

Rosh Hashanah 5773  
Rabbi Ed Elkin

When I was nine years old, I decided that I wanted to be an astronomer. Already a science fiction fan at that age, I yearned for the stars. Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Star Trek – they all fired my imagination for other worlds. Somehow even within that fantasy life, however, I remained somewhat grounded and practical. Realizing even then that I probably didn't quite have the right stuff to be a Neil Armstrong or a Captain Kirk, but feeling pretty comfortable with academic pursuits, I decided that the science of astronomy would be my connection and contribution to the exciting field of space exploration.

I remember being particularly inspired by the story of the discovery of Pluto by the astronomer Clyde Tombaugh at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona in 1930. In 2006, to my chagrin, Pluto was demoted to the status of a "dwarf planet", but that development doesn't take away from the fact that Tombaugh was still a childhood hero of mine. I pictured myself sitting like him alone in a remote observatory staring out at the universe through a gigantic telescope, comparing photographic plates night after night, and then noticing something odd, evidence of some mysterious gravitational pull that turns out to be something really significant. And not that I would need or want the fame and glory attendant upon such a discovery, because it was of course the pure joy of scientific research that motivated me -- but listen, I

knew even then that sometimes there were things in life you just had to put up with!

So at nine years old, with that vision of my future career in mind, I actually sat down and wrote letters to several observatories asking for information on what it would take to become an astronomer. And to their credit, quite a few actually replied. I heard from the Palomar Observatory in California, and the Mauna Kea observatory in Hawaii, from Tombaugh's Lowell Observatory, and even from the famous Greenwich Observatory in England. They were all encouraging, and they all sent me literature. But they also told me something that wasn't part of my plan. To be an astronomer, I had to study math. Well that was that. Despite the fact that I was an accountant's son, math was never my strong suit. So I concluded that I probably didn't have the right stuff for that either. As you know, I never did become an astronomer, and the Greenwich Observatory and the others have managed somehow to carry on in their work without me.

Still and all, I've continued to maintain an active interest in all matters to do with space. I love reading about discoveries of new planets in far off solar systems, and black holes provide a never ending source of fascination. The amazing landing of the Curiosity rover on Mars last month and its continuing peregrinations have blown me away. When the Higgs Boson announcement

was made a couple of months ago, I read every popular science article I could find in an ultimately futile effort to understand what it all really meant. Neil Armstrong's recent death brought back memories of how inspired I was by the idea of human space exploration.

So given this context, you'll understand why last year at this time, I paid particular attention to the following news report: "Scientists from NASA announced that a six-ton decommissioned research satellite is heading for earth and is expected to hit sometime next week. The satellite, about the size of a bus, could land anywhere. Scientists said that the odds of any individual being hit by the satellite are about 1 in 21 trillion."

As remote as the chance was that I would actually be hit by this giant fireball of space junk, I did find myself casting a somewhat wary eye up to the sky when I heard this news report. As exciting as space exploration is for me, there is something particularly horrifying about a peril that comes down from the sky, seemingly out of nowhere -- and you know there's absolutely nothing that you can do about it. If you're the unlucky one, you just get flattened.

And then I realized something -- that in many ways that falling satellite is an apt metaphor for some of the things that happen in our lives. Every day big

things fall on the unsuspecting. Sometimes, the doctor brings the news. Sometimes it's someone from the HR department, or our financial advisor. Sometimes it's a car out of control, or a plane that crashes, or a madman in a movie theater, or a tightness in the chest. Some of these things we can prepare for, but most not. The NASA satellite ended up falling harmlessly into the Pacific Ocean, and sometimes our scares end up like that as well. We escaped. Phew -- what a relief. Turned out to be nothing, the biopsy came back negative. The cutbacks hit another department. That wasn't actually him holding hands with another woman. She decided at the last minute to see a different movie. The satellite landed harmlessly in the Pacific and was fodder for late night comedy routines for a couple of nights and then forgotten about by all. But as we know, there are times it lands right on our head, or on the head of someone we love, and it changes our lives forever -- and we can control it about as much as we can control space junk falling out of the sky, meaning not at all.

