Sermon | Rosh Hashanah 5783

Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
B'nai Israel Congregation

Seeking Awe and Wonder

As with all of my Rosh Hashanah sermons, I begin with a confession: I am a self-proclaimed nerd. I always have been. The theme of my bar mitzvah party was aliens. I grew up playing Sega, Nintendo 64, and Xbox (and I still play video games on my Nintendo Switch—an excellent pandemic purchase). And I love movies that take us to other worlds—E.T., Star Wars, and every single film of the *Jurassic Park* franchise, including this summer's *Jurassic World Dominion*, the final installment in the series, which the critics hated, but audiences loved. I cannot tell you when I first watched the original *Jurassic Park*. The film came out in the summer of 1993, when I was not even five years old, so I must have seen it years later. (My parents are here, and I know we owned it on VHS, but they are responsible parents and would not have allowed me to watch it at the age of 5!) I think that most children go through a dinosaur phase, or at least I will tell myself that, but there was something about *Jurassic Park* as an idea that was intriguing and awe-inspiring. Entertainment writer Sampada Sharma said it best: "The first sight of those giant reptiles left me in awe…The world of *Jurassic Park* felt like a parallel universe that could totally exist." Those are my feelings exactly.

I have to admit that those awe-inspiring moments are not as common in my life today as I imagine they were years ago. We live in world where technology advances so often and so rapidly that the latest gadgets fail to impress us. I have often remarked that if the new iPhone cannot brew me an actual cup of coffee, then I really don't need the new iPhone. And yet we know that each innovation and every advancement is worthy of celebration. How can we not

be in awe of all that we have in this world? Perhaps we are jaded. Perhaps we are disillusioned. Perhaps these past few years have clouded our minds. It is time, once again, for us to see the world as the awe-inspiring marvel of God's Creation that it truly is. Thankfully, Judaism holds the key to unlocking the wonder of the world and once again infusing our lives with awe.

The shofar is just one reminder to refocus our attention on this Rosh Hashanah. After each set of the stirring and awe-inspiring blasts of the shofar in the repetition of today's Musaf Amidah, we recite the words *Hayom Harat Olam*. The phrase can be translated in different ways, but we will rely on the one in our *Mahzor Lev Shalem*: "Today the world stands as at birth." Three Hebrew words suggest that today is the birthday of the universe, the day upon which God brought life into existence in our world. Only in this place in the *mahzor* is Rosh Hashanah explicitly linked with the divine work of Creation. Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, and the remainder of *Hayom Harat Olam* makes that clear. But here we are reminded that today is also the day upon which we recognize and celebrate the wonder and majesty of God's Creation.

We are told that the universe was an awe-inspiring place even before God created this world. The Torah begins with these words: "When God began creating heaven and earth, (וְהָאָ֗רֶץ הָיְתָ֥ה תֹ֙הוּ֙ וָבֹ֔הוּ) the earth was void and desolate, there was darkness on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God moved over the waters."[1] What is meant by "void and desolate," תֹ֙הוּ֙ וָבֹ֔הוּ? Rashi says that it refers to astonishment and amazement, because if we could have seen it, then we would have been astonished and amazed. The universe has always been awe-inspiring. Judaism helps us to notice it, experience it, and appreciate it.

[1] Genesis 1:1-2.

God's ministering angels teach us about this awe-inspiring Creation. In the blessings which precede the Shema each day, we mention these angels of the divine that assemble to praise God. With awe and reverence for God they say קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ, קָדוֹשׁ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת. מְלֹא כָל־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ "Holy, holy, holy is Adonai of Hosts, the fullness of all the earth is God's glory." We mention this not only to give credit to the ministering angels for being awestruck by God's world, but in order to cultivate that same sense of wonder within ourselves. Like the ministering angels, we too must raise our voices together and declaim with awe and reverence how awesome this world is.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught about this sense of awe. He called it "radical amazement" and emphasized the role that it should play in our lives. In his book, *God in Search of Man*, Heschel writes, "radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious [individual's] attitude toward history and nature…To find an approximate cause of a phenomenon is no answer to [their] ultimate wonder…such knowledge fails to mitigate [their] sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all."[2] In other words, it is not enough for a religious individual to grasp the scientific facts behind a particular phenomenon. He also writes, "Our radical amazement responds to the mystery, but does not produce it. You and I have not invented the grandeur of the sky nor endowed [humankind] with the mystery of birth and death. We do not create the ineffable, we encounter it."[3] You can explain to me from now until the end of time how lightning is formed in the heavens and strikes down onto the earth with such radiant light and energy in one particular area. Such scientific explanations are

[2] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 45. Language edited to be gender inclusive.
[3] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 20.

necessary, but insufficient for the religious individual. When we encounter this knowledge, we reawaken our radical amazement. We ask: Who is the Designer of the laws of physics, light, and energy? Such a marvelous system could not have randomly come into being! I am awestruck. I cannot help but be amazed. I am speechless. You, too, can adopt this attitude to the world. Judaism gives us the tools to see the wonder of the world, and then helps us to transform that speechless-awe into concrete acts of religious significance.

One way that Judaism teaches us to give voice despite this speechlessness is through words of blessing. We invoke God's name with words of blessing to give content and form to our awe and wonder. There is a blessing upon hearing thunder and seeing lightning. There is a blessing for seeing the ocean after many days. There is a blessing when we are awed by some wonder of Creation: *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, Oseh Ma'aseh Breishit*. Praised are You Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, the Maker of Creation.

