

## “Yirah”

Rosh Hashanah Sermon  
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September 26, 2022

Last December, NASA launched the James Webb Space Telescope and sent it to orbit the sun about a million miles away. In July, it beamed the first images back to Earth [see image below]. While we here in central Maine, unlike our urban counterparts, have a chance to glimpse the vastness of the universe because we can see the stars, these new images are on a completely different level. They are so beautiful, so breath-taking, and yet...they can make us feel small, insignificant, out of control.

The very vastness that takes our breath away can also make us afraid. As Psalm 8 says, “what are we that You have been mindful of us? We are mortal, do You take note of us?” (Psalm 8:5) Rabbi Karyn Kedar writes, “We feel small, unable, incapable, judged. We are so afraid of the ambiguities in life. Afraid because we have so little control over forces both small and large.”<sup>1</sup> Our recognition of our tiny place in the vastness of the universe can lead us to trepidation.

Here we are on Rosh Hashanah, marking the start of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of *Norah*. The word *norah* comes from the Hebrew root yud, resh, aleph meaning “to fear” or “to stand in awe of.” The verb occurs 432 times in the Tanach (isn’t it amazing what computers can do?) Most of the time, it’s used to mean “fear,” such as when we read about Sarah laughing in amazement at the proclamation she would have a child at the age of 96. When confronted, the text reads, “Sarah lied, saying, לא צחקתי “I did not laugh,” כי יראָה for she was frightened. (Gen 18:15)”

In the holiness code we will read on Yom Kippur afternoon we are warned “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.

יִרְאֵתָּ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה “You shall fear your God: I am the Adonai. (Lev. 19:14)”

Similarly we should show deference to the old יִרְאֵתָּ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה “you shall fear your God: I am the Adonai. (Lev 19:22)”

If we used this more common reading of the word, we would translate *yamim noraim* as the Days of Fear. And that makes a certain amount of sense. What is scarier than God looking down on us, writing our fate for the next year in a big book? We just read “*Untaneh tokef kedushat hayom, ki hu norah v’ayom*” We declare the sacred power of this day, it is **awesome** and full of dread; at least that is the translation I grew up with. In this context, we clearly are emphasizing the *dread* part of the verse. What follows is a depiction of God sitting on a throne, judging us, “remembering what we have forgotten.” Even the angels quake with fear and trembling. We pass before God like sheep before a shepherd as God determines our fate for the next year.

This depiction of God speaks to a time when kings and queens reigned and where famines, wars, and disease regularly took people’s lives. Recognizing, perhaps, that this depiction resonates less with us today—do we really think God judges us for the entire year? Do we really think that our actions will avert God’s decree?—modern liturgists have interpreted and rewritten this central prayer. We can not control what life gives us, but

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Karyn D. Kedar, “D’var Torah: Fear is the Opposite of Love,” November 2021, <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/fear-opposite-love>.

we can control how we act, writes Rabbi David Teutsch. The Untaneh Tokef is an “artistic wrestling with impermanence and death,” says Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig. The *machzor* we use offers two interpretive versions of this prayer that deemphasize the fear and trembling.

So why do traditional interpretations emphasize the fear and trembling? Perhaps because we assume that those emotions will motivate us to do better. After all, the rabbis who compiled our *machzor* did not want us to end up cowering and paralyzed with fear on the floor of the sanctuary. They thought the threat of punishment would cause us to change our behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Fear of negative consequences certainly is one way to change.  
If you don't do your chores, you get grounded.  
If you don't do your job well, you get fired.  
If you drive recklessly, you get a ticket.

Fear can indeed be an effective motivator, but it is not the only way to change.

After two and a half years of living with sorrow and uncertainty and upheaval, I heard from all of you that fear should not be the focus for our holidays.  
We've had enough of that.  
We are weary.  
We don't want to be scared into being good.

Yes. We've had enough. So let's try an alternative translation of Untaneh Tokef:  
“Let us proclaim the power of this day—  
a day who holiness awakens deepest awe  
and inspires highest praise for Your dominion,  
For Your throne is a throne of love;  
Your reign is a reign of truth.”<sup>3</sup>

Not fear, but awe.  
Not terror, but wonder.  
Not trepidation, but amazement.  
*Yamim Noraim*  
Days of Wonder.