I'm turning 50 next month *im yirtzeh hashem*, so I'm feeling a bit reflective on the meaning of life and some of the vulnerabilities of life as I anticipate this milestone in my own individual journey. I don't feel any particular urge to go out and buy a red convertible or jump out of a plane as a way to mark mid-life. But I am thinking a lot about how blessed I've been and, without dwelling on or worrying too much about the unknowable future, wondering a

bit about what's coming next. I pray to have the physical strength to continue to do all the things I want and need to do for many years to come, both personally and professionally, and also the spiritual strength to absorb whatever challenges life may dish out, as it seems to do so amply and so randomly the more years we're granted on this earth.

Which brings me to the Gloria Taylor case. You'll recall that this past June a BC judge granted Ms. Taylor, who is afflicted with ALS, the legal right to have her doctor assist her in committing suicide if she so chooses. In reaction to the verdict, Ms. Taylor said the following: "This is a momentous time in history. Now all Canadians will have the right to die with dignity. This is a blessing for me and for all other seriously ill Canadians. I'm so grateful to know that if I choose to do so, I will be allowed to seek a doctor's help to have a peaceful and dignified death. This brings me great solace and comfort. I was overwhelmed with emotion when I heard all Canadians will have the right to compassion and comfort when it comes to the end of life."

Now this is not the forum for a comprehensive discussion of the Jewish views on physician-assisted suicide. This is a very complex topic in Jewish law, as it is in secular law, marked by seemingly irreconcilable clashes of competing values playing out in the context of gut wrenching and heart breaking personal situations. It involves individuals who are suffering in a way that

few among us can imagine. We yearn to do whatever we can to help them ease that suffering, and in the case of Gloria Taylor, she asked the BC court for a very specific kind of help, and the court agreed. But I am troubled by this case, and I don't know what I would have done if I had been in the judge's shoes. I don't have answers, but I do want to share two observations with you at this turn of the new year, when our tradition challenges us to go to a deeper place than we usually inhabit and contemplate the meaning of life, and death.

First, central to Jewish faith is the understanding that this world is an arena in which justice is utterly absent. Wolves pounce on baby sheep and tear them to bits, cars skid on the ice and crash, and, as in the case of Gloria Taylor, sometimes good people are afflicted with horrible diseases. The satellite sometimes does hit, seemingly from out of nowhere, and when it does, some people conclude that therefore there is no God. But for me the amorality of nature does not threaten my faith. Rather, it is precisely because the world is not just, and because nature is amoral, that God put *us* here. We human beings, despite our many flaws, are the force for morality, for justice, and for love in this world. That's our divinely ordained role. In the words of Rabbi Janet Marder, we are like the sheriff sent out into the frontier to bring law and order where there is none. We are the scouts sent into the cold Arctic wastelands to warm them up with compassion and kindness. We

are miners sent down into the dark pits to turn on the lights. We don't always live up to the task of course, and that gap between our divinely ordained mission and our humanly determined actions is what this time of the Jewish year is about. Often our actions don't turn on the lights in the dark pits but rather only make the world darker. Our judgement is often flawed, and our energy and focus are often limited, and our selfishness often triumphs. But we can't let our awareness of our failings become an excuse for not trying to be better or an excuse for giving up altogether on our highest aspirations. In this example, when someone we know or love gets hit with a terrible illness, our job is to do the best we can to be present with them in their suffering as long as, and as much as, we possibly can.

I once read about a small Christian sect called the Hutterites, who live in the remote regions of the Canadian prairies and the upper Midwest of the United States. The Hutterites usually marry only other Hutterites, narrowing their gene pool, and they have a high instance of bipolar or manic depressive illness in their community. People with bipolar disorder have a high suicide rate, especially when they are in the depressive state of their illness. Yet the Hutterites have an extremely low suicide rate. Why? It seems to be because when they notice the onset of the depression, they never leave the person suffering the depression alone. They help those sufferers get through their depression alive by not abandoning them to their own self-caused death.

