

Rabbi Rochelle Tulik
Yom Kippur 5782
Reclaiming Your Wonder

As a rabbi, I read lots of books. I try to find wisdom in all of them. So I want to share an excerpt from one of my recent favorites:

Ivy and Bean sat in the kitchen thinking. Ivy thought and sucked cream cheese out of her hair. Bean thought and squeezed her head between her hands until her eyeballs almost popped out.

“We’re supposed to have a *new* idea,” Ivy said.

Bean’s dad came into the kitchen. He looked at their thinking faces and sat down at the table next to Bean. “What’s happening kidalunks?”

“We need an idea to stop global warming,” said Bean.

“Easy,” he said. “Make posters.”

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

“You know grown-ups,” said Ivy. “They don’t have very good imaginations.”

Ivy and Bean began thinking again. “What if...” began Ivy and stopped. She stared at the refrigerator. “Ice cubes! We could throw ice cubes in the sky and it would cool down the earth.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. To get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible. To be spiritual is to be amazed.

To be spiritual is to be amazed. To be human is to live with amazement. But sometimes I feel like wonder and amazement are relegated to youth. That at a certain point we learn that we have to “get serious”...to grow up.

We learn to push down wonder and amazement. We turn away from “silly ideas” like ice cubes solving global warming. There comes a time when we become afraid to share a silly idea, ask a silly question. Afraid to try something outrageous, think outside the box. There comes a time in our lives when we worry more about how it will look than how we will feel. There seems to come a point when our natural instinct to ask questions and seek answers, to find wonder and amazement in the world around us, gets pushed aside and covered up.

As we age, we learn to be afraid. Afraid to fail. Afraid to look foolish in front of our peers. And our wonder and amazement suffer for our fear.

But you shouldn't be afraid. You shouldn't be afraid to ask, to wonder, to try. It's not easy. And sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes when you try, you fail; when you risk, you lose. But sometimes, you succeed ... sometimes, you win. And either way, no matter what the outcome, you can learn.

Our tradition is full of outrageous discussions and ridiculous questions that try to get to the heart of what Judaism is all about. Questions about whether vampires adhere to the rules of kashrut, about the primordial tongs and how they were fashioned without already existing (a little like the chicken and egg question); questions about what to do if a snake crawls inside a woman's body; discussions about demons who dance on our hands while we sleep. Our texts are full of knowledge that could only come from what some might think was a silly question.

The rabbis were full of wonder. No question was off the table. Nothing was too ridiculous to ask. They asked questions, imagined ridiculous scenarios, addressed the impossible. All for the sake of knowledge, wonder; all for the sake of Judaism and the community. All for the greater good.

What's the most ridiculous question you have wanted answered recently?

- Do spiders drink water? Yes
- What's the fastest way to learn a language? Children's books
- Is lab grown meat kosher? Depends who you ask (of course)
- How tall is the highest peak in the Adirondacks? Mount Mercy at 5,344 feet
- How many times a day do pandas poop? 40

Edmund Burke wrote:

The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reasons for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when she contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.

You should ask one silly question a day. Just for fun. Work to reclaim your wonder.

Becoming an adult doesn't mean you should lose that sense of amazement. That curiosity that we admire so much in children. We praise our children for asking questions, for pestering us with why? and how? and what if? We praise them, as tired as we can get, for seeking to understand the world around them. And we praise them for being amazed, for being surprised, for appreciating what they once didn't know, but now understand.

I fear that as we age we take away our own permission to wonder. We feel that we are supposed to already know things, already be able to do things. Even if we've never done them before. How many times have you swallowed a question because you felt like you should already know the answer? How many times have you wanted to try something new but worried you're "too old"?

I want you to try. I want you to risk. I want you to live with wonder and amazement. As Albert Pike wrote,

We are all naturally seekers of wonders. We travel far to see the majesty of old ruins, the venerable forms of the hoary mountains, great waterfalls, and galleries of art. And yet the world's wonder is all around us: the wonder of setting suns, and evening stars, of the magic springtime, the blossoming of the trees, even the strange transformations of the moth.

Wonder is all around us. And within us. Take risks. Make silly suggestions. Flip ideas on their heads. Ask ridiculous questions.

If we don't ask, we'll never know. If we don't try, we'll never succeed. Of course sometimes it takes more than one try and sometimes we'll miss the mark entirely. But that's what Yom Kippur is all about. When we miss the mark we try again. When we ask a silly question, we learn something. When we make ourselves vulnerable, we open ourselves back up to wonder and amazement.

Our tradition offers us a formula for blessings; a formula for being amazed at the world around us. Every morning we offer thanks, we recognize daily miracles, simple things that happen without us having to do anything or even understand why. The sun comes up. Our eyes open. On Rosh Hashana morning in the tent I told a story about a person cursed to find something to bless every day. He was forced to find wonder, be amazed. And as he did so day after day - through his practice of looking for something to bless - he learned the world is filled with mystery and filled with wonder. We just need

to open our eyes, open our hearts to asking questions and seeing the unexpected.

Ivy turned to Bean. "It worked!"

Bean elbowed Ivy. "Of course it worked. It couldn't help working. It's science."

As they walked back to the cafeteria to give Ms. Aruba-Tate her watch, Bean's dad put his arm around her shoulder. "That was a great science project, sweetie. Much better than my poster idea."

Bean gave him a squeeze. "Oh, Dad, don't feel bad. You're a grown-up. You can't help it."

It is okay not to know everything. But you should never lose your sense of wonder. Ask a silly question. Try something you've never tried. Risk looking ridiculous. Follow the example of our ancient Talmudic scholars. Imagine what Judaism would tell us to do if we ran into a zombie.

In the new year, 5782, open your hearts to the wonder and amazement that are all around you. Reclaim the wonder of your youth. Ask why more. Ask how more. Look inside yourself and others. Seek to understand. The world is full of beauty and blessings. Take time to see them, feel them, and appreciate them.

Live your life in radical amazement. With eyes open to the wonder all around. Because it is out there. Not just atop mountains and strewn across the night sky. It is in the smile of a neighbor, the laugh of a grandchild. Wonder is found when you open your heart to it. And that is risky. But so worth it in the end.

Baruch ata adonai - blessed are you adonai, who opens our eyes to wonder and helps us feel the blessings all around.