

## We Are Starstuff

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Where were you on the afternoon of August 21, 2017? If you are anything like me, you were gazing up into the sky, witness to the first coast-to-coast total solar eclipse to cross our country in nearly a century. While the narrow ‘zone of totality’ spanned 14 states from Oregon to South Carolina, a partial eclipse was visible everywhere. For just under 3 minutes that Monday afternoon, as the day momentarily turned to night, millions of Americans looked up toward the sky, witness to a once-in-a-lifetime celestial spectacular.

According to one summertime survey, more than half of the country had plans to view the much anticipated solar phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The eclipse dominated media coverage and was by some measures the most photographed and Tweeted occurrence in history. The statistics are staggering but not all that surprising. After all, humankind has been fascinated with the cosmos since the beginning of our existence. The Ancients relied on the Sun, Moon and stars for timekeeping and tracking the seasons. And later in the 4th century BCE, “human beings, in an important sense, began the intellectual adventure that has led us to the shores of space.”<sup>2</sup>

We have come a long way since the first astronomers attempted to map the universe. Our understanding of the celestial bodies and their roles in our lives is vast. Perhaps most significant, we now appreciate that stars, like our own sun, are more than tools for navigation and timekeeping, but the origin of life itself. Dr. Carl Sagan teaches in his seminal work, *Cosmos*, “All the elements of the Earth except hydrogen and some helium have been cooked by a kind of stellar alchemy billions of years ago in stars... The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood... were [all] made in the interiors of collapsing stars.”<sup>3</sup>

Which means literally each of us is made of starstuff. At the chemical level, we are all made from the same elements cooked up billions of years ago deep inside stars. That’s fairly simple to digest. But now feel what happens in your body when I remind you that if what I just said is true, then you are also made from the same organic materials as your neighbor down the block with the barking dog, the beggar on the street corner asking for change, and that person who voted for the other candidate last November. At the molecular level, we are all connected. Sewn from the same fibers of life.

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<sup>1</sup> Poll (Here: <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/08/19/rel7e.-.eclipse.pdf>) was conducted by Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS) and Cited by Jennifer Agiesta, CNN Polling Director, in “CNN Poll: Americans’ Eclipse Viewing Plans Take Shape” (19 Aug. 2017).

<<http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/19/politics/eclipse-poll-travel-plans/index.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (Ballantine Books Trade Paperback Edition, 2013), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (Ballantine Books Trade Paperback Edition, 2013), p. 243-244.

Surely we all can wrap our minds around the fact “that we are all made of the same basic chemical ingredients — the same as each other, and the same as the stars. But that commonality remains an inert fact until we activate it with our empathy and our care. And when we do,” teaches one leading Reform rabbi, “I believe that we are not just being nice, not just doing the right thing. We are actually making tangible the divine *Echad* — the Oneness — that is at the heart of the world.”<sup>4</sup> When we open our hearts to the commonalities that unite us all, then and only then, can we bridge the great societal divisions that divide us and achieve our potential for greatness.

But this illuminating fact is darkened by our deeply fractured society. In the days following the November election, the most contentious in recent history, a record-setting 77% of Americans perceived the nation to be divided. That figure rose from 2012.<sup>5</sup> The animosity between Republicans and Democrats is deeper now than at any point in the last two decades. The Pew Research Center finds that “‘Ideological silos’ are now common on both the left and right... Liberals and conservatives disagree over where they want to live, the kind of people they want to live around and even whom they would welcome into their families.”<sup>6</sup>

The extreme polarization and ‘us vs. them’ mentality extends beyond the polling booth. Why, asks David French of the National Review? “It’s easy: It’s often the path of least resistance, and it gives people a sense of larger purpose. When you live, work, and speak with people of like mind, it’s virtually inevitable that common expressions of shared views will leak into sports, corporate policy, and even [the movies and TV you watch]. Americans have choices, and millions have chosen ideologically closed enclaves.”<sup>7</sup>

However, Torah demands that we live differently. Jewish tradition reminds us again and again that each of us is deeply connected, emphasizing the importance of the full participation of all people in our communal covenant with God. Consider the Torah portion for Yom Kippur: *Nitzavim*. The portion begins *Atem nitzavim hayom, kul’chem* — You stand here this day, all of you, before your God — you tribal heads, you elders, and you officials, all the men of Israel, you children, you women, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water bearer —

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi David Stern of Temple Emanu-El in Dallas.

<sup>5</sup> Gallop News, *Politics*, “Record-High 77% of Americans Perceive Nation as Divided” (November 21, 2016), <<http://news.gallup.com/poll/197828/record-high-americans-perceive-nation-divided.aspx>>.

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public” (June 22, 2014), <<http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>>.