This is human community at its greatest depth, and very hard to reproduce in our urban 21<sup>st</sup> century lives. Most of us would not or could not choose to live like the Hutterites, and I don't want to suggest that there are easy solutions to the complex challenges of depression and suicide. Yet the Hutterite example challenges us to consider what we are doing as a community and as a society to support the individuals among us who are suffering, whether from mental illness in the Hutterite example, or with a physical affliction like Gloria Taylor, to enable them to choose life, and not death.<sup>1</sup>

Second observation: our modern western society and culture has become very focused on the rights of the individual. And that focus is in many ways a healthy corrective to the emphasis on the needs of the collective at the expense of the individual that has characterized so many times and places in human history. The emphasis on the collective has undoubtedly resulted in unspeakable cruelty to many individuals. But individualism may need a corrective as well. The premise of Gloria Taylor's case is that it's her body, and she should be able to do what she wants with it. Since suicide isn't illegal in Canada, allowing a physician to help her when she decides she is ready to die would simply level the playing field so that she can do at that time what able-bodied people can legally do.

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<sup>1</sup> David Novak, The Sanctity of Human Life, pp. 157-158.



But in Jewish tradition, our body is *not* ours to do with as we wish. That is a very difficult principle for us as moderns to accept. Our faith teaches that God gives us the breath of life, and we are entrusted by God with the duty to care for the bodies we have been given as best we can, and to use our bodies for the performance of mitzvot. Our individual autonomy around our bodies is ultimately limited by our membership in God's covenant with the Jewish people, and this principle certainly has applicability in the physician assisted suicide debate. A very different example of this principle, also in the news this year, is circumcision. Some of the folks in the anti-circumcision camp say that the practice of infant circumcision deprives boys and men of the right to choose how they want their bodies to appear. That argument has been persuasive in some European countries in the past year which have sought to ban the practice.

But in Jewish law, we as individuals do not have singular control over our bodies. We are part of a brit with God, which obligates this practice even though we may not understand it on a rational level or even if it makes us uncomfortable. Having our sons circumcised is one among many decisions parents make on their behalf. Jewish tradition is of course comfortable with that, because in our tradition individual autonomy and freedom of choice are not paramount, but exist in an ongoing dialectic with the claims of tradition

and community. Our membership in this covenant is so much more than an adornment or a decoration, it's not just a few Yiddish words, a taste for certain ethnic dishes, a couple of extra days off for Jewish holidays, and an appreciation for a good Jewish joke – rather, it obligates us to serious commitment, it compels us to serious learning, participation in and support for the Jewish community, the performance of mitzvot, living according to the highest ethical standards, wrestling with questions of faith in God. In any of these areas we may find ourselves doing things we as individuals might not at that moment want to do, or refraining from doing things we do want to do. But I have found in my life anyway that being part of something bigger than myself enriches my life so much, that it is worth giving up some individual autonomy and control.

In the Gloria Taylor example, we are obliged by our covenant to ask whether the negative effect on society of creating a system in which physicians may legally hasten the deaths of their patients, with all the ramifications and implications thereto, might outweigh the desire we all have as individuals to control what happens to our bodies. To the extent that societal concerns are given primacy, there may be good reasons to hesitate granting Gloria Taylor and others that right. Which is not to say that heroic measures developed by modern medicine, measures which would have been inconceivable to our ancestors, must be taken in every scenario to prolong people's lives. The

question is, can we draw a line, challenging as it may be to do so given all the new technologies at our disposal, short of allowing physicians to actively hasten the end? Can those of us who care for loved ones at the end of their lives find ways to support them through their anguish so that they will find the strength to choose life?

We all know it's not easy for caregivers to watch someone suffer. Some of us handle it better than others. I recently re-read Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Ivan is living the perfect bourgeois life with his career and family when the satellite hurtles down on him in the form of a sudden illness. At the end of his life, Ivan's doctors give up on or pontificate to him, and his family behaves as if he has brought his illness upon himself. In the face of his imminent death, his household behaves as if nothing much has changed. Tolstoy writes, "Ivan Ilyich's worst torment was the lying – the lie, which was somehow maintained by them all, that he wasn't dying, he was only ill, and all he had to do was keep calm and follow doctor's orders and then something good would emerge. Whereas he knew that, whatever was done to him, nothing would emerge but more and more agony, suffering and death. And this lie was torture for him – he was tortured by their unwillingness to acknowledge what they all knew and he knew; they wanted him – they were compelling him – to be a party to this lie. All this lying to him, lie upon lie, on the eve of his death, lying that was inexorably reducing

