

## It's Awesome!

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Yom Kippur, 2015/5776

Back in the 1960's Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks had an act where Reiner would interview a 2,000 year old man - played by Brooks with fedora, black cape, and stereotypically Jewish accent - on various topics. In one piece, Reiner wonders about the origin of applause.

Brooks answers with a story. "In the old days," he says, "when we were exposed to a wonderment, we really reacted!" Then he demonstrates: He asks Reiner to sing a high note, which he does quite well, and Brooks goes like this: (slaps face). He keeps doing it as he exclaims "OH!" "OH Boy!" "Wow!" Until Reiner interrupts - "But doesn't that hurt?" "You bet it hoits," says Brooks. "We could not continue to react to wonderments like that!" He tells Reiner that eventually some smart guy finally suggested "Pull your faces out of it," and he demonstrates. Which eventually led to the polite sophisticated applause. "But in the old days" Brooks says, - "we did something real, and primitive and natural..."



It's a great sketch, and I encourage you to watch it on YouTube<sup>1</sup>. But it is more than just funny. It speaks to an important aspect of life that we moderns seem to have lost: that face-slapping WOW reaction to wonderments - the experience of awe.

Recently there has been a growing interest in awe within the academic community: what it is, and how it impacts individuals and society. We call our High Holy Days the "Days of Awe," but I suspect few of us have ever really thought about what that means. I would like to explore it with you this morning.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers and social activists of the 20th century, based his philosophy, indeed his life, on awe. He writes: "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; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."<sup>2</sup>

For Heschel, Radical Amazement is realizing "that life takes place under wide horizons, that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era."<sup>3</sup> "It is a way of [gaining] insight into a meaning greater than ourselves. Awe is an intuition for

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOTKDgrdvvg>

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955)

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955)

the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme. ...It enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance.<sup>4</sup>

Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner, at the University of California at Berkeley, define awe from a psychological and social science perspective. For them, awe is “an emotional response to perceptually vast stimuli that transcend current frames of reference, the overwhelming feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends our understanding of the world.”<sup>5</sup> It is stunningly similar to Heschel’s religious definition.

Albert Einstein weighs in as well: “the most beautiful and deepest experience a [person] can have is the sense of the mysterious...To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly.”<sup>6</sup>

It is the feeling we have when a baby is born; even though we know the biology of it, we still sense that we have witnessed a miracle. As the character Bill Compton says in *True Blood*: “Just because you understand the mechanics of how something works, doesn’t make it any less of a miracle.”<sup>7</sup>

Long before Heschel, Piff and Keltner or Einstein, our people appreciated the power of awe. Jacob awoke from his dream and said, “How awesome is this place - it is none other than the house of God...”<sup>8</sup> The Israelites sang at the shores of the Red Sea: *Mi kamocha Ba'elim Adonai?...Nora tehillot, oseh feleh*. Who is like You, awesome in splendor, working wonders?<sup>9</sup> The entire book of Psalms can be seen as a response to the wondrous works of God in our world.

The people who study awe, whether from a scientific or religious perspective, all agree that awe is an important experience in our lives. When Heschel says “Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine,”<sup>10</sup> he means that awe helps us to feel the presence of God in daily life; to sense the sacred within the mundane. In fact, according to Heschel, faith itself depends on awe. He writes: “Awe precedes faith; it is at the root of faith. We must grow in awe

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is Man?* (1965)

<sup>5</sup> Piff and Keltner, *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Einstein: *A Life in Science* by Michael White and John Gribbin. Free Press; New edition edition 2005

<sup>7</sup> Charlaine Harris, *Southern Vampire Mysteries*.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 28:17

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 15:11

<sup>10</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (1955)

in order to reach faith... Awe rather than faith is the cardinal attitude of the religious Jew.”<sup>11</sup>  
He adds that while “knowledge is fostered by curiosity; wisdom is fostered by awe.”<sup>12</sup>

