

The first day of Rosh HaShanah, 5759/1998

--Rabbi Rob Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken

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Shanah Tovah.

The questions we don't know how to answer tend to be the questions that stay with us.

Almost two years ago, I went to spend a Shabbat at a synagogue where I was applying for the position of rabbi -- it was a synagogue other than this one. I led parts of the service, read from the Torah, gave a sermon, and then there was a light lunch to which the entire congregation was invited -- And towards the end of the lunch, I was invited to stand up and to field questions from members of the congregation. It was basically like a job interview in front of a live studio audience of 150 people.

I was able to anticipate many of the questions I was asked - but I remember the question on which I stumbled: when someone asked: "In just a few words, what's the most important concept of Jewish spirituality?"

So I've been thinking about this issue until now. And I've decided that it's a question that cannot be answered. First of all, it's impossible to choose just ONE most important concept of Jewish spirituality. But I do think I can get it down to THREE.

And secondly, it's impossible to address each of these concepts in just a few words. But I think I could do each one in about 20 minutes.

I bet you can see where this is going.

During these High Holiday services, I will address what I think are the three most central and relevant concepts in Jewish spirituality - one this morning, one tomorrow morning, and one next week on Yom Kippur morning.

When I use the word "spirituality," I'm referring to those aspects of Judaism that transcend the limitations of our senses and transcend the material world.

As one contemporary author and teacher writes, "Spirituality is a highly personal outlook about what is sacred to us, it is the expression of our most deeply held values, and it is that sense of higher purpose that guides our daily lives. Spirituality is not an otherworldly approach or a retreat into the occult. It is what you know in your heart to be true-- or "heart-knowledge." We are called as Jews to search for the tradition of heart-knowledge in Judaism." (David Ariel)

So this morning, I would like to share with you the first of these three most central Jewish spiritual values. Actually, I would like to convey it to you through one of my favorite stories by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, who is a noted author and rabbi in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

Rabbi Kushner writes about how one year, in the middle of November, he once went to the nursery school of his synagogue to spend some time with the kids and to tell them a story. Midway through the story, the kids noticed that snow had started to fall outside - the first snowfall of the year. As you might expect, there was suddenly great excitement in the room. "Look! It's snowing outside! Winter is here!" And they all lept out of their places and ran over to the window, completely oblivious to the fact that the rabbi was trying to tell them a story.

Now, there's a special blessing in Jewish liturgy to be recited upon seeing spectacular natural events - such as the first snowfall of the year. Rabbi Kushner first contemplated telling the kids about the blessing and having them join him in reciting it. But he decided just to recite the blessing to himself. He realized that for the children, there was no reason to recite the blessing. Their spontaneous reaction, their excitement, was an even stronger affirmation of the wondrousness of nature than any adult's blessing could ever be. After all: for the nursery school students, this was snowfall number five or six of their entire conscious lives!! (Or maybe we'd better revise that figure upward, as we're talking about Massachusetts.) There's no way that adults can appreciate the wonders of snow as much as kids can. As Rabbi Kushner writes, "There are places children go that grown-ups can only observe from afar."

In many ways, young children are spiritual virtuosos, and adults, in our acts of prayer, are attempting to see the world through the eyes of young children - trying to re-create what it was like when we observed our first snowfall - our first sunset - our first rainbow.

And THIS is what I think is one of the most important principles of a Jewish spiritual approach to the world. We make an effort to see the world through the eyes of a child.

This year the Jewish world commemorated the 25th *yahrtzeit* - the 25th anniversary of the death - of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, certainly one of the spiritual giants of our century. There is virtually no Jewish leader today who has not been profoundly affected by the writings of Rabbi Heschel. And many of his writings discuss this very issue - how we can train ourselves to see the world with the wonder and amazement of a child.

Rabbi Heschel suffered a debilitating heart attack when he was in his mid-50's -from which he never fully recovered. A few days later, one of his closest students and disciples - who was my teacher, Rabbi Samuel Dresner - visited him at his apartment in Manhattan where he was recovering. And Rabbi Heschel spoke slowly, with much difficulty, almost whispering.

"Sam," he said, "when I regained consciousness, my first feelings were not of despair or anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I had lived. "Take me, O Lord," I thought. "I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime." And Rabbi Heschel paused, exhausted by those few sentences, and then went on: "That is what I meant when I wrote, in the preface to my book of Yiddish poetry: *`ij d`Ha brarho eepcrx `pyh`Hh bliw -- `eo ce d`Hqh fii nix brbrao*. I did not ask for success. I asked for wonder. And you gave it to me."

Let's think about Heschel's words. "I did not ask for success. I asked for wonder. And you gave it to me." According to Heschel, the most profound blessing one can have in life is NOT success. It is NOT material prosperity. It is not even "happiness." Rather, it is "wonder" -- the ability to spot and appreciate miracles in the world - the ability to experience the world anew every day - the ability to stave off boredom and jadedness - to experience every sunset, every rainbow, every human interaction as if it were the first one.

Rabbi Heschel had a name for this approach to the world. He called it "radical amazement."

He writes: "Radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature. It is alien to his spirit to take things for granted, to regard events as a natural course of things.... He knows, [of course,] that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. Looking at the world, he would say, quoting from the Psalms, "This is Adonai's doing -- it is marvellous in our eyes."

One of the blessings of the Amidah - which we recited once today and will recite later on again in our service - begins with the words *Modim anachnu lach*, We thank You. Among the things for which we thank God are "nisecha sheb'chol yom imanu," Your miracles which are with us every day, "*ve'al*

*nifl'otecha ve'tovotecha sheb'chol et - erev, vavoker, ve'tzohorayim.*" And for your wonders and beneficent deeds that happen all the time - night, morning, noon."

