

Awe and Communal Responsibility
ROSH HASHANAH 2ND DAY 5783
Rabbi Rachel Gurevitz

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, I began with a reflection on the amazing images being captured by the James Webb telescope, showing us galaxies and stars and so much more in the Universe than we've ever been able to see before. It was an invitation to think differently about what these *Yamim Nora'im* – these Days of Awe – are all about. I concluded my remarks thus:

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 ...

That's what these High Holy Days are for. The Yamim Nora'im – the Days of Awe are and should be exactly that... 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.

Subsequent to having written that sermon, I came across an article from a few years back that reinforced for me the incredible gift of this season, if only we realized its potential. A 2015 research paper entitled “Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior” by Piff et al was summarized by the researchers in a piece in the Sunday NY Times. They begin by noting that other mammals exhibit the physiological reaction of goosebumps in response to a threat whereas humans do so as a manifestation of awe. We seem ‘wired’ that way and, they posited, there is perhaps an evolutionary reason for this which is connected to the ways in which awe switches our focus from the self-interested to the more communal. A lot of collective rituals in many faith traditions, they note, were designed to instill a sense of awe. So they decided to put this idea to the test empirically.

Here are just few examples of what they found (citation:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/opinion/sunday/why-do-we-experience-awe.html>)

1,500 individuals across the United States were asked a series of questions to assess how much awe, among other emotions, they experienced on a regular basis.

In an ostensibly unrelated part of the study, they gave each of them 10 lottery tickets that would be entered for a cash prize drawing.

If they chose, they could share a portion of them with another unidentified individual in the study who had not received any tickets. They found that participants who felt more regular wonder and beauty in the world around them, were more generous to the stranger. They gave approximately 40 percent more of their tickets away than did participants who were awe-deprived.

Some of this research was conducted on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, which has a spectacular grove of Tasmanian blue gum eucalyptus trees, some with heights exceeding 200 feet — a potent source of everyday awe for anyone who walks by. They took participants there and had them either look up into the trees or look at the facade of a nearby science building, for one minute. Then, a minor “accident” occurred (actually a planned part of the experiment): A person stumbled and dropped a handful of pens. Participants who had spent the minute looking up at the tall trees — not long, but long enough, they found— picked up more pens to help the other person.

From these and other studies that they cite that show similar patterns, they suggest that awe imbues people with a different sense of themselves, one that is smaller, more humble and part of something larger; even brief experiences of awe, such as being amid beautiful tall trees, lead people to feel less narcissistic and entitled and more attuned to the common humanity people share with one another. These researchers conclude: “... fleeting experiences of awe redefine the self in terms of the collective and orient our actions toward the needs of those around us.”

Back in 2015 they also noted that there were cultural trends that were diminishing opportunities to experience awe, observing that here in the United States more people seemed to have become more self-focused, materialistic, and less connected to others. I would say that we have witnessed the impact of this in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of us felt deep disappointment and, at times, anger, that so many seemed to be unwilling to take the simplest step of putting on a face mask to help protect not only themselves but others. Arguments were made that it infringed on their ‘individual rights.’ But even among those segments of society that understood the importance of the communal response to a global pandemic found themselves retreating from the communal. Our social worlds all got a lot smaller. Some of that was out of necessity and we, here, at the congregation were among many venues that were not willing to risk the lives of our individual members by bringing people together in certain ways until vaccines and treatments could protect most people from the worst outcomes of the virus.

At the same time, many of us took more time in nature. We spent more time outside. We noticed the small details of the changing seasons. We travelled locally and appreciated our neighborhoods and our nearby scenes of beauty more. And many did respond to the call of the communal. People who stepped up quietly to help fellow congregants through CBS Cares with phone calls and meal drop offs. Those who responded to a request to opt in to an Oneg Host Team so that we could get back to providing the important post-Shabbat service nourishment that oils the wheels of informal conversation and connection between us. Those who joined a project team or responded to an invitation to share their expertise in short-term gatherings that have helped guide our communal work as a congregation.

I'll have more to say on this in my reflections on Kol Nidre and my Yom Kippur morning sermon. This morning, I want to offer those of us present together the opportunity to put into practice that which the researchers, the science, and our own incredible Jewish wisdom traditions teach us is good for our souls and good for our communities – an invitation to reflect upon and share moments of awe.

In the next few minutes I'd like to invite you to turn or move to join someone who is not your spouse or family member. In small groups of 3 or 4, take just a couple of minutes max each to bring to mind and share something that instills a sense of awe in you. Let's connect awe and the communal – the introducing ourselves and speaking with each other, so that my RH reflections on awe are not just an abstract thought but something we can act upon right here, right now.