**“Finding Wonder in an Age of Wonders”**

This summer, I did something I have never done, not because I never had an opportunity, but because I, honestly, never wanted to in the first place. For the past fifteen years of living in Western New York, I have avoided taking the central thrill ride of Niagara Falls, the Maid of the Mist. As my family can attest, I do not love anything that travels over a hundred miles per hour, dips, twists, or, in any way throws me off balance. A good day at the amusement park is one that I do not ride a single ride. And, while a boat floating slowly down the Niagara River toward the falls would not seem to be “in the same boat,” for me it is one and the same.

But, being a good sport, I put on the prerequisite blue pancho and, standing side by side with my family, braced myself for the worst. Closing my eyes, I prayed. I prayed that I would not get nauseous. I prayed that I would not get a headache. I prayed to return safely to the shore as quickly as possible.

Opening my eyes, I found something I had not expected. The experience was not only enjoyable, it was joyful. Getting closer and closer to one of the largest waterfalls in the world, I was filled with a sense of awe, or what our ancestors called *Yirah,* a moment of profound beauty.

A few days later, watching the spectacular production of Romeo and Juliet at Shakespeare in the Park, my view obscured by the hundreds of other audience members present that night, I looked up in the sky and saw Japanese lanterns floating over ahead like exotic birds. As the fires within them burned in the delicate August sky, I felt again a sense of profound appreciation.

What was it about those two moments that was so transformative? Was it the experience itself or the surprise that went along with it? Do surprise and awe go hand in hand? And, what role does awe, or *Yirah*, have in our lives?

*How many of you have experienced a moment of awe this day, this week, this month, this year? Did it stay with you afterward? Do you feel changed by it?*

This story of surprise and wonder is familiar in our tradition. Throughout the Torah there are many moments that take our ancestors’ breath away - the Burning Bush, the Crossing of the Sea, Mount Sinai. But, for me there is one that stands out, occurred on a quiet night in the middle of the Judean Hills, at a time when the fate of our people hung in the balance. Jacob, our patriarch, was fleeing for his life from his brother Esau after stealing his inheritance and their father’s blessing. Alone, confused, and distraught, he was forced to sleep on a bed of rocks far from his home in Be’er Sheva. Only a teenager, he had never been on his own. No doubt he was petrified.

It is in this moment of despair that a true miracle occurred. The Torah tells us in Genesis chapter 28, that Jacob dreamed of “a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and messengers of God were going up and down on it.” In the dream, God offered him a blessing of future success for himself and for his people. “I am with you and will protect you,” God told him. In his dream, Jacob felt a sense of profound protection and safety, all of his fears melted away. This is the moment that will propel him toward a new path: a path of righteousness, humility, and appreciation.

When he awoke, Jacob exclaimed: “Yesh Adonai Bamakom Hazeh, V’lo Yadati.” “Surely, God was in this place and I did not know it” (Genesis 28:16)

About this verse, the medieval commentator Ibn Ezra writes: “There are places where miracles are seen. I cannot explain why this is so because it is a deep mystery.”

According to Judaism, *Yirah*, wonder or awe, is absolutely essential to what it means to be human in the world. As the psalmist tells us: “*Reishit Chochmah, Yirat Adonai*” “The Start of Wisdom is Awe of Heaven'' (Psalm 111:1) Experiencing awe is especially essential during the High Holy Days. These are, after all, our Days of Awe, *Yamim Nora’im*.

But, for most of us here in 2023/and our new Jewish year, 5784 (Yay!), awe is getting harder and harder to come by. Not because it isn’t present, but because it is always present.

I felt this in particular this past Summer when the latest picture from the James Webb Telescope came out, a closeup of Rho Ophiuchi cloud complex, the closest star-forming region to Earth. In it a mass of textured yellow gas floats like a jellyfish between bright red splotches and bright bursts of white star light. Like so many of the other images from the Webb Telescope, it is space unlike anything we have seen before.

But, this is not all that happened that particular week, these three other important discoveries also all occurred:

* Scientists in Japan took real steps toward growing babies in a laboratory, using the DNA of two male rodents.
* Scientists at Purdue University developed a new super white acrylic paint that can reflect 95 percent of sunlight. Something that can be very useful in cooling our streets.
* And, in a project funded by Caladan Oceanic, scientists used baited robotic cameras to capture a young snailfish, 8,300 meters below the surface of the Pacific Ocean, the deepest life ever discovered.

