

Reframing the Days of Awe

Rabbi Rachel Gurevitz, Erev RH 5783

Did you see the images that were first released back in mid-July from the James Webb Space Telescope? Those amazing, gorgeous images? Do you remember how you felt when you first gazed upon them?

It is incredible what those images are revealing to the scientists who study them. Take, for example, a constellation known as Stephan's Quintet, a group of five galaxies about 300 million light-years from Earth. Four of these galaxies are interacting, transferring gas and dust between them. The telescope's view of the galaxies in infrared light shows as never before how those interactions are driving the formation of stars inside the galaxies. Then there was that image that looked like an Arizona mountain range against the night sky. It was an image of the Carina Nebula, a region of active star formation nearly 8,000 light-years from Earth. The magnificent vista unveiled by the telescope revealed hundreds of new stars never seen before, and even structures in the dust and gas of the nebula that can't yet be explained.

(<https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/07/12/1055846/james-webb-space-telescope-first-observations/>)

And then in August came another mind-blowing composite image known as Epoch 1, made up of 690 individual frames that capture a patch of space near the big dipper, revealing an astonishing array of galaxies, some never before seen. It includes one, named after the daughter of a scientist, Maisie's galaxy, which the readings suggest existed 290 million light-years after the Big Bang.

There's one word that comes to mind when I see these images and read about what they are revealing to us about the Universe – awe.

What is awe? Colloquially we might say "That's awesome." In that context we might be meaning that is cool, or we feel happy that something turned out the way that it did. But that kind of awesome doesn't hold up a candle to the kind of awe I feel looking at these images of distant space in such incredible, beautiful and powerful detail.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines awe as: **an emotion variously combining dread, veneration, and wonder that is inspired by authority or by the sacred or sublime.**

This English language definition of awe actually captures quite well the dual meaning of the Hebrew word *Yirah*, which is translated both as awe and fear, depending on the context, in the Hebrew Bible.

Do we ever feel those emotions all at the same time? The power of the ocean is awesome, as is looking up at the sky to see lightening light up the sky. But watching waters break over into land and wash away cars, destroy roads and bridges, and flood homes is terrifying and dreadful. When something is too enormous, either in scale or in impact, for our limited minds to fully fathom, that can also be awesome both in the sense of veneration and also dread.

It brings to mind something from a favorite book of mine from my youth that also became first a radio show, then a TV show and eventually a movie – The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, by Douglas Adams. At a certain point in the story we are introduced to something called the Total Perspective Vortex, which is a machine built with the intention of showing beings the infinity of creation, which became used as a method of torture. Anyone who enters this machine, in being shown the awesomeness of creation, realizes how infinitesimally small and irrelevant they are in the larger scheme of things and the feelings it creates are so overwhelming that no-one can bear them. According to the Hitchhiker’s Guide fandom site:

The machine was originally created by its inventor Trin Tragula as a way to get back at his wife. She was always telling him to get a "sense of proportion," so he showed her the Vortex. Tragula was horrified to learn he had destroyed her mind, even as he proved his point that if life was going to live in such a vast Universe, one thing it could not afford to have was a sense of perspective.

That is until a particular character in the story, Zaphod Beeblebrox, becomes the only being known to have survived it due to the enormity of his ego. And yes, if you are not familiar with the Hitchhiker’s Guide, it is a comedy and I highly commend it to you.

How we respond to things in our lives and in our world or our Universe is all about perspective. Some will look at those incredible images from the James Webb telescope and will conclude that there is no God. The reach of science, stretching further away and further back in time than ever before, has not yet revealed a being or a presence that aligns with what is likely a somewhat limited pre-existing image of what God might look like if we could see God. However, I see those same images from space and feel like I’m glimpsing an aspect of God.

The more that I see, the more awe that I feel, the more I feel that there is nothing except God that could possibly contain the vastness of all that is out there. I am reminded that the Torah presents to Moses the knowledge that no-one can actually see God and live. I don't take that literally – it's not a 'you'll get struck down by lightning if you catch a glimpse of me' kind of thing. Rather, it is simply describing a scientific truth. It isn't possible for us in our limited physical beings to be able to fathom and hold the reality of God. Like stepping into the Total Perspective Vortex, it would literally blow our minds.

So what does all this have to do with the High Holy Days? Well, this season goes by many names. But one of them is the *Yamim Nora'im* – the Days of Awe. Having spent some time reframing what it is to experience awe, perhaps we can shed some light on the 10 days that lie before us and emerge with a new understanding.

We inherited a language that, for too many, feels like it is designed to make us fearful. Our liturgy, written in an ancient mindset, speaks of how we are to be judged for our deeds and this will determine what might lie ahead for us in the year to come. But I find this way of looking at the Days of Awe to be cartoon-like, over-simplistic. It is infuriating because, for many, it is off-putting. We reject the theology – we reject the notion of a conscious Being of a God that is keeping score and literally writing us into a book. But we might be here anyway, going through the motions because it's what we've inherited and we feel a certain amount of family obligation. And we might be able to articulate what we've rejected, but we might not have found something else to replace it with. So I'd like to offer us something; something that speaks to my sense of what the deeper purpose of this season is all about and how we can engage with it in a more meaningful way.

What if, when we pause from focusing on the minutiae of our lives, and pull back the lens of the telescope to see the big picture, the awe we feel is not about the fear of punishment but rather, the mixture of veneration and wonder, perhaps with just a little of the dread that the dictionary definition offered us? A reframing of our lives when we look from a different perspective. Not so much that we end up in the Total Perspective Vortex and see ourselves so small as to be irrelevant and our choices to be meaningless. But enough to stop and recognize that we have this one life and we take the time to ask ourselves 'how am I living this existence that I have been gifted?' Perhaps it would help us to let go of the things that get between us that shouldn't. Perhaps we might realize that some of our aspirations are material, selfish, small minded.

Perhaps we are going through a particularly challenging time, yet we are able to remember that this too will pass, or that even in the midst of the challenges that we are facing we can still find moments of blessing each day.

And we reset.

That's what these High Holy Days are for. The *Yamim Nora'im* – the Days of Awe are and should be exactly that. But not because we fear punishment. But because, just as the Webb telescope has broadened our perspective on the Universe, so the reflective time and the pulling back the lens to look at our own lives is an invitation to shift our perspective in such a way as to perhaps alter our self-perception, our perception of others, and the opportunity we have to change how we encounter all that comes our way in the coming year and how we choose to act.

May your days ahead be truly awesome. Shanah Tovah