"To Go Where No Man -- Or Woman -- Has Gone Before"
Lech Lecha 2021
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October 16, 2021

I remember the first time that humans walked on the moon. I remember it because I remember seeing it live.

I was fifteen years old. It was the summer of 1969. I was in Idaho at a Boy Scout encampment. We were gathered around a large canvas tent with its flaps rolled up, with a tiny TV somehow rigged up to a source of electricity.

I remember there, on the screen, seeing a very poor quality black and white image of the astronaut Neil Armstrong gingerly stepping down from the lunar module, known as the Eagle, onto the surface of the moon. And as he stepped foot on the moon, he said, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

I remember thinking at the time: This is awfully boring. It's terribly anticlimactic. And I remember wondering, "Why is that?"

Human beings have been imagining space travel to places such as the moon for many years; and works of science fiction -- short stories, novels, television shows and movies -- have long depicted space travel in ways that are truly engrossing and engaging.

This experience, on the other hand, was everything but that.

Why was that?

It partly had to do with the fact that the participants in the enterprise were not chosen because of their imaginative qualities; they were chosen because of their dependability, their ability to handle themselves in a crisis; their problem-solving ability.

They weren't poets; they were pilots. They were the kind of people you'd want to hear over the intercom if you were flying in a thunderstorm and you learned that

your plane had to make an emergency landing because three of its engines had inexplicably shut down.

They didn't display a lot of emotion. They were direct and stoic and were somewhat robotic in their affect.

I remember, as I listened to those first words uttered on the moon's surface, sensing that there was something odd about them. Neil Armstrong later said that in fact he was misquoted; that he had said what he had intended to say, namely, "That's one small step for A MAN -- namely, himself --, one giant leap for mankind."

But I, for one, and millions of others, didn't hear him say that. That didn't surprise me; but at the same time, it was disappointing.

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And so, I was somewhat curious, and amused, at all the hoopla surrounding the flight into space that took place this past week. The trip lasted a very short amount of time. And the amount of time that the participants experienced close to zero gravity was only minutes. And yet, there was something compelling about this journey that made it memorable.

It had everything to do with one of the participants on the flight: a man who had gone where no 90-year old -- man or woman -- had ever gone.

I'm referring not to Captain James Tiberius Kirk, the captain of the starship, "Enterprise." That's a fictional character. (See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_T._Kirk .) I'm referring to William Shatner, the actor, who shared with us what it was like for him to see the earth from outer space.

I admit: if my father were still alive, I am not sure that I would have been happy about him going into outer space at the age of 90. In fact, I'm sure I wouldn't have been.

But that, of course, was part of the appeal of this story: the realization that William Shatner was taking a risk, a serious risk -- whose consequences may not yet be clear.

But it was more than that: it was that in a clear and direct way, he pierced through the fourth wall, and made it clear what it meant to him to view the earth from space. He was awed. He was moved. And that -- I believe -- was real.

It's ironic, isn't it, that it took an actor going into outer space to reveal to us what it might mean for us to go forth on a dangerous voyage into the unknown.

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"Lech Lecha," God says to Avram. "Go forth!"

"...to the land that I will show you!" (Genesis 12:1)

We don't often pause to shiver at those words. The Debbie Friedman melody to those words is calm and sweet and soothing. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8WrShnKTWY .) It belies the terror of leaving one's home, one's surroundings, and going forth into a strange world, hoping -- not knowing -- that things will turn out all right.

We don't often contemplate -- I hadn't, until this week -- that Avram (as we learn in the fourth verse of today's parashah) is described as being seventy-five years old. To take a risk at that age, thousands of years ago, is extraordinary to contemplate.

Of course, you might say, Avram wasn't told to go into outer space; just to travel to Canaan -- a distance of, oh, only hundreds and hundreds of miles. (!)

But interestingly, later on in our parashah, God speaks to Avram and directs his attention to outer space.

We read about it in Genesis chapter 15. Avram is discouraged, because he doesn't have any children. So "God took Avram outside and said, "Look toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them." That's how many descendants you're going to have! (Genesis 15:5)

I've long been fascinated by this episode. Looking toward the heavens is, on the one hand of course, a way of grasping a truth about the physical universe; but

Avram is also told to use his imagination: to realize that he will have as many progeny as there are stars -- namely, an innumerable number of them.

The Bible tells us very little about Abraham, so the midrashists seized on this story and picked up on what it tells us about Abraham's power of imagination, to tell another story, about how Abraham became the father of monotheism:

When Abraham was three years old, he began to wonder in his heart: Who created the heavens, and the earth, and me?

And he looked up to the sky and saw the powerful sun beating down on him, so powerful that he couldn't keep his eyes open while looking at it.

And so, all that day, he prayed to the sun.

In the evening, the sun set in the west and the moon rose in the east.

Upon seeing the moon and the stars around it, he said: This one must have created heaven and earth and me -- these stars must be the moon's princes and courtiers. So all night long he stood in prayer to the moon.

In the morning, the moon sank in the west, the stars disappeared, and the sun rose again in the east.

And so he said: There is no might in either of these. There must be a higher Lord over them -- before Whom I will pray, and before Whom I will prostrate myself.

(Beit Ha-Midrash, A. Jellinek, 2:118-196)

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As far as I can recall, William Shatner didn't mention God when he got back from his flight. But he was in awe. And, as Heschel teaches us, it is awe that is at the root of religiosity. If we don't feel awe at the heavens -- at the size and complexity

and beauty of the heavens -- then we are missing something. To be in awe at the heavens is to realize that human beings are not gods; that we are but a small feature of the universe. And out of that recognition can come great things.

One thing that William Shatner did say when he returned from his voyage is, “I hope that I never recover from this.”

I hope that the rest of us can learn from this: Whether it’s by stepping outside and looking up at the moon and the stars, or by sitting in front of a screen and watching fifty-year-old reruns of old Startrek episodes, let’s lift up our eyes to the heavens and contemplate our place in the world.

Shabbat shalom!