

## Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5784 – Rabbi Linda Joseph

### WHAT IS AWE?

Say with me: *Ooooh!* ...

Say with me: *Aaaah!* ...

Say with me: *whoa!* ...

These sounds are anthropologically-studied, cross-cultural, universal exclamations when humans encounter Awe.<sup>i</sup>

Today, the Days of Awe, the *Yamim Noraim*, begin. Let's delve into a *basic* question for this time of year. **What is Awe?**

I keep being drawn back to this story: a dream of Reb Nachman of Bratslav. Here is how Howard Schwartz retells Nachman's tale:

"In my dream I woke up in a forest. The forest was boundless. I wanted to return. One of you came to me and said: "This forest is so long, it is infinite. All the vessels in this world, are made from this forest."

He showed me a way out of the forest, which took<sup>ii</sup> me to a river. I wanted to reach the end of it. One of you came to me and said: "This river is endless. Everyone in the world drinks from the water in this river." Then he showed me a way of reaching the end of the river.

After that, I came to a mill built by the side of the river, and one of you came to me and said: "This mill grinds the grain for everyone in the world." Near the mill, I saw a blacksmith working. One of you came to me and said: "This blacksmith makes tools for the entire world."

And then I woke up. The hammering of the blacksmith, still echoing in my ears.

After Reb Nachman told this dream he said: "The world tells a story, but I have lived a story."<sup>iii</sup>

Reb Nachman, in his dream, finds himself in an endless forest, and he wants to return. How is he to get out? How is he to return? Will he return? His dream is set in the place of *Yirah*. *Yirah* is the Hebrew word for Awe. In this case, we might translate *Yirah* as Awe that is Fear. The forest is endless – *Ein Sof* – without end -- like the unknowable, incomprehensible, aspects of God. Reb Nachman is in Awe, Fearful to be in such a place.

Many theologians describe Awe as Fear. They use this analogy:

The Awe experience is the emotion that overwhelms us, as we perch at the edge of the Grand Canyon, overlooking the vast and shimmering colors of cliff, and rock, below us. We notice how high we are. We notice how tiny we are. We are aware of the vacuous space that is before us.

A gust of wind could...[\[breathe\]](#)...

That is Fear. That is Awe. At the ledge of wonder... We squirm. We worry. We angst. We quake. We sweat. We've all known such times of *Yirah*.

An existential moment of Fear on the ledge of wonder:

- Think: of the terror of hurtling along a highway, in a speeding Maserati sports car, at 205 miles per hour....
- Think: of a diagnosis of cancer – what does the future of our lives hold?
- Think: of the vulnerability of a mother in childbirth – will she, and the child survive?

Such moments are the *Yirah* that is Fear.

We moderns don't like this sense of *Yirah*. We prefer to think of Awe as not Fear-filled, but as Wonder-filled. It just feels better.

The best-selling author, Diane Ackerman, defines *Yirah* as Wonder for us, in her line that reads: "Wonder is the heaviest element on the periodic table. Even a fleck of it stops time."<sup>iv</sup>

No surprise, given our preference for *Yirah* as Wonder, that the writings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, resonate with so many. Rabbi Heschel sees a clear distinction between Fear and Wonder. He writes, in his philosophical work, *God in Search of Man*:

"Fear is the anticipation and expectation of evil or pain.... Awe, on the other hand, is the sense of wonder and humility inspired by the sublime or felt in the presence of mystery."<sup>v</sup>

For Rabbi Heschel, *Yirah* are those moments that stop time. They inspire.

He continues to say:

"The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a

*Yirah* is in the noticing of wonders that connects us, to something greater than ourselves.

- For Reb Nachman, Awe in the sense of wonder, is revealed by his companions in his dream. We do not know who they are. But they help him see greater than himself. What do his friends show him?

- All the vessels of the world, that is, all of existence, are made from this forest.
- That there is a path out of an infinite forest that leads out.
- That there is an endless river that sustains all life.
- There is a mill that grinds grain that feeds all.
- That there is a blacksmith who renders all tools.

