

## Feeling awe and appreciation

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A middle aged surgeon and his wife are walking along a sandy beach, when they suddenly notice a brass lamp protruding from the ground. The wife picks it up, wipes the sand from it, and a genie immediately spouts forth from the lamp. "You may have a total of 3 wishes", the genie says.

The surgeon allows his wife to have the first two wishes. She asks for a house on the cliff side nearby, overlooking the beach. Suddenly, a mansion appears in the distance. She asks to be free of illnesses for as long as she lives. This is granted and as a token of gratitude the genie transports them to the doorsteps of the cliff side mansion.

The genie turns to the surgeon and inquires what his wish is. The man states, "I'd like to have a wife that is 20 years younger than myself." The genie nods and then makes the man 70 years old."<sup>1</sup>

Okay, that joke may or may not be funny depending on your perspective. To be sure, appreciating what one has can be difficult. Ben Zoma in Pirkei avot, Chapters of our Fathers, asks, "*Eize who ashir?*" "Who is rich?" How would you answer this? Who is rich? The one with the biggest stock portfolio, nicest house, highest performing car, or most money? The answer is, "*Hasameach b'chelko.*" One who is happy with what one has.<sup>2</sup> Sounds so simple but it can be so hard. When you think of your life, are you happy? Are you able to value what you have?

It's not always easy to focus on the good. It can be a challenge to appreciate our blessings, what we have achieved, and the life we are living today. Even when we know intellectually that we have had good things come our way, we find ourselves focusing on what we lack, what we wish we had, the loves lost, the financial goals unachieved, and even the aging of our bodies. With such sentiments, it is especially difficult to feel any gratitude. Why is that? We can have so much and yet focus almost exclusively on what we lack. Maybe it's just human nature. Perhaps, we have unrealistic assumptions. We want to believe that things will always stay the same or if they change, it will only be to our advantage. We expect stability, for the things to remain as they are, but when change occurs, we feel as though the ground beneath us is breaking apart.

There are many sermon ideas I could explore here such as flexibility, growing through transition, or empowering ourselves to ride the waves of change, but tonight, tonight, I want to explore ways of enjoying what we have and appreciating the life we are living. I want us to take time to catalogue what we have, the blessings in our lives, and to make ourselves more mindful of them. For tonight, at least, let's push the worries and concerns aside, allow the muscles in our

neck and back to relax, and to savor the good in our lives. We can all benefit from this. Too often, many of us wake up feeling the tension of anxiety gripping our bodies, the fatigue of not enough sleep, and the thoughts of what we need to do.

Let's start with an awareness of our physicality. Are you sitting with your feet planted on the ground? Are your legs crossed over one another? Do your arms rest in your lap or over the shoulder of a loved one? How about your fingers? Wiggle them a moment. Shrug your shoulders up, hold it, and release. When you take a breath, is it through your nose or your mouth? Breath, *Ruah*, the life force within us, given by God. Let's start with a *neshama amuka*, a deep breath. Let's take our time. Come on a journey with me through space and time.

Professor of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, Daniel Matt, writes in God and the Big Bang, "In the beginning was the big bang, fifteen billion years ago. The primordial vacuum was devoid of matter, but not really empty. Rather, it was in a state of minimum energy, pregnant with potential, teeming with virtual particles. Through a quantum fluctuation, a sort of bubble, in this vacuum, there emerged a hot dense seed, smaller than a proton, yet containing all the mass and energy of our universe."<sup>3</sup> The seed cools and expands wildly, faster than the speed of light. Expansion slows, particles survive to become building blocks of matter. There's a flood of energy and the universe expands. After 300,000 years of cooling, hydrogen and helium are formed and billions of years later, they grow into galaxies and stars. Photons break away from matter, oscillate at a lower frequency and fly through space, making our universe transparent. "This is the moment of, "*Yehi Or*, Let there be light!"<sup>4</sup>

Daniel Matt connects the origins of our universe in his book with the Jewish mystical view of creation. *Ein Sof*, the name for God that means, "There is no end." This is the part of God that is beyond human comprehension. *Ein Sof* not only extends to the far reaching corners of the universe but is a part of every aspect of life. *Ein Sof* withdraws and there is nothingness. This is not emptiness as the word suggests but 'no thing.' Nothing we can understand. The Hebrew word is *Ayin*. The mystics believed that the universe emanated from divine nothingness. "According to the thirteenth-century kabbalist, Moses de Leon, "The beginning of existence is the secret concealed point. This is the beginning of all hidden things, which spread out from there and emanate, according to their species. From a single point you can extend the dimensions of all things."<sup>5</sup>

The Zohar, the mystical medieval commentary to the Torah, states, "A blinding spark flashed within the concealed of the concealed, from the mystery of Infinite, a cluster of vapor in formlessness...Under the impact of breaking through, one high and hidden point shone. Beyond that point nothing is known. So it is called Beginning." The universe expands. Daniel Matt asserts, "We cannot behold the infinite, but its power is displayed through everything that exists. Creation is a form of revelation. The underlying oneness is not apparent, but it is real."<sup>6</sup> *Ayin*,

no thingness, a point of indescribable energy, is the mystical start of the Big Bang, the expansion of our universe, the beginning of life itself.