the solemn act of his death to the same level as their social calls, their draperies, their sturgeon for dinner – it was all a terrible torment for Ivan Ilyich. And strangely enough, on many occasions when they were acting out this farce in front of him, he was within a hair's breadth of screaming at them, 'Stop all this lying! You know and I know that I'm dying, so the least you can do is stop lying to me.' But he never quite had the nerve to do it. He could see that the awful, terrible, act of his dying had had been reduced by those around him to the level of an unpleasant incident, something rather indecent (as if they were dealing with someone who had come into the drawing room and let off a bad smell), and this was done by exploiting the very sense of 'decency' that he had been observing all his life."<sup>2</sup>

Tolstoy is clearly very judgemental of Ivan's caregivers. Perhaps deservedly so, but it is a very challenging role that most of us have little experience in before a satellite comes crashing down on a loved one and suddenly we're thrust into it. Ivan's illness lasted for three months; what if the painful end stretches out over a period of years? Still and all, we can't but ask, what would have been if Ivan Ilyich's doctors and family members *hadn't* lied to him? If they had been present with him, with honesty combined with care and compassion, as his death approached? Would it have eased his suffering any? As far as his physical agony goes, probably not. This was going to be a

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<sup>2</sup> Leo Tolstoy, The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories, Penguin Books, p.199.

hard death no matter what. But maybe a different approach by his caregivers would have helped his emotional and spiritual state as he anticipated his death. Ivan wants desperately to live. But he realizes that if he's going to die, what he craves most is the genuine, authentic, honest presence of other human beings. This is a precious lesson that he learns as he reviews his own life and considers how superficial it had been. The novella forces us to ask, is it only a crisis of mortality that can teach us to face ourselves with utter honesty, or can we learn this lesson, absorb it, internalize it, live it, even *without* the threat of imminent death hanging over us?

One way of looking at this time of year on the Jewish calendar is as a challenge by our tradition to do this kind of brutally honest review of our lives, no matter how close or far we may perceive death to be.

Before concluding, I am going to switch gears to mention briefly two topics relating to Israel that have been very much on my mind. The first topic is less like a satellite suddenly crashing down and more like a slow moving asteroid that we know has been on a trajectory towards us for many years and then finally arrives. I refer to this summer's United Church of Canada decision to boycott products made in West Bank settlements and to rescind their prior call for the Palestinians to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. I

have been involved periodically in dialogue efforts with the United Church over the years in regard to their Middle East policy, including four days that I spent in Jerusalem during my sabbatical last year with the working group that put forward the recommendations which were ultimately adopted this summer by the church's General Council. Boycott and divestment resolutions of this sort have been proposed at several successive United Church General Councils, including one that I attended in 2006 in Thunder Bay, and we anticipated that one day such a motion would pass, and now it has. I have consistently argued with United Church interlocutors that boycott is the wrong way for them to go in expressing their sympathy for the suffering of the Palestinians or their advocacy of a two state solution. Since the General Council passed the boycott resolution, I have been involved in conversations with many colleagues and others in our community over how the Jewish community should respond. It is a complex topic over which there is a multiplicity of views. We've seen this one coming for a long time, but now that it's here our community is finding it impossible to arrive at a unified response. That may be frustrating, but is ultimately reflective of the reality of a politically diverse Jewish community. The United Church problem raises many hot button issues for our Canadian Jewish community: What do we think about the settlements and the occupation? What are the moral obligations of the Jewish state to the Palestinians? How is Israel's security best insured? How should we approach Jewish-Christian relations in our

country in general, and around Israel in particular? How do we as a Diaspora Jewish community express solidarity with and support for Israel when we may disagree fundamentally with some of its policies? How do we define anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism? Who speaks for the Canadian Jewish community in its relations with outside groups? It's all in there, making this issue very complex and emotional. As for my own view, I find myself in the nuanced place of being adamantly opposed both to settlements and to the UCC's new policy. I find it hard to imagine carrying on with "business as usual" with local churches which support the national UCC's decision, although what that means specifically on the ground is not yet clear. I look forward to continuing internal conversations around this issue which I hope will help us to clarify our own values as a community so that if we do engage with the United Church or others around Israel, we do so from a place of knowledge and understanding of who we are and what we stand for. And I hope that the United Church itself will reflect on what it has done and in due course reverse the stand it has now taken and explore more positive and balanced ways to have an impact on the vexing problem of Mideast peace.

