

**Kol Nidre Sermon 5784**  
***How Awesome Is This Place***  
**Rabbi Stacy Friedman**

It was the middle of the night, or maybe the middle of the day, I could no longer discern. I had been so focused on the beating of the heart, his heart. You see, just days earlier, we learned that my husband Frank would need open heart surgery. It took us by surprise; Frank was otherwise healthy, active, cycling and exercising every day, and has always had the most annoyingly healthy diet you can imagine. But all of this was no contest for genetics, so there he was, lying in the hospital bed in the ICU following his quadruple bypass. And despite the fact that the doctors assured us he'd be okay, I was still afraid. Afraid that his newly repaired heart would suddenly stop beating. Worried that the jarring alarms and beeps of the machines and tubes that kept me on high alert signaled something terrifying. I was concerned about his pain, his recovery, and if I'd actually remembered to close the garage door as I left the house early that morning.

But one night, as I sat by Frank's hospital bed, I held his hand and watched him breathe, slow breaths in and out. And I began to breathe with him. And I felt such gratitude and reverence; for life, for our love, and for our family. And in that moment, my fear dissipated and awe took root in my heart. I was filled with awe for the mystery of healing, for the selfless medical team that saved his life, and for his heart that continued to beat – and still does! –despite everything.

**We come here tonight to reclaim this awe.** We come here because in truth, every one of us knows the burden of a broken heart, of fear, and of failure. We come here for forgiveness, for healing, and to mark a new beginning. And we come here on these Days of Awe to lift our souls and to infuse our lives with wonder and with awe.

This is what happens to Jacob in the Book of Genesis. Following a terrible conflict with his brother Esau, Jacob flees to the desert, where he falls asleep for the night using a rock as his pillow. There, he dreams of a great ladder with angels going up and down, and God appears before him and blesses him saying, “I am with you, I will protect you wherever you go, I will never leave you.” When he wakes, Jacob realizes, “אֲכֵן יֵשׁ יְהוָה”<sup>1</sup> God was in this place and I didn't even know it. And then he proclaims, “מִה־נֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה” How filled with awe is this place! How wondrous is this place. The challenge is in the very word נֹרָא (nora) itself, given that it has two distinct and opposite meanings with a very thin line in between. On one hand נֹרָא means fear and dread; and on the other, it means awe and reverence. And our task, like Jacob's, is to tip the scales toward wonder and awe. Because when Jacob went to sleep that night in the desert, surrounded by snakes and scorpions and his brother's looming wrath, he didn't even know if he'd be alive the next morning. But he was, and when he woke up, the terror had lifted and awe took root in his heart. It was there, under the desert sky

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 28:16-17.

and endless stars, that Jacob finally looked up from his own struggles to see that he was part of something so much larger and more magnificent than he ever imagined. And so are we. Our world and our lives are filled with untold beauty, endless mystery, and holiness. And we, just like Jacob, don't always notice. We're busy. Our world can feel so dark at times and we lose sight of the stars overhead. And sometimes, we are on such high alert that we forget to breathe, to open our eyes, and to see what is right in front of us. We come here tonight to prevent ourselves from becoming spiritually complacent, indifferent to the wonders of the universe and the magnificence of our lives. This is why Heschel teaches that, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. 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. To be spiritual is to be amazed."<sup>2</sup> Our goal this year is to wake up each morning and say, "מַה-נוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה. *Ma nora ha makom ha-ze.*," how awesome is this place, this life, this world.

U.C. Berkeley professor, Dacher Keltner, has been teaching people about happiness, and how to find "the good life," for decades. At the center of his inquiry is the question: *How can we live lives of meaning, purpose, with joy and community and belonging?* It is the very same question we ask ourselves on these holy days as well. And after years of extensive research, he found the answer in two words: FIND AWE.<sup>3</sup> In this incredible new book, Dr. Keltner describes awe as "the feeling of being in the presence of something vast, that transcends our understanding of the world." Keltner and his team of researchers gathered data from 2,600 people from 26 countries about their experiences with awe. And they identified eight categories of awe, including religious experience, music, nature, mortality, and kindness. Keltner also discovered that awe has many health benefits: it contributes to our physical and mental health, reduces stress and depression, makes people kinder and more generous, and increases our life expectancy. Awe even makes us think better and more open to new ideas!<sup>4</sup> Experiencing awe can transform our lives. Keltner also explored what does not elicit awe; here's what did not make the list: "Money didn't figure into awe, except in a couple of instances in which people had been cheated out of life savings. No one mentioned their laptop, Facebook, or smartphone. Nor did anyone mention...their new Nikes, or Tesla..."<sup>5</sup> or any other material possession. It is the sacred that evokes awe.

