

**“What a Wonderful World”
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Rosh HaShanah Day #1 Sermon
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Shanah Tovah

Albert Einstein was born in Germany in 1879 and died in New Jersey in 1955. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Poland in 1907 and died in New York in 1972. That means that 48 years of their lifetimes overlapped. Now, I don't know if Einstein and Heschel ever met, spoke, or read each other's work. But what I can tell you is that both these men, arguably two of the greatest masterminds of the Twentieth Century, were deeply embedded in Jewish thought. One studied the cosmos and one studied the Torah, but the conclusions they drew were transcendental and deeply spiritual in their similarity. They both taught us about the deep necessity for Curiosity and for **Wonder**.

I like to imagine that Einstein was standing under the heavens, peering at the stars when he said, “He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.”

Such magnificent words, and ones that mystically align with the teachings of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel composed literal volumes about Radical Amazement – the concept of being actively fascinated with -- intrigued by -- the people and places around us.

“Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement,” he wrote, “to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

“To be spiritual is to be amazed.” I had always loved those words, but never had their meaning been more immediate, more palpable, than on one specific night my mom and I spent in the jungle of Costa Rica.

We were about ten days into our trip through the most densely- biodiverse country on the planet. We had spied tree frogs with neon-green and black stripes, and others with bright red toes. We had crossed rope bridges to spy mother and baby sloths, bathed in the natural hot springs at the base of Arenal volcano. We walked trails lined with countless orchids in every color, were startled by the hoots of monkeys. We looked up to see literally hundreds of different kinds of birds. Looked down to watch battalions of leaf-cutter ants, marching tirelessly with their bright green cargo, ant after ant, leaf after leaf.

The landscape buzzed with the electricity of nature. The air was alive with butterflies and bugs. The soil crawled with beetles and geckos. The trees were draped with snaking vines and massive leaves. Everything moved; everything was alive. Our sense of **Wonder** was heightened and deepened simultaneously, and all I knew was that I wanted more.

So, after the tour group had returned to their rooms one evening, my mom and I signed up for a separate Night Hike excursion. We got lucky; we were the only two visitors the guide escorted into the rainforest that night.

Walking across a narrow and high suspension bridge, it was too dark to see the Sarapiquí River below. But I knew it was there; we had rafted there just one day earlier. The herons and otters we had seen were asleep in the marshes by now. Unsure of what we were about to encounter, we were scared and exhilarated all at once. We were entering the world of the night.

Now, spiders are not my favorite species of animal, but when we encountered the Golden Silk Orb Weaver spider, I had to admit that she was magnificent. She was motionless, poised right in the middle of her intricate handiwork of yellow strands. Woven with seven different types of silk, the web is strong enough to catch large flying insects or small birds, all to be devoured by this sitting queen. This spider's web is strong enough, in fact, that human scientists try to understand its genetic and chemical makeup, hoping to imitate it to make bullet-proof vests.

מה-גִּדְלוּ מַעֲשֵׂיךָ יְהוָה מֵאֵד עֲמָקוֹ מִחֲשֻׁבְּתֶיךָ:

wrote the Psalmist.

“How great are Your works, Adonai. How very intricate Your designs!”

Just down the trail, we encountered the dwarf glass frog, whose back resembles a peachy mushroom with watery white spots. We learned that the male frog protects his progeny – the egg sac laid by the now disappeared mother - by holding it on its back. What appears to be spots on his back are in fact the eggs. Fully camouflaged, Father frog and his undisturbed eggs spend all night in the trees – hidden in plain sight.

At the base of this tree grows a tiny mushroom, whose top is a little apricot-colored cup which catches pools of rainwater and dew every night. Strategically settled on a branch directly above, Father frog knows exactly when to drop his eggs into the little mushroom bowls. There, they will become tadpoles and grow legs, and when the time is right, a new generation hops away. A whole eco-system, a fully evolved life span, all taking place on one branch of one tree.

And that same tree simultaneously hosts vines, leaves, blossoms, and bark, each of which holds one hundred stories of other plants, insects, mammals, and birds, who co-exist as one interconnected system and also as a minuscule fraction of this vast jungle. If we had taken one step too far, or too fast, or shone our lights in a different direction, we would have missed the whole thing.

