gave birth to our literary tradition, and nowhere in the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*), is the sense of awe more evident than in *Sefer T’hillim*, the Book of Psalms. Through the lens of awe, the Psalmist sees the universe in beauteous detail, and through metaphor telescopes the full range of human emotion— from despair to hope, outrage to pure delight.

Psalm 121, a Psalm for Ascents, begins:

Esa einai el he-harim, mei-ayin yavo ezri –

I lift up my eyes toward the mountains and ask, “what is the source of my help?”

You can picture it – the Psalmist looking upward, toward the mountains, feeling the vastness of the universe– and what does he say? *Mei-ayin yavo ezri* - what is the source of my help?” He marks the awe with a question. The emotion is palpable.

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I say “emotion,” though it’s only in recent years that psychologists have regarded awe as a distinct emotion. In the 70’s, Psychologist Paul Ekman famously identified six basic emotions: anger, disgust, happiness, sadness, fear, and surprise. Unsurprisingly, scholars have since expanded that list, and today new research reveals why awe should make the cut.

Dacher Keltner, Professor of Psychology at UC Berkeley and founder of the Greater Good Science Center, makes the case in his recent book, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder*. Keltner defines “awe” as “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world.”

There are two key points in Keltner’s work I’d like to highlight. First, the groundbreaking research on the health benefits of cultivating awe– physically, mentally, and emotionally. It actually improves the wellbeing of our bodies and minds, reduces stress and anxiety, and even results in more generous behavior toward others.

Second, and perhaps most relevant for us- here, on this day of awe- is where we can find it. If you want medicine, you can simply “lift up your eyes” to Walgreens or CVS. But what about awe?

Keltner conducted a study of participants from 26 countries, translating 26,000 narratives to uncover the most common source of awe. And he found that it wasn’t nature or the cosmos; it wasn’t art, nor science, nor spiritual practices. “In fact,” Keltner said, “it was other people’s courage, kindness, strength– actions of strangers, roommates, teachers, colleagues at work, people in the news, characters on podcasts, and our neighbors and family members. Around the world,” he writes, “we are most likely to feel awe when moved by moral beauty: exceptional virtue, character, and ability, marked by purity and goodness of intention and action.”

What is the primary source of awe? It’s actually right here– among us, in community. *This is not a hoax.*

Believe it or not, this hidden truth was known to the Psalmist, lifting up his eyes. If we aim our telescope at the metaphors of Psalm 121, we see it hiding in plain sight. Yes, he lifts up his eyes to the mountains and sees a question mark. Yet, the answer to his question– the locale of his

awesome Helper– is right by his side: the notion of a God concerned not with the cosmos, but with the earth; a God whose “business” is found in our midst; with our feet on the ground; by our side. “The God of Israel” does not sleep on the job!

For the Psalmist, the Source of Awe, which he calls *Ezri*, “my Help,” fixates on the human condition—on our welfare, our safety. Yes, the eyes begin up on a mountain, but then they scroll down; they land on land.

As our eyes scroll, where do our eyes land?

I recently went back to that very awesome question mark, on August 18th, to see what I had missed that day, on that very site. And here’s what I found:

“New Top Cop at EPA Aims to... Hold Polluters Accountable”

“In Ecuador...They’re Getting a Chance to Halt Drilling”

“Dead Dolphins Wash Ashore...the Case of Ecocide against Russia”

“A Search for Maui Victims Goes On”

“As Wildfire Nears, Entire Canadian City Evacuates”

“The Age of the Urban Inferno Is Here,” an Op-Ed by David Wallace Wells.

Friends, we lift up our eyes to the mountains, in awe of worlds unknown, while our own planet faces a question mark, the likes of which humanity has never, ever known.

By now we are all too familiar with the ecological disaster of our times. All who are both intelligent and moral see what humanity is doing to our planet. We are doing this actively and knowingly.

This is not a hoax. Our ice is melting, land flooding, fires raging; our air is smoking, and our water– which is 70% the earth’s surface - is so toxic that marine life is dying more rapidly than ever.

This year is the hottest year on record. But let’s unpack that a bit because “on record” means only about two centuries. We can do better than “on-record” through the science of paleoclimatology. The last time that earth was this hot was about 125,000 years ago. If you want

to know what that felt like back then, you can go ask your friendly neighborhood Neanderthal, or her pet Woolly Mammoth.

Nevertheless, the response from humanity, led by our great nation, reads like a script of a satire, featuring the wisdom Chelmites, rather than the *shomrei adamah*, the guardians of the earth that our tradition demands we become.

We are capable of extraordinary achievements, with each generation surpassing the last one's wildest dreams of what's possible. Yet, when we lift up our eyes, we direct our awe to ventures of folly, or moral daze, like so-called "extreme tourism," traveling to outer space or the unknown depths of the ocean. For some, this is awesome fun. For others, it's a side job to help fund an awesome apocalyptic plan to save humans— by becoming Martians.

Yes, surely there are life-enhancing benefits to exploring the unknown.

There's magnificent awe in stargazing. There's nothing wrong with the mind-tickling delight of those stars twinkling at us from 1400 light years away, with a perfect question mark; that the question mark we see is actually light particles from the 13th century.

However, at this very moment, if that question mark is still there, right now, its light will arrive here in more than a thousand years from now. The very possibility of our descendants ever seeing its light depends on the questions that mark our own lives, in our own age.

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We have choices to make, individually and together. Lifting our eyes to the mountains, and then scrolling down with the devotion of a God who focuses in awe on our feet on the ground, on the human condition, what will we choose to do, individually and together?

Yes, the crisis is enormous. Yes, we all can name it and conclude that anything we do is so very small. So, we ask the smaller questions; not irrelevant, just...smaller: "Do you recycle?"

"Do you carpool, or drive an electric car?"

"What do you eat?"

This crisis *is* enormous, and therefore bigger questions beckon. When we aim our scopes at reality, *with pragmatic radicalism*, we see that more than 70% of carbon emissions come from a hundred corporations. Those consumer-based questions can be red herrings, distracting from the questions that emit the most light.

Questions like,

"What public policies do we advance?"

"Where do we invest our money?"

“Who do we put in office?”

“How do we empower people of conscience to vote—and have their votes counted?”

And perhaps most importantly:

“How are we teaching our youth to organize power for the sake of *tikkun ha-olam*, repairing this one and only glorious home?”

These are not Days of Tinkering; these are Days of Awe.

They demand awesome resolve, awesome love, and the awesome faith that is implanted within the human spirit.

Esa Einai el Heharim—mei-ayin yavo ezri?

I lift up my eyes to the mountains— what is the source of my help?

This Psalm is called a *Shir LaMaalot*, a Song for Ascents, for Rising Up. The commentator Rashi read these words and said that we sing not for God of the heavens above, but of the righteous ones who shall rise up.

As we enter 5784,

May we lift up our eyes in awe of the righteous.

May we rise up in wisdom and courage.

And may the constellation of our deeds shine brightly,
that our light may reflect off the beautiful eyes
of generations yet to be.

Amen.