And Judaism has known for thousands of years what science has recently discovered: That our lives become richer and holier when we allow ourselves to experience more awe. And Judaism helps us to cultivate wonder and holiness through its brilliant system of rituals, mitzvot, and blessings which point us toward gratitude and awe. Every morning we thank God to be alive so that we don't take a single day for granted. There are blessings for every type of food, and for rain and rainbows. Every Sukkot, we sleep outside under the full moon to reconnect to the majesty of nature. And our tradition even legislates weekly star gazing, as we search for three stars in the sky at the end of Shabbat. Judaism reminds us to pay attention, to make a regular practice of feeling

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, pg. 74.

<sup>3</sup> Dacher Keltner, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, pg. xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pg. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg. 19.

awe, and to lift our eyes and our souls to find sparks of the divine in every living thing. In fact, so fundamental to Judaism is the transformative power of awe, that nearly 2,000 years ago, Rav Yehudah taught, “The Holy One created the world only so that we should have reverence for God.”<sup>6</sup> Essentially, God created us so that we can live in awe of the universe and everything in it. “וְהָאֱלֹהִי עֹשֶׂה נִסִּים וּמוֹפְתִים מִלְפָּנָיו”.

Awe is at the center of everything. That’s why we’re alive! That is why we mark time itself as holy each time we say the *Shehecheyanu*, the ultimate blessing of awe. Because we know how precious our lives are, how fleeting and uncertain, and we want to embrace it all.

Longtime Rodef Sholom member Cynthia Pepper, was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer four years ago. She told me, “When you’re sick, you’re at the mercy of the scans and medical appointments, and I want my life to be bigger than that. I need something to look forward to.” So, two years ago, Cynthia and her husband Val decided to travel. Since then, they’ve been to Glacier National Park, the Grand Canyon, the Sequoias, and the Oregon Coast. When I asked what moved her most, she answered immediately, “The most inspiring to me of everything we’ve seen are the Bristlecone pine trees. They grow in harsh climates, with extreme temperatures, strong winds, and high altitudes where other trees can’t survive. But they do. And if they can, so can I.”

At the end of his life, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch decided to make an arduous journey to Switzerland. Before he left, his students asked him, “Rabbi, why are you going to Switzerland?” He replied, “When I stand shortly before the Almighty...what will I say when God asks, ‘Shimshon, did you not see my Alps?’”<sup>7</sup>

And maybe God is asking us as well, did you not see the smile on your child’s face? Did you not hear that resplendent symphony? Did you see the ripples in the water on the bay just as the sun sets? Because we don’t have to stand at the base of the world’s oldest tree or at the bottom of a majestic mountain to be awed. We can pursue awe wherever we are. We choose awe by not taking anything for granted, so that we don’t squander any of God’s wonders. So tonight, I ask each of you: When do you experience awe? How can we rediscover and recover wonder and see with fresh eyes in the New Year? We can experience awe even in the midst of our busy lives; stepping outside for just two minutes and looking up at a tree is enough to elevate our souls wherever we are. And, in times of darkness, of struggle, there too, we can be awestruck, just as I was in the hospital while holding the hand of my beloved. Of all the ways we can experience it, there is one that Keltner discovered that leads to awe more than any other. It is moral beauty, other people’s kindness; we are moved by generous deeds and words. In fact, just seeing kindness in others makes us more grateful, generous, and open-hearted. And our world certainly needs more of that!

In fact, Talmud teaches us that on our dying day, the ultimate Day of Judgment, we will each be called to account for everything in this world that we could have enjoyed.<sup>8</sup> With

<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31b.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom*.

<sup>8</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Kedushin.

this in mind, over the summer I went to see a Taylor Swift concert. When I told my son Eli that I was going, he immediately asked, with just a bit of snark, “So are you a Swiftie now?” “No, not yet,” I responded. I wasn’t even familiar with her music. But I explained to him that I was going because I wanted to be part of this phenomenon that has drawn millions of people around the world with such fervor and enthusiasm that early ticket sales crashed the internet. And from the moment I walked into the stadium in my sequined top, I was captivated. I felt like I was part of something larger than myself. And so did every person in that stadium, most of whom knew every word of every song. It was a celebration. It was a movement. And I must confess that I am now a Swiftie.