But we might have seen something else instead. Millions of dramas play out in every fractional corner of every square mile of every jungle, rainforest, and cloud forest; in every inch, mile, and expanse of every desert, ocean, mountain, and nation on this amazing planet. I was fortunate enough to see just a few of them, and the words of Psalm 92 flooded my senses once again:

כִּי שִׂמְחָתָנִי יְהוָה בְּפַעֲלָהּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂי יָדָיו אֲרִנֵּן:

You have gladdened me by Your deeds, Adonai; / I shout for joy at Your handiwork.

The Sages teach us that we should hold so much reverence for the world that we feel compelled to recite one hundred blessings a day. Mishnah Torah provides blessings for all sorts of

Wonders: Upon seeing beautiful scenery or pleasant-looking trees. Upon encountering exotic

animals or unfamiliar people. Upon observing a rainbow or a shooting star. Upon experiencing a thunderstorm or an earthquake.

There are so many sights that we take for granted – that we fail to notice or take the time to observe. So many opportunities for marvel, for questions, for joy.

Heschel 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.”

I felt totally alive on my night hike through the jungle. I wasn't tired, hungry, or cold, and I was not ready to leave. But after reaching the far end of the loop, our guide turned around to walk us out. I tried to peer past him into the darkness. There was so much more I wanted to explore: What lay beyond the loop in the next tree? Who was still out there? What was I walking past unknowingly? What systems far beyond my understanding were happening even as I made my way out of this amazing place?

I was the last in our single-file line. I stopped to tie my shoelace but didn't ask them to wait. I wasn't going to get lost – there was really one way out – so when I straightened up and should have caught up with them, I paused for a few moments instead.

The moon was completely obscured by the tree canopy; there was no source of light save the flashlight in my hand. When I suddenly thought to click it off, I was enveloped in pure, literal blackness. I couldn't see my own hand in front of my eyes or anything in any single direction around me. Utter darkness. I looked over my shoulder to where I had just been. It seemed as if there were nothing there. If I hadn't had just seen the thicket of trees, frogs, roots, and spiders, I never would have believed that it was there at all. My mind reeled; no matter how I tried to focus my eyes and peer down the path, it appeared that I was alone in oblivion. I was so small, so unseen, so unnoticed in this vastly complex spot on the globe. I swam between the extremes of being deadened and heightened. It was not nothing; it was not everything. And it was anything but empty.

And it would all be happening whether I was there to witness it or had never booked the tour at all. The age-old question is answered: Of course a tree falling in the forest still makes a sound, and what's more, the tree doesn't care at all whether a human being is there to hear it. Neither the guide, my mom, nor I had anything to do with the intricate systems happening within this teeming jungle. The spiders, frogs, and trees have no cognizance of - or need for - human participation whatsoever. Standing alone in the darkness, all my usual roles were unnecessary. My role was not to teach, to lead, or even to learn. My role was to be Radically Amazed. To be guided by the words of another great Twentieth-Century thinker, poet Mary Oliver, who wrote, "To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work."

Last night, we spoke about the importance of Humility – of approaching our lives with a tolerance and balance. But adding **Wonder** to the mix moves us into the realm of spirituality.

Heschel asserts that, “Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act of man.”

It’s the same sense of **Wonder** that our forefather Jacob experiences when he awakens from his dream – having seen angels ascending and descending the ladder of his mind – hearing God’s voice telling him to go out in every direction to follow his destiny. Jacob awakes from his sleep and exclaims,

אָכּוּ יֵשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי:

(Gen. 28:16)

“Surely GOD is present in this place, and I did not know it!”

You don’t have to be in Greenland to practice **Humility**, and you don’t have to be in Costa Rica to experience **Wonder**. Like Jacob, like Einstein, and like Heschel, you just need to be where you are.

מִה־נִּוְרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה

(Gen. 28:17)

“How awesome is this place!”

Friends, we gather together on the very first day of 5787, yearning for answers about the best ways to live in this new year.

Turn off your flashlight. Stand still. Take a deep breath. Listen hard. Peer over your shoulder to where you have been and to where you are about to go.

There is never such thing as “nothing there.” The darkness is never all-encompassing. There is an astonishing world out there, ready for you to embrace. This year, allow yourself to be awestruck. To be grateful. Ask for Wonder – and be ready to be mindfully, intentionally – and radically – amazed.

Shanah Tovah