There are other, non-religious benefits of awe. The Berkeley study reveals that awe increases what the researchers call ‘pro-social’ behavior - what we might call righteousness. In their experiments, participants who had experienced awe cooperated more, shared more resources and sacrificed more for others than those who did not. They report that “awe helps bind us to others, motivating us to act in collaborative ways that enable strong groups and cohesive communities”.<sup>13</sup>

Experiences of awe have inspired countless works of art, from landscape paintings to romantic poetry to spiritual memoirs. And research has demonstrated that awe actually inspires creativity, helping us to think more flexibly and see things in a new light. A study from the University of Tel Aviv showed that the experience of Awe helped children to consider different perspectives and see beyond their present situation.<sup>14</sup>

Awe is good for your health. An experiment with stressed-out college freshmen revealed that the experience of awe lowers levels of interleukin-6, a molecule that causes inflammation in the body. The more frequently someone reported having felt awestruck, the lower the IL-6.<sup>15</sup> Imagine if feeling more awe could have an impact on your arthritis. It hasn’t been proven, but it couldn’t hurt.

If you are still not convinced, awe is even good for business. An article in the Business Section called “Get More Hours Out of Your Day” reports on a study out of Stanford and the Carlson School which found that the experience of awe made people feel like they had more time available, made them more patient, and boosted their life satisfaction. “When you feel awe, you feel very present—it captivates you in the current moment,” says researcher Melanie Rudd. “And when you are so focused on the here and now, the present moment is expanded—and time along with it.”<sup>16</sup> And as Benjamin Franklin said, “time is money.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (1955)

<sup>12</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Between God and Man* (1959)

<sup>13</sup> Piff and Keltner, *op. cit*

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/22/the-psychology-of-awe\\_n\\_5799850.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/22/the-psychology-of-awe_n_5799850.html)

<sup>15</sup> Gretchen Reynolds, “An Upbeat Emotion That’s Surprisingly Good for You,” *New York Times Magazine*, <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/an-upbeat-emotion-thats-surprisingly-good-for-you/>

<sup>16</sup> Susan H. Greenberg, “Get More Hours Out of Your Day,” *Stanford School of Business*, Spring 2013  
<http://qz.com/74253/how-to-get-more-hours-out-of-your-day-look-at-something-awesome/>

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “Advice to a Young Tradesman, Written by an Old One” (1748)

In all these studies, researchers tested awe against happiness and other positive emotions and in every case, awe had more profound effects. The reason behind it, according to Piff and Keltner, has to do with what they call the “small self.” Investigating why awe arouses altruism, they concluded 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...led people to feel less narcissistic... and more attuned to [our] common humanity... In the great balancing act of our lives, between... self-interest and a concern for others, fleeting experiences of awe redefine the self in terms of the collective, and orient our actions toward the [others]...When experiencing awe, you may not, egocentrically speaking, feel like you're at the center of the world anymore.”<sup>18</sup>

In a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, Calvin looks up at the night sky and says: “Look at all the stars! The universe just goes out forever and ever!” Hobbes replies: It kind of makes you wonder why man considers himself such a big screaming deal.<sup>19</sup>

The “small self” is expressed in the Jewish *Mussar* tradition as the trait of *Anavah*, usually but mistakenly translated as humility. *Anavah* is an honest sense of where the self appropriately fits into the bigger picture: an attitude of occupying “no more than my space, no less than my place.”