According to the mystics, God was at the beginning, radiating, illuminating, enabling our universe to change, transform, expand, and to allow life to develop. *Ein Sof*, there is no end, no limit. We cannot possibly conceive what this is, our mortal years are too few compared to the life of our universe. What is 80 years or even the ideal of 120 years compared to thousands, millions, and billions of years? There is such beauty and awe connecting our understanding of the origins of our universe with ancient Jewish teachings. To allow our minds to traverse beyond Southern California, beyond North America, to rocket through our atmosphere, to journey beyond our solar system and galaxy in and through time, can offer a respite from the banality of life. I find thinking and imaging in such ways helps me to transcend for a moment the minor irritants and rise above the trivial. It helps me put into perspective my existence, my life, and gives me a sense of awe.

To have a deep intuition of awe though does not require space travel. Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book, God in search of Man, advocates a way of looking at the world, our lives, and God.

“What do we see when we see the world?” he asks. “There are three aspects of nature that 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, we may accept it in awe.”<sup>7</sup> There are things we certainly need from the world, we need air to breathe, water to drink, wood to build, soil to farm, and metals to forge. We can enjoy nature such as the shape of the clouds in the sky, the swell of the ocean wave, and the view from a mountain. And then there are times of deep appreciation, of feeling something moving within us, perhaps without cognition, we sense that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. To experience such transitory moments require a presentness, a willingness to open our eyes and self to the world around us. To feel awe, can be transformative even for the few fleeting seconds it occurs. But the revitalization that can come with it, can be grounding, beautiful, and illuminating.

Heschel advocates for wonder. He writes, “As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.”<sup>8</sup>

When are you able to feel and sense the beauty of life? Is it in the eyes of your grandchildren, the embrace of a person you love, the beauty of a budding rose, or the cool breeze of the ocean? Heschel also teaches that there is a mystery even to our cognition. The very act of

thinking is worthy of awe. He writes, “What formula could explain and solve the enigma of the very fact of thinking?... The most incomprehensible fact is the fact that we comprehend at all.”<sup>9</sup>

So let’s take a few moments right here and now to ponder the things we feel grateful for. How are we blessed? When we reflect on our childhood what joy did we have? What were we lucky to have? Let’s take nothing for granted. Did you have a roof over your head? Did anyone love you? Did anyone try to assist you?

How about our transition to adult hood. Were there invaluable lessons that we learned? Did you have any special friendships or relationships? Were you lucky in your experiences or travels? Was any part of your education valuable?

As adults, what do you list as your accomplishments? Did you glean any insights? What things bring you joy? Are there people in your life that you love?

If you were to list ten aspects of your life that you are grateful for, what would they be?

And how about life itself? The ability to think, to will, to wish, and to feel. While at times our days go by in a blur, there is so much that happens throughout the hours of the day. To be sure, if I am boring you right now, you will feel the press of time but even if you aren’t suffering too much, we can still appreciate what can occur within 90 minutes. We have images, ideas, day dreams, and thoughts that course through our minds. When we get up, we will socialize with people we haven’t seen in a long while, embrace someone we care about, and share our stories. What a gift life is. What a blessing to be here, to be alive, and to experience all the wonders of our world.

When I took a Musar, a Jewish ethics class, a few years back at HUC in LA, one activity that Rabbi Richard Levy, *zichrono l’vracha*, had us do was to take some time for *hitbodedut*. This is time to be alone. I was very confused by this initially. What do you mean fifteen minutes alone time? “Does it count if I am showering or cooking,” I inquired. No, it doesn’t. So I would set my timer on my watch and sit outside and just sit. At first, it was awkward but it got easier. I felt my mind settling down, relaxing a bit. Now, I don’t know if that would be helpful for you. There are many ways to slow things down and try to focus on what is right in our lives. Perhaps, every day, we can take a few moments to count our blessings. Push aside what we lack, what we wish for, but instead, to take stock of the good.

When we are able to appreciate what we have, life is sweeter and more precious. *Eizoh who ashir?* Who is rich? The one who is happy with what one has. No matter if our lives didn’t go according to plan. No matter if we cannot traverse to the far reaching corners of space. And no matter if no magical genie comes into our lives. Maybe that’s for the best. Perhaps, with the right frame of mind, we’ll be able to sense and appreciate the everyday blessings of our lives. With the start of our New Year, may it be filled with awe, joy, and the ability to savor all that God gives us. May we have a greater sense of meaning and have the ability to wonder at the

beauty of our world and the love and friendships we have. And may it be a year of blessing for us and our families.

**Notes:**

1 <https://upjoke.com/gratitude-jokes>

2 Pirkei Avot 4:1

3 God and the Big Bang by Daniel Matt pg. 19

4 “ “ pg. 21

5 “ “ Pg. 41

6 “ “ Pg. 4

7 God in Search of Man, Abraham Joshua Heschel, pg. 33-34

8 “ “ Pg. 46

9 “” Pg. 47