Throughout the year, our liturgy is built on wonder. We recite the *nissim b'chol yom*—the blessings for daily miracles.  
Daily miracles...those everyday occurrences that we take for granted but are actually quite miraculous when we think about them.  
Opening our eyes.  
Standing upright.  
Firm steps.  
Being made in the image of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig and Rabbi David A. Teutsch, “Study Texts for Untaneh Tokef,” *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah*, (New York: CCAR Press, 2015), 172-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah*, (New York: CCAR Press, 2015), 174.

As Mary Oliver writes in her poem, “Mindful”:

Every day  
I see or hear  
something  
that more or less  
kills me  
with delight,  
that leaves me  
like a needle  
in the haystack  
of light.

*Yamim Noraim*

Days of Noticing Miracles.

This *yirah*, the feeling of amazement, can inspire us to do better in the new year. Not surprisingly, scientists have studied the effects of cultivating awe. Professor Piercarlo Valdesolo of Claremont McKenna College, found that when we experience awe we become more cooperative, more generous, and more concerned about the community.<sup>4</sup> Psychology professors Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner found that awe “helps bind us to others, motivating us to act in collaborative ways that enable strong groups and cohesive communities.”<sup>5</sup> Awe increases feelings of spirituality and interconnectedness according to research by Professors Patty Van Cappellen and Vassilis Saroglou.<sup>6</sup> So, experiencing awe can help us to be better—to act more cooperatively, to build stronger communities, and to connect more to our spirituality. These are all behaviors we hope to cultivate and encourage during these Days of Awe.

This definition of *yirah* as wonder or amazement is also found in our ancient texts. When Jacob awakes from his dream of the ladder with the angels climbing up and down it, he says, “Surely Adonai is present in this place, and I did not know it!” The text continues, “Shaken אֲרִיָּהּ he said, ‘How awesome is this place! מִהֲנוֹרָא הַמְקוֹם הַזֶּה This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven (Genesis 28:16-17)’”

The dream opens Jacob’s eyes to the awe and wonder that was surrounding him. He is shaken out of his normal way of interacting with the world and sees not just an ordinary landscape or rocks and bushes, but a gateway to the heavens.

Walt Whitman writes,

To me the sea is a continual miracle,  
The fishes that swim—the rocks—the motion of the waves—the  
ships with men in them,  
What stranger miracles are there?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> National Public Radio, “Awe Appears to be Awfully Beneficial,” June 29, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1011415113>.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner, “Why do we Experience Awe?” *New York Times*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/opinion/sunday/why-do-we-experience-awe.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Patty Van Cappellen and Vassilis Saroglou, “Awe activates religious and spiritual feelings and behavioral intentions,” *Augusta* 2012, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232598520\\_Awe\\_activates\\_religious\\_and\\_spiritual\\_feelings\\_and\\_behavioral\\_intentions](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232598520_Awe_activates_religious_and_spiritual_feelings_and_behavioral_intentions).

<sup>7</sup> “Miracles,” Walt Whitman.

Yamim Noraim

Days of Amazement.

We cannot all be a Mary Oliver, or a Jacob or Walt Whitman. In our hurrying from one task to the next it can be difficult to see the beauty that surrounds us. We all need a reminder, and this reminder comes not just in the name for these days, but in the very day itself. Today we are marking the creation of the world. Instead of letting that phrase slide over us, let's really think about that creation for a moment.

“When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters, God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light.”<sup>8</sup>

“God saw the light: that it was good. God separated the light from the darkness.

God called the light: Day! and the darkness he called: Night! There was setting, there was dawning: one day.”<sup>9</sup>

We don’t have any pictures of those first days of creation. Just the words as various translators attempt to create a picture for us of this awe-inspiring event.