There is even a blessing that one is to recite after use of the restroom. Can you imagine explaining to a child that after we go potty, we pray? Perhaps the older we get, the easier this one is to understand. The prayer is a blessing to thank God that our bodies function as they are designed to do, which enables us to be comfortable enough to focus on prayer, to sit and stand if otherwise able, to speak and think and pray. But as a child it seems laughable. Pray after using the potty? You must be kidding! The bathroom is gross, and prayer is supposed to be austere and decorous. That is precisely the point. Judaism elevates the seemingly mundane. When we recite the blessing with intention, we pause and reconsider how we view our bodies and the act of using the restroom. There matters are far from mundane! When we stop to think about it carefully, it is incredibly awe-inspiring to consider how many things need to work properly and

function as designed for us to simply wake up each morning and get out of bed each day. Judaism gives us the tools to notice the wonder in this moment.

In their book, *Switch*, brothers Chip Heath and Dan Heath make this point emphatically. They write, "Imagine a world in which you experienced a rush of gratitude every single time you flipped a light switch and the room lit up. Imagine a world in which after a husband forgot his wife's birthday, she gave him a big kiss and said, 'For thirteen of the last fourteen years you remembered my birthday! That's wonderful!'"[4] In our world, we take too many of these things for granted. We *assume* that the light will turn on when we flip the switch. We *assume* that our loved ones will remember our birthdays. Imagine a world where we stopped assuming, and started celebrating even the smallest of wonders as awe-inspiring moments.

There is a word for awe in Hebrew, but it is fraught with complexity. The word, *yirah*, implies both awe *and* fear, sometimes separately, often simultaneously. Perhaps the word is best translated as "reverence," and we have multiple examples of this in our liturgy and in rabbinic writings. When we say the blessing for the new month on the Shabbat preceding its beginning, we mention *yirat shamayim* and *yirat cheit*, reverence and piety, or awe of heaven and fear of sin. The context gives the word its particular meaning. We are not in awe of sin, and we need not be fearful of heaven. I much prefer to think of *yirah* as awe and wonder because I cannot fully embrace Judaism out of fear of the punishment that will come from not doing otherwise. Fear might make me cautious, perhaps even obedient for a time, but it alone cannot lead me to fully embrace Judaism. To be in *awe* of God and Creation is much more compelling. To see a child take their first steps, as one of mine did this month; to peer out from the window

[4] Chip Heath & Dan Heath, *Switch*, p. 48.

of a plane miles above the earth and see the snow-capped mountains or the vast expanse of sea below; to gaze upon a work of art and lack the words to describe it; all of these are moments of awe and wonder. These are the moments that give us goosebumps, that take our breath away, that leave us speechless, that draw us in. Judaism is designed to help us do just that—to create more of these moments in our daily lives, to give us the language to mark those moments, and to thereby cultivate within ourselves a sense of wonder and awe of this world and everything in it.

Our congregation was selected this year to participate in a program called Scientists in Synagogues, a grass-roots initiative run by Sinai and Synapses in consultation with the American Association for the Advancement of Science Dialogue on Science, Ethics and Religion, and funded by the John Templeton Foundation, along with other donors. We had our first event a few weeks ago in which we just scratched the surface of the intersection between science and Judaism. We showed how, despite what is often said in politics and pop-culture, science and religion are not in conflict with one another. In his book *Homo Deus*, Yuval Noah Harari explains, "Religion is interested above all in order. It aims to create and maintain the social structure. Science is interested above all in power. Through research, it aims to acquire the power to cure diseases, fight wars and produce food."[5] In Harari's estimation, science and religion are not reaching towards the same goal, and thus they need not be seen in conflict with one another. Science gives us power in the form of knowledge, and religion helps us to organize that knowledge and power. Scientific discovery helps us to learn more, but it also reveals how very little we actually know. Judaism gives us the framework through which to be amazed by

[5] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus*, Loc. 3436.

that realization and the language to declare it in an orderly manner.

Harari reminds us of the story of the Wizard of Oz—how each character shlepped along the yellow brick road hoping that some all-powerful being at the journey's end would grant them what they felt was lacking from their lives. Harari writes, "At the end of their journey they discover that the great wizard is a charlatan, and he can't give them any of these things. But they discover something far more important: everything they wished for was already within themselves. There was never any need of some godlike wizard in order to become sensitive, wise or brave. You just need to follow the yellow brick road and open yourself up to whatever experiences come your way."[6]

Harari may be a secular Israeli, but that does not stop him from expressing deeply Jewish ideas. He is describing precisely how Judaism operates. The goal is not to get to the end of the journey and receive some coveted prize that only someone else can deliver to us. We are, after all, reflections of God. It is not our task to wander down the yellow brick road with the goal being to reach some predetermined destination. Rather, we are supposed to encounter God, what Heschel calls "the ineffable," along the way, and make those encounters moments of radical amazement, wonder, and awe.

In August, NASA released an image showing various options for where the next American astronauts on Artemis III may land on the lunar surface. The Artemis program has a goal of creating "a long-term, sustainable lunar presence and serving as a steppingstone for future astronaut missions to Mars." As I read this, I could not help but ask myself: Is this real, or is this science-fiction? Is the first season of the Apple TV+ series *For All Mankind*, or is this a real

[6] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus*, Loc. 4105.

NASA program? And then I must ask: What else is out there? Who else is out there? How are they a part of the Divine plan? I am in awe of the expanse of the universe and of its vastness. But I need not look to the heavens to be amazed. I am in awe of what I see and experience in my home, in this building, in this world. A commitment to Judaism, to prayer, to reciting words of blessing, these things have helped me to actively cultivate that sense of awe and wonder, to recognize it, and give voice to it, to inspire me and my life. As a rabbi, I try to enable each one of you to experience this, too. Let this be your year to be awestruck and amazed. Find moments to elevate the seemingly mundane with words of blessing, and realize just how amazing this world truly is. *Hayom harat olam*—Today the world stands as at its birth. May we give thanks to God for this Creation, and may we be in awe. Shanah tovah!