*Anavah*, or the “small-self” is not about feeling so small that we despair. The Education page of the New York Times published an email exchange between an English major and her astronomy professor. The student asked: “How do you keep from despairing at the immensity of space and the smallness of us?” The teacher answered: “Johanna, you are most certainly infinitesimal in the cold vastness of the cosmos, and yes, you are only one of billions of humans and other creatures who have come before and will come after...But you are also, just as certainly, a miracle: you are a creature capable of thought, of wonder, of awe...of recognizing that you are not the center of the Universe. You are capable of love, and so need not despair of insignificance. See you Monday.”<sup>20</sup>

So here’s the interesting thing: even though awe is clearly good for us, the Berkeley researchers found that our society is, in fact, “awe-deprived,” and we are the worse off for it. They point out that “Adults spend more and more time working and commuting and less time outdoors and with other people. Camping trips, picnics and midnight skies are forgone in favor of work. Attendance at arts events has dropped over the years. This goes for children, too:

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<sup>18</sup> Piff and Keltner, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Watterson, *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes* (2005)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/02/education/edlife/quoted.html>

Arts and music programs in schools are being dismantled [ in favor of ] standardized testing; time outdoors and for novel exploration are sacrificed for résumé-building activities.”<sup>21</sup>

Every moment of our lives is filled with miracles, but we are conditioned to ignore them. In order to get through the day, we become inured to the wonders right in front of us. On the way to the car we walk by the first tulip of the season without seeing it; as we organize who will pick up the children and who will pick up the dry cleaning, we fail to appreciate the depth of beauty in our partner; we have become so used to the ability to Google any topic at any hour of any day or use our thumbs to send a message immediately around the world that we don't realize incredibly awesome that is!

Heschel believes that this has the potential to destroy us: He writes: “Small is the world that most of us pay attention to, and limited is our concern. There are three aspects of nature which command our attention: its power, its beauty, and its grandeur. Accordingly, there are three ways in which we may relate ourselves to the world: we may exploit it, we may enjoy it, and we may respond with awe...Our age is one in which usefulness is thought to be the chief merit of nature...We have indeed become primarily tool-making creatures, and the world is now a gigantic tool box for the satisfaction of our needs. Dazzled by the brilliant achievements of the intellect in science and technique, we have not only become convinced that we are the masters of the earth; we have become convinced that our needs and interests are the ultimate standard of what is right and wrong.”<sup>22</sup> Heschel says “[This] is the period of a divine eclipse. We sail the seas, we count the stars, we split the atom, but never ask: Is there nothing but a dead universe and our reckless curiosity?”<sup>23</sup> “Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin.”<sup>24</sup>

Piff and Keltner agree: They describe the impact of losing the ability to experience awe: “Awe deprivation has had a hand in a broad societal shift that has been widely observed over the past 50 years: People have become more individualistic, more self-focused, more materialistic and less connected to others.”<sup>25</sup>

At the end of their report, Piff and Keltner offer an antidote to awe-deprivation. “we suggest that people insist on experiencing more everyday awe, to actively seek out what gives them

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<sup>21</sup> Piff and Keltner, op. cit

<sup>22</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (1955)

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (1951)

<sup>24</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (1955)

<sup>25</sup> Awe, The Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior. Piff, Paul K.; Dietze, Pia; Feinberg, Matthew; Stancato, Daniel M.; Keltner, Dacher, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 108(6), Jun 2015, 883-899. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000018> Cited in <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/opinion/sunday/why-do-we-experience-awe.html>

goosebumps, be it in looking at trees, night skies, patterns of wind on water or the quotidian nobility of others — the teenage punk who gives up his seat on public transportation, the young child who explores the world in a state of wonder, the person who presses on against all odds.”<sup>26</sup>

In another Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, Calvin is standing in front of his class and says: “Today for show and tell, I’ve brought a tiny miracle of nature: a single snowflake! I think we might all learn a lesson from how this utterly unique and exquisite crystal turns into an ordinary, boring molecule of water just like every other one when you bring it into the classroom. And now, while the analogy sinks in, I will be leaving you drips and going outside...”<sup>27</sup>

The beginning of awe can be as simple as going outside. The scent of flowers, the colors of a sunset or the autumn leaves may have become clichés but they can be sources of true awe; we just have to get past expediency and hubris and pay attention to them. Heschel says, “there is a dawn of wonder and surprise in our souls,”<sup>28</sup> we just need to cultivate it. Imagine yourself looking at the world through the eyes of a young child for whom everything is new and exciting and wondrous.