Finally, some things fall out of the sky not by chance but rather because they are sent with malicious intent. I'm thinking now of Iran. I have neither the time nor the expertise to offer a geopolitical analysis concerning the threat of Iranian nuclear missiles and what Israel should do about it. I am

frightened about the ramifications of Israel and the West failing to stop an implacable foe from developing these horrific weapons. I'm also frightened about the ramifications of Israel launching pre-emptive airstrikes which could have such unpredictable consequences for Israel itself, for the whole region, and indeed for the whole world. I have a daughter studying at the Hebrew University this year, I'm leading a really exciting shul trip there in December (for which there are still spaces by the way), and I have faith that it will be all right somehow. I believe we Diaspora Jews need to keep going to Israel, to maintain our connection and to enrich our Jewish lives in a way that only time spent in the Jewish state can do. There is in truth very little that we can do here to affect the Iranian situation. But we're gathered here in our great numbers on Rosh Hashanah to pray, so let's take the opportunity to pray together with extra kavanah for the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel, let's pray that her leaders may make the difficult decisions that confront them with wisdom and humility, let's pray that war be averted, let's pray that the threat of weapons of mass destruction be removed, and that nothing evil ever falls down from the sky on the people of Israel.

As you know, I never did become an astronomer. My life took a turn I never could have imagined then, and here I stand before you a rabbi -- a career and a life that in many ways couldn't be more different than that of my



childhood hero Clyde Tombaugh sitting alone at his telescope night after night and comparing photographic plates. I don't think I'll ever discover a planet, not even a dwarf planet. But one thing is consistent in my life. I still look up at the sky as I did as a child. And I am still amazed at its vastness and fascinated by what's out there. And now I have something I didn't have access to as a child: Jewish language to articulate some of that sense of wonder. The psalmist said *Ki er'eh shamekha ma'asei etzb'otekha yareah ve-chochavim asher konanta* "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place...*mah adir shimkha bechol ha'aretz* "Oh Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!" (Ps.8:4, 10). At this mid-life transition point for me, I aim to hold on to that sense of awe about the universe that has inspired me for as long as I can remember.

Our recognition of God's majesty in nature does not mean nature is perfect. Things happen. For reasons beyond our understanding, people suffer from terrible afflictions. Scientists and engineers build amazing things like satellites, and sometimes they fall out of orbit and crash. Doctors develop innovative treatments, and sometimes they end up only prolonging the suffering of the dying. Nature's secrets are unlocked, and sometimes governments and armies use those discoveries to make horrible weapons which can obliterate hundreds of thousands of people. And some of our

insights about the workings of nature allow us to develop products that ultimately degrade and destroy nature itself, the earth and the environment in which we live, and perhaps one day us along with it. Nature is magnificent, but it is amoral. We human beings have been given the unique capacity to make moral judgements, to decide what we're going to do with the knowledge and insights we've developed. We also have the unique capacity to choose hope over despair, and when others around us are feeling hopeless as a result of their suffering, to help *them* as best we can choose hope over despair. Given these capacities, it is our responsibility to exercise them to the best of our ability, even in the most trying of circumstances. Let us renew our resolve to do so in the year ahead.

At this new year, we acknowledge our vulnerability and give thanks to God for granting us another year. We hope and pray that no satellite may fall out of the sky onto us or the people we love in 5773. We hope and pray that if *has ve-halila* one does fall, that we may have the strength to maintain our faith in the fundamental goodness of life, of humanity, of God, and of ourselves even as we struggle with whatever challenges we face. We pray that our families and communities are strong enough to support us in time of need, and that we step forward to help others as much as we are able. In doing such acts on earth, we truly ascend to the heavens.