

Yom Kippur Evening Sermon 5784 – Rabbi Linda Joseph

SHOPPING FOR AWE

(Lay out boxes of products – boxes labeled AWE on one side – then with Dacher Keltner's categories on the other side.)

My husband, Richard, is a regular at Costco. He introduced me to its' business model. So, I'm familiar with it. However, I admit to you now: I find such box stores way overwhelming.

So, imagine how confounded I was, when I -as a fangirl of encountering God - read a spiritual article by Alan Morinis, that suggests God and Costco have the same business idea!

Hear his theory out:

When you go to Costco, placed on the end of several aisles, are tables. There is an employee offering you free food samples. They are hoping to entice you to purchase a product that might not have been on your regular shopping list.

Would you like to try a potsticker?

A biscotti?

How about some pita chips?

Or some avocado dip?

Here...take a sample!

As you circumnavigate the store, you can eat almost an entire meal! And, if you are like my husband, you might even finish your visit to Costco, by topping off the free-tasting menu - with a one-dollar-fifty hotdog!

God, suggests Alan Morinis, has used a similar store model since the creation of humankind. God has filled this world with multiple spiritual traits:

- Love,
- Wisdom,
- Happiness,
- Patience.

We experience each of these in the different aisles of our lives. When we taste a free sample of Compassion, or Kindness, or Generosity, we become familiar with that sample, and we might be inspired to look for more - in the store of life.ⁱ

Awe is one of the products in God's store. Once you've experienced it – well – you want to have it again. It's what my mother would call: more-ish! You want to recapture that fleeting moment, the indescribable feeling, the exposure tinged with wonder.

What is “more-ish” about Awe? Research tells us: It is full of good nutrients for our soul! Jonah Parquette speaks to the benefits of Awe in his book: “Awestruck”. Proclaiming in his subtitle, that Awe can make us happier, healthier, and more connected.ⁱⁱ He then backs these findings with anecdotes and scientific studies.

In *Pirke Avot*, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, speaks of Awe as one of the essential wisdoms. He says: “Without Wisdom, there is no Awe. If there is no Awe, there is no Wisdom.”

So, Awe is not *just* more-ish, it is also good for us! Something we *should* want to sample and purchase from God's store.

But for many of us, finding the Awe shelf in God's store is not so easy. We feel lost and overwhelmed - just like I do when I find myself in the aisles of Costco. At those moments, Richard says to me: “Finding the item you need is *easy* in any Costco store - if you know where to look.”

And I am going to suggest to you, that adding more Awe to your life, *is* possible, if you know where to look for Awe, in the aisles of God's store of life. And the scientific evidence and Jewish tradition suggests that it will make your life better!

So where can you find Awe?

Well, there is not just one brand of awe. There are several brands of Awe products in God's store. Dacher Keltner in his research on Aweⁱⁱⁱ suggests eight primary ways we can find Awe in our everyday life.

Tonight, Kol Nidre, since we are here, in a Jewish locale of God's store - let's search for Awe using a Jewish lens and the categories that Dacher Keltner proposes.

On the Awe shelf, the most popular product according to research is: **Moral Beauty**. We find awe when we experience or learn of other people's courage, kindness, strength, or their overcoming.^{iv}

When Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel “prayed with his feet” and marched with the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr in Selma Alabama across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. When the Rabbi sat with King outside the Arlington Cemetery to protest the Vietnam War, we admired his Moral Beauty. We were awed by his public actions as a Jewish leader that counted this country’s racism.

Many of us have found Awe in the lives of Holocaust survivors. Each time we listen to a story: the grim details, the fear, the *chutzpa*, we cannot help but wonder at the ability to overcome horrors, to begin again, have children, work, establish new lives, and even for some - the ability to forgive.

In God’s store, on the shelf, next to Moral Beauty, is what French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, called “collective effervescence.” Durkheim explains **Collective Effervescence** this way:

“we are buzzing and crackling with some life force that merges people into a collective self, a tribe, an oceanic “we”.^v

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. Remember how you felt, on that holiest day of the year, when you learned of the surprise attack on Israel? Suddenly as we gathered in the synagogue, we were made hyper-aware of the collective nature of the Jewish people, the connection between “us” in the diaspora, and the “us” in Israel.

Eighteen days after the war had started, Israel survived this vicious attack. We - the Jewish people we - the tribe of we, the oceanic we, mourned those killed, maimed, and captured. But also felt an Awe that Israel had prevailed this assault. We had pride. Collective effervescence.

Collective effervescence is also felt during *Simcha*. The *Naches* we experience when our grandchild is named and becomes part of the Jewish people. Or when they stand up in Shul to read from the Torah as they become a Bet Mitzvah. Or when we watch them choose to stand under the Chuppah being married, according to the laws of Moses and Israel. With each of these *Smachot*, there is a buzzing and crackling, with a life force that merges us into the Jewish “we”. We have a sense of Awe. *Mazal Tov!*

The next product on the Awe shelf, in God’s store, gets good reviews. It is the Awe we feel when we encounter **Nature**.

I love the Midrashic quote that has made it onto greeting cards – “Every blade of grass has an angel bending over it, saying: “Grow, grow.”^{vi} It speaks to the wonder

to be found in even the *smallest* part of the natural world, and its connection - to the Holy.

