

G-d of Abraham and Einstein

Leyl Rosh HaShana 5768

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Imagine an autumn night like this one, long, long ago. There is a cool breeze in the night air, wonderful and refreshing compared to the Mesopotamian sun that still burns hot during the day. The marketplace is quiet, all the vendors having closed their stalls and returned to their families' tents hours ago. Only one person stirs, walking silently through the empty square. His eyes are glued to the night sky.

He is a young man, really still just a child. He works with his father during the day, selling in the marketplace the *teraphim* that his father fashions out of wood and stone. But the boy really has no taste for his father's livelihood. He has wanderlust, and at night he loves to come back to this place, so quiet, and gaze up at the desert sky.

He's watched the cycles of the moon – waxing large and waning small – until there's the tiniest sliver of a new moon, like tonight. He has learned to watch the constellations in the heavens. He can identify many of them – the scorpion, the scales, the virgin. Most significantly, he has mapped in his mind the way they move from season to season – how they dance around one another throughout the year. And, through careful observation, he's noted how every autumn they return to their same location. He ponders that it has always been this way – the stars in their unending cycle through the sky, but according to logical and even predictable rules.

He smiles when he thinks of the wooden statues that people come running after in the family shop each day. And he looks up at the heavens again, and thinks: “Who created these amazing things? Where did the heaven and the earth come from? It couldn't be the sun... it disappears every evening. It couldn't be the moon and stars... they set every morning. There must be something higher, beyond all these things...”¹

His thoughts are interrupted by his brother Nahor, calling to him. “Avram! Avram! Father says to come back home! It's an early morning in the idol shop tomorrow!”

And Avram takes one last glance above, noting one more time the position of the stars and the new moon. He can't shake the feeling that he is about to make a giant leap, a connection of some sort. He senses that just as he is looking for something nature's design, so, too, there is something there that is looking for him. He calls it a night, and follows Nahor back to the tents...



¹ My paraphrase of *Midrash Tehillim* 1:13

At least since the days of Abraham, religious people have looked towards the natural world in wonder. For many of us, the realm of nature is the place where the first fluttering of religious consciousness happened.

Certainly, the current state of the world is such that our Father Abraham never could have imagined. He never would have conceived of the awesomeness of mapping the human genome or pondered black holes in deepest space. Those mysteries are left to his descendents: Maimonides, Spinoza, Einstein... down to you and me.

No, Abraham's gift to us is something different. He was the first, says our faith, to look to the stars and to the natural world and comprehend that beneath the apparent diversity that seems to exist in our universe, there is an underlying unity that connects all Creation and its Creator.

For instance, these are the words of Albert Einstein, interviewed shortly after his 50th birthday in 1929. Already he had made his mark as one of the most sublime minds in human history, the theoretician of relativity and unraveler of some of the mysteries of the cosmos. Einstein said:

We are [like] a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. But it does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn't know what it is. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward G-d. We see the universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws – but only dimly understand these laws.²

As the sun set this evening over the horizon, the year 5768 arrived. According to our tradition, this date brings us right back to the origins of the universe. Rosh HaShana commemorates the spark of life that ignited all creation. And it plants within us that sense of awe and wonder – celebrating the idea that not only were we created, but that we are cognizant of the fact that we were created.

Imagine an intellectual terrain in America where science is deepened by the humility, morality, and wonder of religious tradition. And imagine an academy where religious faith is nourished by the rigor and deductive principles of science. Now there is an agenda for the 21st Century! Back in the dark ages of the 20th Century, people still pitted the two against each other. There was science and there was faith, and in monkey trials and televised political debates people were forced to choose a side. Our challenge, on this Rosh HaShana, is to ask: **How is my religious faith, my sense of *kedushah*, and my understanding of G-d deepened by what science has taught me to be the truth about the world?**

² Quoted in Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), p.386

Jewish belief in this underlying unity teaches us certain spiritual truths. It is taught that Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, the Rosh of the Mir Yeshiva in the early 20th Century, was reflecting on the latest technology of his era. He said,

The seismograph has taught us that a tremor in any part of the world can be felt by a sufficiently sensitive instrument everywhere in the world. The same is true of a person's deeds. One should not think that his actions do not affect others. Everything one does in some way affects everyone else in the world.³



Of course, awe of the natural world is not the same as respect for it. All we need to do is reflect on the crisis of global warming and climate change to realize this.

Global warming is fact, not theory. We know that eleven of the last 12 years rank among the 12 hottest years in human history.⁴ And we know the cause of these changes: carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels, as well as methane and other greenhouse gases, spewed in ever increasing amounts from the corporate consumerist cultures thriving around the world. Paired with rapid loss of the great forests, especially in less-developed nations around the world, the recipe for disaster is now clear.

Our society in America is culpable for more than our fair share. Even though America represents barely 4% of the world's population, we are directly responsible – through our cars, our factories, the meat industry, and more – for more than 30% of the pollutants that cause global warming.⁵ Now, I do not believe that America is responsible for all the evils of the world, like our enemies would claim. I just happen to believe that we should accept more responsibility for the evils that are our doing.