<sup>7</sup> David French, National Review, “We’re Not in a Civil War, but We Are Drifting Toward Divorce” (June 8, 2017), <<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/448385/americans-left-right-liberal-conservative-democrats-republicans-blue-red-states-cultural-segregate>>.

all of you stand here this day to enter into the covenant of your God, which your God makes with you this day.<sup>8</sup>

Torah paints a picture of the entire people — men, women and children, young and old, regardless of social standing or wealth — absolutely everyone standing united as one before God.<sup>9</sup> But Torah continues: “I make this covenant, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day and with those who are not with us here this day.”<sup>10</sup> Powerfully, the tradition invites us to consider this message as timeless directions for us today. One modern commentary teaches, “*Nitzavim* pictures all strata of Israelite society, including those living and those yet to be born, entering into a renewed covenant with God.”<sup>11</sup> Not just those who wandered with Moses, but with all generations of humanity.

The text speaks to a double audience: it addresses both those who stood poised to enter the Promised Land all those years ago, and also speaks to us today. We are reminded at this season that we are all interconnected — my behavior impacts you and yours effects me. Without my puzzle piece or yours, our puzzle is not complete. After all, The Eternal asks us to stand before God at this time as a single spiritual unit, recognizing us as a single congregation.<sup>12</sup>

But as David French suggests, aligning ourselves with such a theology is not easy. The divisiveness of contemporary American life has forced us inward, seeking safety within the ‘filter bubbles’ we have created.<sup>13</sup> At times, moving beyond these ‘closed enclaves’ may even be painful. Just consider the number of families across our country, including families right here at NSCI, who came to dinner last Thanksgiving after weeks of not speaking with family members because they voted differently in the election. How many of us still avoid certain discussions with friends or coworkers because we simply cannot bear hearing what they have to say?

Please do not misconstrue my message. Disagreement and differences of opinion are healthy. In fact, Jewish tradition encourages dialogue and debate. The rabbis of Antiquity engaged daily in what we call *machloket* or disputes between two differing schools of thought. The oral arguments that took place in the major academies of Babylonia and Eretz Yisrael were later written down and redacted into what we call the Talmud, often preserving both the majority and minority opinions on the same page. In doing so the rabbis modeled for us what it means to push

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<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 29:9-11.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah (13th century) on Deuteronomy 29:9.

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 29:13-14.

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Howard Avruhm Addison, “A Few Choice Gifts,” *The Modern Men’s Torah Commentary*, p. 295.

<sup>12</sup> Found in *Tanna D’Veit Eliyahu Zuta*, cited by Rabbi Alan Lew in *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* (Little, Brown and Company, 2003), p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this the term ‘filter bubble,’ read Eli Pariser’s, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (Penguin Books, 2012).

ourselves beyond our own bubbles, our own particular ways of viewing the world. And when we do tear down the artificial walls separating us for the sake of learnings and growing, the Talmud teaches that we invite God into our midst.<sup>14</sup>

A story is told by Rabbi Jonathan Malzman: A rabbi once asked his students: how do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun? The first student answered: “When I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor, that is when the night has ended and the day has begun.” Another responded: “When I see a house, and I can tell that it’s my house and not the house of my neighbor, that is when the night has ended and the day has begun.” A third student said: “When I see a flower and can make out the colors of the flower, whether they are red or yellow or blue, that’s when the night has ended and the day has begun.”

Each answer brought a sadder frown to the rabbi’s face. “None of you understands. You only divide. You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from the field of your neighbor, you separate one color from all the others. Is that all we can do — dividing, separating, splitting the world into pieces? Isn’t the world broken enough?” The students then asked: “So Rabbi, how do we know that night has ended and that the day has begun?” The rabbi stared back into the faces of his students and with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, he said: “When you look into the face of the person who is beside you, and you can see that person is your brother or your sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun.”

Just as Americans stood last month staring up at the momentarily dark sky turned bright once again, so too can we emerge from this dark period of division in our country. Our Sages taught: “Just as this day commences in darkness, the darkness later giving way to light, so the darkness that you find yourself in will be replaced by bright light.”<sup>15</sup> Squinting, we can open our eyes and see that light is reflected in each one of us, that Divine ‘starstuff’ is imbedded in every person. When we open our hearts to the commonalities that unite us all, we can mend the fractures in our society and emerge stronger and more whole. Together, then, we can stand ready to welcome the arrival of the bright light of empathy and connectedness, knowing that it illuminates each of our faces, making tangible the divine *Echad* — the Oneness — that is at the heart of the world.<sup>16</sup>

*Ken yehi ratzon* — May we merit these words coming true.

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<sup>14</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 6a.

<sup>15</sup> Tanchuma Nitzavim 1.

<sup>16</sup> Rabbi David Stern of Temple Emanu-El in Dallas.