



Rosh Hashanah

The beginning of the Days of Awe

WHAT FLOWS through your mind as you gaze up at the night sky? Wonder at the vastness and beauty of the starry carpet overhead washes over me every time I peer into the too bright city sky, or gaze up from sands of a still, dark desert. Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of our Days of Awe, lifts us out of our daily pursuits into weeks devoted to awe of the Creator of this wondrous cosmos. Jewish tradition teaches that Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of creation – specifically, the birthdate of humankind, the day that God completed the Creation of the world and handed it to us to inhabit and cherish.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-72) found the root of Jewish spirituality in the same kind of wonder that I feel as my eyes encounter the limitless night sky. Wonder – undiminished by the scientific understanding of the mechanics of the physical phenomenon – is the beginning of radical amazement, the sense that existence and our consciousness of it are suffused with mysteries we do not understand. This kind of wonder grows into the radical awe of God that inspires our prayer. Quoting the morning prayer, *Modeh Ani* (I Thank You), Heschel suggests, “The sense for the ‘miracles which are daily with us,’ the sense for the ‘continual marvels,’ is the source of prayer.... This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things.”

“Miracles that are daily with us.” Long before Heschel, Jewish tradition suggested that humankind could take lessons in praising the Creator from the animals, vegetables and minerals, and stars and thunderbolts that fill the natural world, from the smallest to the most gigantic. Aggadah (storytelling) in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds and many other early midrashic collections going back to the days of the Second Temple preserve the long and imaginative Jewish tradition of finding inspiration and teaching in the doings (real and fanciful) of doves, grasshoppers, frogs, gnats, lizards, storks, fish, lions – every creature from the infinitesimal to the gigantic, as well as celestial bodies, clouds and plants. Louis Ginzburg, the great collector of midrash and aggadah, recounted, “Not only do all creatures serve man, and contribute to his comfort, but also God ‘teacheth us through the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wise through the fowls of the heavens.’ He endowed many animals with admirable moral qualities as a pattern for man.”

Medieval Kabbalists found not only admirable qualities that humankind might emulate, but even divinity itself in the ordinary, wondrous things of the world. R. Bahya ben Asher of Saragossa,

a late 13th century judge and kabbalist, wrote that because Israel’s God subsumes all powers, the Divine name *Elohim*, the God of creation, is plural. Exploring the hidden meanings of the first two verses of Bereishit / Genesis, he suggested that every element of creation was first drawn from, and continues to emanate from, Divine Wisdom. Not only humankind, but all of creation feels the need to express wonder and awe at the power of our Creator.

One of the most charming, often whimsical, expressions of the notion that all matter – animal, vegetable or mineral, or even gassy stars – praises the Creator is *Perek Shira* (Chapter of Song). This little anonymous tract first appeared in the 10th century, probably in Israel. In its roughly 85 verses, animals, plants and inanimate natural objects, such as rivers, stars and lightning, sing out praises of God drawn from across the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and in later manuscripts, snippets of the 13th-century mystical masterpiece, the Zohar. Even now, in these times of global climate change and the deterioration of so many of Earth’s ecosystems, as I sit in my garden on this sunny afternoon, I can only join their chorus.

This joyful awe at the divinity of creation was one of the many emotions dancing through my mind at the moment I first held my first grandchild – and almost immediately I felt compelled to mark her birth by creating an illuminated book adapted from *Perek Shira*. “All the World Praises You!” an illuminated Aleph-Bet book, celebrates Dalia’s birth by transforming the medieval text into a colorful little book in which the gates of heaven, represented by the front covers, open onto 22 natural phenomena mostly drawn from *Perek Shira* (I included a couple of newer concepts unknown to the medievales), as they praise our common Creator, all organized according to the Hebrew alphabet...and a honeybee (*devorah*, my name) and a dahlia lead the parade on each page.

As a child, I was always amazed by the variety of life scurrying through a simple clump of grass – the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary. I enjoyed countless spring and summertime moments whiled away propped on my elbows in my family’s garden, probing the grass for tiny flowers and insects. If I was really lucky that afternoon, I might glimpse a tiny startled lizard. Over the years I have remained spellbound by the infinite variety of life sheltered in a seemingly insignificant clump of grass, just as was the original author of *Perek Shira*. How better to express the grand sweep of this verse from one of my favorite psalms, than to relate it to these tiny lives!

ד

Daled

Desheh ✧ דֶּשֶׁה ✧ Grass

Yehi khevod 'Adonai le'olam
 Yismah 'Adonai bema'asav.
 Deshaim 'omrim:
 Yehi khevod 'Adonai le'olam
 Yismah 'Adonai bema'asav.

“The grass says, ‘May the glory of the Lord last forever: May the Lord rejoice in His own deeds.’”

The author chose this ecstatic praise of God from Psalm 104, one of the most expansive, most optimistic views of creation in all of Tanakh. This 35-verse song celebrates the God who created a world of perfect natural order and balance. At the cosmic level the Creator “established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never totter,” yet, at the human level, made “the grass grow for the cattle, and herbage for man’s labor that he may get food out of the earth.” Modern Bible commentator, Amos Hakham, suggests that “the central idea of the psalm [is] that contemplating the splendid order of creation brings a person to revere, fear, love, and surrender himself to the Creator.”

The fact that *Perek Shira*’s author matched this grand verse from Psalm 104 with something as lowly as grass raises a thought-provoking tension. Biblical texts often treat grass as a great blessing, while others, such as Psalm 37, regard it as insignificant and impermanent: “Do not be troubled by evil men; do not be incensed by wrongdoers; for they soon wither like grass, like verdure fade away.” This contrast between great and small, between ephemeral and eternal, suggests that even the smallest, least substantial among us can sense and praise the God that enables and suffuses all Creation.

The painting for the letter “*daled*” plants our eyes at ground level, and we scrutinize a dense clump of grass, “*deshe*” in Hebrew. A worm, ants, and a gangly daddy long-legs crawl out from between the blades, a tiny lizard clambers up onto a strong blade, while ladybugs and my eponymous honeybee prepare to launch themselves into the warm summer air. A small bud of the dahlia representing my granddaughter’s presence appears at left.

As we approach the Days of Awe, how do you relate your own life to the miniscule phenomena of the natural world, and to the



The grass says: May the glory of the Lord last forever; May the Lord rejoice in His own deeds!

The painting for the letter ‘*Daled*’ plants our eyes at ground level, and we scrutinize a dense clump of grass

Almighty? Our daily world leads us to view our physical world through the lens of science and technology. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, however, has written eloquently about how science and religion offer not conflicting approaches to the world, but complementary views; science explains the means, while spirituality offers us a meaning for it all. Though science is gradually unraveling so many of the complexities of each presence here, such as the effect of the sunlight on the plants, and the genetics of the grasses and insects, we can nonetheless be dazzled by the wisdom of our God who enabled the evolution of this tiny but essential ecosystem.

And a grandmother can begin to wonder at the same clumps of grass with her tiny granddaughter. ■

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