*Mussar* teacher Alan Morinis points out that “Awe is a natural human response to an overwhelmingly profound experience [like childbirth, or seeing the Grand Canyon.] But only an inner instrument that has been polished and honed will find as much awe in less dramatic situations- awe not because I see a [grand] sight, but because I am able to see, not because the sunset is spectacular, but because there is a sun. Cultivate the capacity to feel awe and the whole world becomes awesome.”<sup>29</sup>

Awe isn’t necessarily easy; but it can be learned, and for the sake of *Tikkun Olam* - building a better society - we need to start practicing. Consider Jacob’s moment of awe after awakening from his ladder dream. It begins with a confession: “Surely Adonai is present here and I did not know it.”

Yom Kippur is a time for confession. “Surely Adonai is present here,” and if we are honest, most of us probably don’t know it most of the time. But we can start now, first by noticing the big things. We have stunning sunsets here, and beautiful big skies. Fall colors are coming soon. Take a moment each day to notice such things. Take them in with your breath, and fully experience them; absorb them.

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<sup>26</sup> Piff and Keltner, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Bill Watterson, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (1997)

<sup>29</sup> Alan Morinis, *Every Day Holy Day* (2010)

Then when you've had some practice with that, move on to the smaller, more regular experiences that appear mundane until we train ourselves to see them differently. Psychologist Carl Rogers says "People are just as wonderful as sunsets if you let them be. When I look at a sunset, I don't find myself saying, 'Soften the orange a bit on the right hand corner.' I don't try to control a sunset. I watch with awe as it unfolds."<sup>30</sup>

I think he is right. Over the years I have watched with true awe as my daughters unfolded from infants into toddlers, schoolgirls to teenagers, and lately I am in constant awe as they blossom into young women pursuing their passions.

Judaism provides a practice which can bring us back to a fuller awareness and appreciation of the wonder of life, and that is prayer. The Talmud teaches that we are to say 100 blessings daily<sup>31</sup>, reciting words of gratitude and appreciation not only at momentous occasions and holidays, but throughout the day, every day – when we eat and when we study, when we get up in the morning and even – believe it or not – when we use the bathroom, we say "*Baruch Atah Adonai*, who with wisdom fashioned the human body creating openings, arteries, glands and organs, marvelous in structure, intricate in design... Praised are You, Adonai...who sustains our bodies in wondrous ways." With a blessing like this on our lips, how can we not feel awe?

Heschel wrote: "A scientific [finding]... does not have to be repeated twice a day; but the insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder, there is a need for daily worship."<sup>32</sup> "To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain the sense of the mystery that animates all beings."<sup>33</sup>

I am awed when I stand at this Bima and take in our amazing community. I see people who are friends, people I admire for their contributions to this community. I see elders and children, single people and large families; I see a spectrum of genders and sexual orientations; I see people I have yet to meet personally, and I hope to meet you sooner than later. I see people with disabilities and infirmities, and the people who traverse their journeys with them, I see people I have helped, and people who have helped me, and I am radically amazed at what a wonderful community it is.

I know that the view from up here is better than the view from your seat, but I want to invite you into to try to see what I see, and experience the awe it inspires. Look around you - at the

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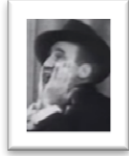
<sup>30</sup> Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn* (1969)

<sup>31</sup> Menachot 43b

<sup>32</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (1955)

<sup>33</sup> Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Edited by Susannah Heschel, (1997)

people seated in your row, in the rows in front and behind; crane your neck to see the people at the front or back of the sanctuary. If you feel the wonder, join me on the count of three - in Hebrew of course - with the 2000 year old man's primitive sense of wonder. Remember, it goes like this:



OK? *Echad, Shteim, Shalosh...*

Do that every day, and we will all have an awesome year.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon*, May it be God's will.

Anthem: What a Wonderful World<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What\\_a\\_Wonderful\\_World](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_a_Wonderful_World)