There is this:

“The smallest [stars] are small, distant, and faint points of light. The largest of these appear larger, closer, brighter, and more fully resolved with 8-point diffraction spikes. The upper portion of the image is blueish, and has wispy translucent cloud-like streaks rising from the nebula below.”<sup>10</sup>

That is the description not of creation, but of one of the first pictures taken from the Webb space telescope, the one that is also hanging in the lobby. A team of science writers and education specialists have put together these descriptions so those who are visually impaired can have access to these stunning images.<sup>11</sup>

While these images can inspire fear in us—who am I in the vastness of space?—they can also bring awe and wonder. Psalm 8 also reads, “I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place (Psalm 8:4).” With the Webb Telescope, we now have a clearer look at those extraordinary stars. Not only that, but think about all the work that went into taking these spectacular images. The scientific ingenuity required to design the telescope, build it, launch it, and deploy it so we can get these images. Awe inspiring.

It can be easy to feel awe in these big moments—gazing at pictures of distant galaxies, watching the sun rise over the ocean, participating in meaningful life cycle events. It requires practice and intention to find awe in everyday moments. Dr. Alan Morinis writes in *Every Day, Holy Day: 365 Days of Teachings and Practices for the Jewish Tradition of Mussar*, “only an inner instrument that has been polished and honed will find just as much awe in less dramatic situations—awe not because I see a sight, but because I am able to see, not because the sunset is spectacular, but because there is a sun. Cultivate the capacity to feel awe and the whole world becomes awesome.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 17.

<sup>9</sup> Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Scire, “Space is for everyone”: Meet the scientists trying to put otherworldly images into words,” August 3, 2022, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/08/space-is-for-everyone-meet-the-scientists-trying-to-put-otherworldly-images-into-words/>; National Public Radio, “Alt text help the visually impaired experience the James Webb Telescope images,” July 22, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/22/1112878868/webb-telescope-alt-text-visually-impaired>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Morinis, *Every Day, Holy Day: 365 Days of Teaching and Practices from the Jewish Tradition of Mussar*, (Boston: Trumpeter, 2010), 358.

Mary Oliver writes in her poem *sometimes*:

“Instructions for living a life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.”

But how?

in the rush of our days

in the busyness of our lives

in the endless news cycle

in the Facebook and Instagram posts that shout out, “read me!”

Not to mention the piles of dirty laundry

the garden that needs to be put to bed for the winter

the dog waiting to be walked

the mail that demands tending.

Judaism has long understood the science of action—of built-in routines.

The laws that govern Jewish time build those routines for us.

Every Friday night Shabbat comes with its mandate for rest, not when we feel like it, but when the sun sets.

Every morning, we have a set of prayers we say designed to cultivate wonder and awe—the daily blessings we recited this morning.

We mark each new moon, tying ourselves to the cycles of the natural world.

But, you are thinking--I don't traditionally observe Shabbat.

I spend my day driving to soccer games or going to the grocery store.

I went to out to dinner or the movies last Friday.

I don't wake up each day and say the morning blessings; I check my phone for the latest news.

To which I say, okay.

You can't do everything, but you could do something.

What could we do to cultivate a spirit of *yirah*?

What guidance does Judaism give us?

A ritual upon waking.

Singing Modeh Ani and thanking God for being alive. Noticing the gift rather than taking it for granted.

As Marcia Falk writes,

“The breath of my life

will bless,

the cells of my being

sing

in gratitude,

reawakening.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1996),

The blessing of Wow!

We teach our Hebrew School students that we can do four things during our prayers—ask, thank, apologize, and say WOW. Wow is the most overlooked and underused.

Find a Wow moment each day.

Just one every day.

This year, you are invited to embrace these *yamim noraim* as Days of Awe, Days of Amazement, Days of Wonder.

And, because I can't resist a reminder to be awed, I've created a guide for each one of you for the next 14 days, all the way to Sukkot. Take one, and go on this scavenger hunt of awe. Check in and let people know how it is going.

We can make ourselves better not by just by looking at where we have gone wrong, but by seeing and experiencing more expansively.

We humans are unique—while other mammals get goosebumps when they are afraid; we alone, also get goosebumps when we experience awe. So, I want to end this teaching by sharing a wow feeling with all of you. Can the people in the front row please come up and hold a picture. We will embrace these *yamim noraim*, these Days of Awe, together.

Below: One of the first images from the James Webb Space Telescope