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It is written that Reb Nachman woke from his dream, the hammering of the blacksmith still in his ears. And he said: “The world tells a story, but I have lived a story.”

We have read this story. We have learned this story. We have heard this story. It is not the same as Reb Nachman living it in his dreams.

Reb Nachman’s story of *Yirah*, develops in his unconscious. He resided virtually in the place of Fear, an endless forest that seemed impossible to escape. He experienced inwardly the Wonders within - the path, the river, the mill, the blacksmith. For Reb Nachman, his feelings of Fear and Wonder within this tale are immediate, simultaneous. and real – they are lived.

Can Fear and Wonder coexist?

Science tells us that these emotions stimulate the same part of our parasympathetic nervous system. This part of our nervous system evokes a fight-or-flight response when in Fear, but is also responsible for a relaxation response when we perceive Wonder. Usually these responses operate separately, like a hot faucet, and a cold faucet. But... when we pray and meditate, evoking Awe within us, science has found that these responses activate at the same time, like a singular faucet that can run warm. <sup>viii</sup>

In life, *Yirah* as Fear, and *Yirah* as Wonder, might feel like they are separate things. But, they are in fact, interconnected in the container that is Awe. Science has now proven that.

Alan Morinis, a practitioner of *Musar*, puts it this way:

“... there is no conflict between these two views of Awe – they are just focused on different points along the pathway.”<sup>ix</sup>

The Romantic poet, William Blake, in his poem *Auguries of Innocence*, suggests the same thing.

He begins with Wonder:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour<sup>x</sup>

...and then he continues to speak of many other types of Awe in this world, that inspire Fear.

- Such as Cherubim that cease to sing;
- a Wolf's and Lion's howl;
- the Spider's enmity;
- a Mother's grief,
- and more.

William Blake offers us this insight:  
"Joy & Woe are woven fine  
A Clothing for the soul divine" <sup>xi</sup>

His, is a classic description of *Yirah* that combines Fear and Wonder.

***Yirah* can be Fear.**

***Yirah* can be Wonder.**

***Yirah* can be a mixture of both.**

- It can be the Fear of a speeding Maserati sports car and the Wonder of the engineering that creates the power of its engine.
- It can be the Fear of our cancerous body, and the epiphany of illness, that life is filled with Wonder.
- It can be the Fear of the moment of childbirth, and the Wonder of the miracle of potential new life.

***Yirah* can be Fear.**

***Yirah* can be wonder.**

***Yirah* can be a mixture of both.**

The Days of Awe have begun. We will fill these *Yamim Noraim*, these Awe-Filled Days, with images and emotions of *Yirah*. We will encounter Fear in our Machzor. We will know Wonder in our prayerbook. And sometimes, these experiences will mingle in our prayers. We will come to know *Yirah* communally, personally, emotionally.

Let us journey through the endless forest of these days, noticing the details together, living our story that hopes for return.

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<sup>i</sup> Dacher Keltner: *AWE: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, NY: Penguin Presss, 2023, p. 57

<sup>ii</sup> "The Endless Forest" in *A Palace of Pearls: The Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*, retold by Howard Schwartz, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 223, word replaced for clarity

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in Jonah Paquette *AWESTRUCK: How Embracing Wonder Can Make You Feel Happier, Healthier and More Connected*, Boulder CO, Shambhala, 2020, P. 13

<sup>v</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1955, p. 77

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, p.75

<sup>vii</sup> "I Know Not Your Way" by Malka Heifetz Tussman in *Women Speak to God: The Prayers and Poems of Jewish Women* ed. Marica Cohn Spiegel and Deborah Lipton Kremsdorf, San Diego: Women's Institute for Continuing Education, 1987, p.33

<sup>viii</sup> Paquette, pp. 52-53

<sup>ix</sup> Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, Boston and London, Trumpeter, 2011, p. 239

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>

<sup>xi</sup> *ibid*