Jewish tradition asks us to revise our conventional definition of a miracle. The word "miracle" cannot refer solely to a supernatural event. If that were the meaning of the word, we wouldn't have miracles every day. No - in Judaism, a miracle is anything in the world that provokes us to radical amazement. And that could be just about anything - - certainly a sunrise or sunset, but to someone who has internalized the concept of radical amazement, it would also refer to every blade of grass, every child's smile, every bite of food, every act of human creativity, every recovery from every illness; every demonstration of love. (Rabbi Heschel once began a lecture by saying, "An hour ago, there took place the greatest event in all history." ---- "The sun set!!")

But we may wonder: If it is so desirable to see the world through the eyes of children, why do we do it so rarely? Why is it so difficult for us? Young children perceive a world full of miracles. Adults, however, have a harder time of it. Our bodies, and our sensory systems and our nervous systems are virtually hard-wired to pay attention to new information and to tune out that which is repetitive and constant. And similarly, after a while, we begin to tune out the radical amazement that we used to feel at the first snowfall of the year. And eventually, when we see a snowfall, our first thought is -- what a pain it's going to be to drive through. And we think that when we have such notions, we are operating on a HIGHER level than the children who are caught up in their awe and wonder. But actually, we are operating on a LOWER level. There is something profound and beautiful we have lost. And one of the goals of Jewish prayer is to help us recover it -- to paint images for us that will help us to continually renew our sense of wonder at the world, to help us to focus on the miracles that are part of our lives.

And that's why in Judaism, there is a blessing for just about everything - blessings before and after each meal - blessings for each sunrise and sunset; blessings for new clothes, new babies, new flowers in the springtime. A blessing for opening our eyes in the morning, a blessing for closing them at night. Even a blessing for going to the bathroom! And each blessing attests to a miracle. When we focus on the content of these blessings, they help us to cultivate our radical amazement.

One of my favorite quotations from the entire Torah was read in the synagogue last week. It reads as follows: If you listen to the voice of Adonai your God, "all these blessings will come upon you, catch up to you, and overtake you."

Now on the surface, it doesn't sound like there's anything particularly remarkable about that verse. But note the metaphor that it uses. Note where "the blessings" are in spatial relation to ourselves. "If you listen to the voice of Adonai your God, all these blessings will come upon you, catch up to you, and overtake you." All the blessings of the world are BEHIND us.

In American society, we are likely to use a different metaphor -- happiness and blessing are way out in front of us, on the horizon, and if we chase them vigorously enough, we might even catch up with them. We even have a name for this - the "Pursuit of Happiness."

But according to the Torah, the blessings of the world are not in front of us, but BEHIND us. If we listen to God's voice, then the blessings and the happiness will pursue us - they will eventually catch up to us and overtake us.

So how do we meet up with blessings and happiness? Not by speeding up - but by slowing down. In the words of Rabbi Harold Kushner, "Isn't it possible that God has all sorts of wonderful presents and blessings for us - good food, beautiful sunsets, flowers budding in the spring, leaves turning in the fall, quiet moments of sharing - but we in our pursuit of happiness are so constantly on the go that God can't find us at home to deliver them!?"

Judaism teaches us that the deepest and most authentic blessings in the world - the blessings that are most enduring - are not the things we long to acquire, but the things that we already have. And we can access this blessing and this happiness merely by slowing down and letting God open our eyes to the miracles that are all around us.

But make no mistake - cultivating a sense of radical amazement is very difficult to do. It is especially difficult for us in the 20th century. There is so much evil and so much suffering in our world that it is very hard to look at the world from a position of radical amazement. And this is a special challenge for Jews, because the suffering of OUR people is held up as the paradigmatic example of the ugliness and cruelty of our world. Isn't it easier to explain all this suffering by concluding that the world and everything in it developed out of randomness rather than by artful design?

Well - in some ways it is easier, and in some ways it is more difficult.

I had an opportunity several years ago to perform Jewish music in a number of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. While I was there, one afternoon I visited the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in southern Poland. After walking around the death camp - visiting some of the barracks, and the remains of the crematoria - I returned to the entrance of the camp. And as I turned around to get a last glimpse at this most horrifying place on earth, I was confronted with a theological dilemma. Because there in the sky, right over Auschwitz, was the most beautiful sunset I have ever seen. It had never occurred to me that there were sunsets in Auschwitz too. I just assumed everything about the place would be ugly.

And at that moment, I realized that it was difficult, though possible, for me to believe that God could create a world that included the horrors of Auschwitz. It was difficult to believe, but it was possible.

But it was impossible for me to believe that a sunset like that arose by chance.

A Jewish spiritual approach to the world demands that we try as hard as possible to maintain our sense of wonder about the world - even in the face of extraordinary difficulties. If this is hard for us, be it known that we are in good company. It doesn't come easily to anyone. We all have to work at it.

I would like to close with another excerpt from the writings of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. Last year, he was interviewed by a reporter who was asking various celebrities: What gift would they like to give themselves for the new year?

Kushner writes: "I thought: A bigger sailboat? no, it wouldn't look good for a spiritual teacher. Youth? no, I like being 52. Wisdom? no, I like the search, the process of working at it. To be better looking? no, couldn't possibly imagine it. So I told her I need a new pair of eye glasses, ones that would enable me to see the presence of the Creator in everyone and everything. --I'm pretty sure it's there,-- I said, --I just can't seem to see it most of the time.--"

May this coming year be a year of blessing for all of us - a year of attention to and appreciation of miracles - and may we all take enough time to slow down to permit the blessings of the world to catch up to us.

Shanah Tovah!

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