Many of us have felt this awe when we enter nature. Reb Nachman makes this connection in his famous prayer.

“Grant me the ability to be alone; may it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass - among all growing things ...”^{vii}

Another Awe product in God’s store is **Music**. It can transport us to places of symbolic meaning.^{viii}

Tonight, we experienced the Awe of music, when once again, we heard the *Kol Nidre* played and sung. What would our Yom Kippur experience be, without this melody which connects us to generations past, to our community, and to God?

And, tonight we experienced the Awe of music yet again, when we joined in communally singing the confessional for the first time

– ♪ *ai, ai, ai, ai, ai* ... The power of music transported us all, collectively, to the symbolic place of contemplating atonement.

Now for this product packaged in a very attractive box...**Visual Art and Design** can evoke Awe. Especially when it creates identification with a cultural system, that we might be part of.^{ix}

Each time we open our Torah scroll and look at the shiny black inked letters, on the creamy white parchment. – Awe is possible. Here are words, purported to have been uttered by God, with stories that have shaped us as a people, that have been hand copied from generation to generation.

You might experience such awe in an Art Gallery. When you view the symbolism inherent in a Marc Chagall painting or window, and are carried by his dreamlike images, to a Jewish place of Awe. Jewish pride.

In the aisle of God’s store, on the shelf, is also the product called **Spiritual or Mystical Experiences**. Such is the awe we feel through study and prayer or at a service. The moment when we sense that there is a greater force or mystery, that exists outside ourselves.

You may find it in the plaintive cries of the Shofar, that break your heart. Or in the shadow of God coddling you, as you offer a *MiSheberach* for one you love who is

ill. Or perhaps it is in the grace and forgiveness that a day such as Yom Kippur, brings.

Once, I felt such mystical Awe, while praying the *Kedusha*, the sanctification of God in the *Amidah* prayer. A fleeting moment came upon me, when I felt myself high amongst the angelic beings praising God – *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*. It was intense, light-filled, and whole – and just as the moment came, it left. Each time we chant the *Kedusha* in our services, I yearn once again to achieve that awesome moment.

This next product of Awe in God's store are our stories and experiences of **Life and Death**.

In Ecclesiastes Rabbah, there is a Midrash that contains a teaching of our sages. "A baby enters the world with hands clenched, as if to say: "The world is mine, I shall grab it." A person leaves this world with their hands open, as if to say, "I can take nothing with me."^x

At the wonder of childbirth, we find Awe in the moment of a baby's cry. We grasp potentiality of the child in years ahead with Awe and hope. But also, at the opposite end of life, at death, there is Awe, in that last breath. The Talmud explains that the kiss of death is likened to removing a hair from milk, as the soul leaves the body^{xi}.

How beautiful and how awesome. Anyone who has witnessed these life-force moments, knows that they are times of incomprehensible Awe.

The final category suggested by Dacher Keltner, found in God's store, on the shelves of Awe – are what I am calling **Light Globe Moments**.^{xii} The moments when we suddenly understand lives essential truths.^{xiii} Keltner writes, that when we realize such insight, it can transform our life.

In God's store, in our Jewish locale, we might find a light globe moment when we learn a Torah text. The wow, that puts our beliefs, values, and intuitions into place for us.

I see this a lot with the conversion students when I teach. As they learn about Judaism and find that it is simpatico. with their understanding of the world, they are opened to an Awe that transforms their lives - and motivates them to ultimately choose a Jewish way of life.

Today on Yom Kippur, we pray for the light globe moment to transform our lives. Our liturgy is designed on many levels. to encourage moments of self-awareness, as we undertake *Tikkun Atzmi*, repair of self, and transform our lives in the year to come.

Dacher Keltner, in his book on Awe, tells us, that there are other categories where Awe might be felt, but these he has listed, are the most common categories.^{xiv} He also tells us, that we may not touched by every type of Awe in our lives, but many find it in these categories.

Playing on Alan Morinis's analogy, we might say: There are other categories of Awe available elsewhere. But these are the best and most popular brands of Awe and are therefore stocked on the shelves in God's store.

I find Costco overwhelming. But finding the right product on the aisle and the shelf does have its rewards... and its savings! Searching for Awe can also be overwhelming. If you struggle with it, you are not the only one. But a start - is knowing where to look, where to search for Awe, and then being open to feeling it.

The product you find, in the store of life, that evokes Awe, will be something you come back to search for again and again. I guarantee you will want to recapture that fleeting moment, the indescribable feeling, the exposure tinged with wonder.

It is... very more-ish!

ⁱ <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/spirituality/what-your-heart-can-teach-you>

ⁱⁱ Jonah Paquette *Awestruck: How Embracing Wonder Can Make You Happier, Healthier, and More Connected* Boulder: Shambhala, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Dacher Keltner *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* New York, Penguin Press, 2023

^{iv} *Ibid*, pp. 11-12

^v Keltner, *op cit*, p. 13

^{vi} Midrash Rabbah, Bereshit 10:6

^{vii} <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/114332?lang=bi>

^{viii} Keltner, *op. cit.* p. 14

^{ix} *Ibid*, p. 15

^x Midrash Kohelet Rabbah (need reference)

^{xi} BT Baba Batra 17a

^{xii} Keltner calls them Epiphanes.

^{xiii} Keltner, *op. cit.* p. 17

^{xiv} *Ibid*, p. 18