Rejecting our responsibility reflects the type of thinking that has prevented the United States from signing the Kyoto Accord. You'll recall that ten years ago, that international accord was signed, calling on developed nations around the world to meet binding targets by 2010 to turn back global warming. One hundred and sixty nations around the world have ratified it and committed to it. The U.S., in 1997, signed the accord, but subsequently reneged and refused to ratify it.

And why do we not join the community of nations? The White House spokesman explained at the time – reflecting on the habits of the American consumer – ““The President believes that [high-energy consumption] is an American way of life... [and] the American way of life is a blessed one.”⁶

³ As quoted in *Smiling Each Day* by Rabbi Avraham Twerski (1993), <http://www.uscj.org/Koach/kocdec03quotes.htm>

⁴ Since 1850, when worldwide temperature measurements began. In *Findings of the IPCC* [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] *Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change Science*, Union of Concerned Scientists: http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/science/ipcc-highlights1.html

⁵ *An Inconvenient Truth* (DVD), 2006.

⁶ Ari Fleischer in *Newsweek*, May 21, 2001

The truth is, there is a unison voice coming from every corner of the scientific world. And the facts are terrifying.

- The increase in the number of Category 4 & 5 hurricanes – nearly doubling in the past 30 years,⁷ virtually guaranteeing more Katrinas to come;
- The proliferation of drought, wildfires, and heatwaves;
- *A million species* of animals and plants driven to extinction, if trends continue, by the year 2050.⁸
- And the health toll: It means more asthma, more allergies, more epidemics of all sorts. It means more cancer. That is the legacy our addiction to consumption and fossil fuel is bequeathing to our children.

They say if half of Greenland's ice melts, the city of San Francisco would be lost. And Florida. And Manhattan. Think about it: do we want our children to live in a world with, or without, those places? *How badly do we want our children to live in a world where there remains such a thing as Cape Cod?*

I saw a late-night show on TV⁹ recently where the pundit asked: How can anyone be a parent of a young child today and not be an environmentalist? After all, the truth about global warming is the truth about the world we are bequeathing to them. Given everything that we know about what is happening to the natural world, what do you imagine our children will say of us twenty five or fifty years from now?

However, if ever there was a message to the Days of Awe, it is this: We are capable of changing our destiny. We are able to take responsibility for the choices that are in our hands. And we are not helplessly sailing into oblivion. In the realm of climate change, this lesson rings especially clear. Our children could point to us as the generation that learned from its errors and changed its course, for their sakes. Or they will remember us as the generation that knew the facts, and sold their future for the price of a Hummer. That is the real choice laid out before us.

There are signs of optimism. Consider how those environment-friendly light bulbs used to be sold in esoteric health food stores and cost small fortunes, are now available in everywhere. (It used to be the case that really caring for the environment was a hobby for the rich. It is no longer.) Consider how hybrid cars – which were the fought tooth and nail every step of the way by American auto makers – are now common, and will only become more so. The other night I stepped out of the Temple – and there were, literally, four hybrid cars parked next to each other in a row. It's a start.

And for the most important sign of change, consider the presidential campaign. I was reflecting on the election – still fourteen long, long months away! – and how, for the

⁷ K. Emanuel, "Increasing destructiveness of tropical cyclones over the past 30 years." *Nature* 436: 686-688, 2005.

⁸ David Bjerklie, "Feeling the Heat," *Time*, March 26, 2006.

⁹ *Real Time with Bill Maher*, HBO.

first time in my adulthood, the environment seems to be a genuine campaign issue. Not just soundbites – pro or con, depending on which base is being pandered to – it seems that this year, the environment really is front-and-center. Which is as it should be, for if ever there were an issue that is truly non-partisan, truly religious and moral, it is halting the destruction of the natural world. The fact that it is at the forefront this campaign season is extraordinary. Maybe this really is an era of awakening.

Perhaps this New Year will be a year of relinquishing behaviors that are poisoning our world. Perhaps this year people will come to realize that our addictions to outrageous consumption and gas-guzzling and toxic behavior is akin to... idol-worship.



Our Father Abraham, the famous smasher of idols, would have understood the lesson well: that when we spew more pollutants into the world, it inevitably reverberates back and poisons us. He also would teach us that we can reverse the poison that enters the system in the same way. It is all one system, this universe in which we live: beneath the surface diversity, an underlying unity that lives and breathes. And in that spirit, I believe Abraham would have challenged us with a mandate to protect this planet we all share, today, five thousand seven hundred sixty-eight years since the world's creation.

Ad-nai Eloheinu, veilohei avraham:

Ad-nai our G-d, and the G-d Abraham:

Remember us on this Day of Renewal of Creation.

O G-d of Rambam and Einstein,

Of Newton and Copernicus and Hawking,

We stagger in awe of your universe.

O G-d of the Big Bang,

Of supernovae and black holes,

We pray for wonder, we pray for the sublime,

We pray for awareness in this year-to-come

That the miracles of creation are not in vain.

You have put the power of right and wrong, of life and death,

In our hands.

Astonished by Your giraffes and amoebas,

Your redwoods and your bluefish,

We recommit this day to be your humble partners,

To till and to tend, to build and be built,

To preserve this legacy of wonder and magnificence

For ourselves and our children,

For now and for generations to come.

Amen.