This is what Emile Durkheim called collective effervescence, and this great source of awe, is found at a Giants game, concerts and music festivals, at farmer’s markets, and of course, at synagogue when we gather to pray, celebrate, and learn. Awe is found even when two people come together to brainstorm. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that, “You must be part of something larger than yourself before you can be yourself.” We come here tonight, and on all other nights, to become the best versions of ourselves, to carry and be carried by this remarkable community in our prayers, in our joy, and in our grief. This is the sacred power of this community, which elevates our souls while allowing us to be fallible, human, and real. This is where we find awe and love and wonder.

The *Unetane Tokef* prayer we recite on these Holy Days reminds us of the awe inherent in both embracing life and confronting death. כִּי הוּא נוֹרָא וְאֵיִם, *Ki hu nora and ayom*. This day is tremendous and awesome, נוֹרָא. Tonight, Judaism brings us to the brink of life and death where we confront our own mortality. On Yom Kippur, we dress in white like the shrouds we will one day wear, and with nothing to eat or drink, and we are pure spirit. Tonight, we transcend our lives and this world, we lift our eyes beyond the horizon, beyond what we can even imagine. What a privilege it is to be alive, to stand before the sacred mystery of life and expansive majesty God’s universe. What a gift we have been given to be alive, and to be here to celebrate another year of life. I feel this so acutely this year as never before. I know so many you do as well.

Just two days ago, Frank graduated from cardiac rehab and I asked him, “Do you feel different, altered, after all you’ve been through?” Of course, there are physical changes, but I meant spiritually. He told me, “I feel more connected, more empathetic to what other people experience. And being more in touch with my mortality,” he explained, “is actually calming, as I feel “fused” to the universe, and am moving as part of the great whole of life.” מַה-נוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה. What wisdom you have gained, and I am in awe of your strength and love.

I end with a word about you—this remarkable and sacred community—and the awe and wonder you instill in my heart every day. In April, Claudette Greenblat came to an event and a tour of our new synagogue. She had been ill for some time and walking was difficult for her. She hadn’t gone up or down more than a couple of steps in many months. So when we reached the bottom of the staircase, I asked, “Claudette, would you be more comfortable staying here on this bench while we go upstairs?” She

dismissed my suggestion outright and instead, she willed herself up those stairs with everything she had. With her walker and her daughter, Leah, to support her, Claudette reached the top of those stairs. And there, with the most magnificent look on her face, she stood in front of what will become our memorial wall, and she gazed beyond it, to our new sanctuary, and to the hills and trees and the boundless sky through the window just above the ark. She needed to be there that day, and now I understand why, because just two and a half weeks later, surrounded by three generations of her family, Claudette breathed her last breath. And I will always remember Claudette and the look on her face as she reached the top of the stairs as I said to myself, *מה־נוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה*, *ma nora ha-makom ha-zeh*. I aspire to hold that vision and these words in my heart when I climb that staircase to our sanctuary, and gaze at the trees and the mountains and the sky just above the ark where our holy Torahs will soon reside.

And I so look forward to filling our new sanctuary with the awe and wonder of this sacred community. I am deeply grateful to each of you for teaching me so much about awe for these past 30 years. It is from you that I have learned so much about generosity and love, about awe and wonder. The moral beauty of this community is unparalleled and deep and holy. And I stand in awe before you. I feel so privileged to sit by your sides in moments of both grief and sublime joy. I see your strength when you have moved forward after tragedy and overcome loss. I have seen such deep love and care in your hospital rooms and during prayer. I am moved when young children peek behind the ark only to discover and cry out with joy, "There are Torahs in there!" What a blessing it will be to bring this sense of wonder into the New Year and into our new sacred home.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שְׁהַחֲיֵנוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעְנוּ לְזִמְנֵן הַזֶּה:

*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-olam  
Shehecheyanu. V'kiyimanu, V'higiyanu  
L'zman Ha-ze.*

Source of life,  
Bless this holy community with life.  
Help us to capture the transcendent beauty of Your world,  
Keep us alive with wonder,  
Open our eyes to the majesty of this world,  
And fill our souls and this New Year with  
Awe, with kindness, and with love.