Amazingly, awesome, right? But, not one of these moments of Yirah made the back page, let alone the front page of the Buffalo News or any other major media site. Discoveries that would have awed anyone a decade or two ago now barely making a mark on our consciousness. After years of making big budget movies, increasingly more sophisticated smart devices, ChatGPT, and 450-foot-roller coasters, have we become immune to wonder?

What has happened to us? Where is our sense of awe and splendor? With so many wonders occurring around us all the time, how can we truly take time to acknowledge what is happening? How do we find wonder in this age of wonders?

According to Professor Dacher Keltner, from the University of California, these moments when we experience awe are critical to our well-being as human beings. In his book, “Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life.” he explains all of the many health benefits of awe.

* Awe calms down our nervous system and triggers the release of oxytocin, the “love” hormone that promotes trust and bonding.
* Awe activates the vagal nerves, clusters of neurons in the spinal cord that regulate various bodily functions, and slows our heart rate, relieves digestion ‌ and deepens breathing.
* Awe quiets negative self-talk, deactivating the default mode network, the part of the cortex involved in how we perceive ourselves.
* Awe frees us of the pangs of narcissism and self-shame, criticism and entitlement that color our world today.

To discover these insights, Dr. Keltner started by studying inmates of San Quentin State Prison in California, one of the largest and most hostile environments in America. He asked them about where they found awe. They spoke about finding it in “the air, light, the imagined sound of a child, reading, and spiritual practice.” Teaming up with researchers in America and China to researchers had participants record their experiences of awe in journals. They found that on average that people have two to three moments of awe every single week, that adds up to 100-150 moments every single year.

Yet, despite the profusion of these types of experiences, we rarely take them in. How do we truly harness the power of these moments of awe?

Professor Keltner suggests four things:

1. Pay attention. Just noting what is happening around us and maybe marking our moments of awe in a journal makes a big difference. As Ashirah always reminds me, just look up at the sky on a clear night and find Mars.
2. Focus on the goodness we see not in ourselves, but in others. Professor Keltner tells us that when we see others doing small gestures, like walking an older person across the street, we start feeling better and are also more likely to perform good deeds. He suggests writing down quotes we like, or holding on to stories that have inspired us.
3. Cultivate a practice of mindfulness. This could be structured activities like Yoga and Meditation or it could be just by taking a walk. My friend and colleague Rabbi Malka Binah Klein goes on what she calls “beauty walks.” She was feeling the after effects of the pandemic and this frenetic and harried world we live in. One day she went out and looked at the flowers in the Wissahickon Park near her home, watching them bloom before her eyes. She started taking photos of her finds, cropping them with an eye for what delights her, and then texting them as a way of communicating love and comfort.
4. And, lastly, choosing the unfamiliar path. Awe, Professor Keltner tells us, often comes from novelty. Doing something new can open our mind and increase our sense of the divine.

Take a moment right now to think of something truly awesome that you experienced this past year. Share it with the person sitting next to you. On your way out, take time to write it on a sticky note and put it on the poster board outside of the sanctuary?

Just like our ancestor Jacob we exclaim: “Yesh Adonai Bamakom Hazeh, V’lo Yadati.” “Surely, God was in this place and I did not know it.”

Let those moments of awe fuel our year ahead, shining like Japanese lanterns on the sky overhead, spraying us with water like Niagara Falls. This year let us not only find those moments. Let us savor those moments. These are the moments that transform our ordinary lives into extraordinary ones.

I close with a poem by Rachel Bluwstein called “Tiny Joys.”

Tiny joys, joys like a lizard’s tail:

a sudden sea between two city buildings in the west,

windows glittering in the setting sun—

everything blessed!

Everything blessed.

A consoling music in everything,

in everything mysteries and hints—

and everything waiting for corals of beautiful words

to be strung by the imagination on its string.

*[Tiny Joys, by Rachel Bluwstein, Found in Translation, transl. Robert Friend (Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2006), p. 37.]*

A good sweet year ahead. A Shanah Tovah U’Metukah!