

Days of Awe  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776  
Rabbi Joel Mosbacher

Here's a curious fact about goose bumps. In many nonhuman mammals, goose bumps — that physiological reaction in which the muscles surrounding hair follicles contract — occur when individuals, along with other members of their species, face a threat.

We humans, by contrast, can also get goose bumps when we experience **awe**, that often-positive feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends our understanding of the world.

I have a question for you. How many times a day do you use the word “awesome”? I know that I say it a lot.

Someone sends me a hysterical YouTube Video about the history of dance. Awesome!

Someone tells me that they have an idea for a new program at the synagogue. Awesome!

I get carded at a restaurant. Awesome!

A meeting ends early. Awesome!

Someone did well on a test. Awesome!

I find a spot for something that needs to be refrigerated. Awesome!

I happen upon the movie “Groundhog Day” on TV while mindlessly channel flipping. Awesome!

A younger person in my house takes out the garbage. Awesome!

With the possible exception of that last example, let's be honest. How many of these things actually fit the dictionary definition of **awesome**, if awe means “a feeling of being in the presence of something vast, that transcends our understanding of the world,” an experience that causes goosebumps?

We can experience these moments anytime of year, for sure, but these are, after all, the Days of Awe. I pray, as we begin, that you experience goose bumps sometime in these 10 days, and not because you face a threat, but because you are experiencing awe—here in the sanctuary, with your sacred community, in prayer, celebration, in self-reflection and self-evaluation, and outside of these walls as well.

As I prepared for these *Yamim Noraim*, a question occurred to me that I had never considered. Why exactly **do** humans experience awe? And why would the rabbis of our tradition want **awe**, of all emotions, to be what we feel in this season?

Professor of Psychology Dacher Keltner of the University of California at Berkeley has argued<sup>1</sup> that awe is the ultimate “collective” emotion, for it motivates people to do things that enhance the greater good. Through many activities that give us goose bumps — collective rituals, celebration, music and dance, religious gatherings and worship — awe might help shift our focus from our narrow self-interest to the interests of the group to which we belong.

Now, research recently published in the “Journal of Personality and Social Psychology” provides strong empirical support for this claim. Scholars found that awe helps bind us to others, motivating us to act in collaborative ways that enable strong groups and cohesive communities.

For example, one study asked more than 1,500 individuals across the United States a series of questions to assess how much awe, among other emotions, they experienced on a regular basis. In an ostensibly unrelated part of the study, researchers gave each person 10 lottery tickets that would be entered in her or his name for a cash prize drawing. Each participant was told that the tickets were his to keep, but that if she or he wanted to, they could share a portion of the lottery tickets with another unidentified individual in the study who had not received any tickets.

Researchers found that participants who reported experiencing more **awe** in their lives, who felt more regular **wonder** and **beauty** in the world around them, were more generous to the stranger. They gave approximately 40 percent more of their tickets away than did participants who were awe-deprived.

In **other** studies, scholars have sought to understand why awe arouses altruism of different kinds.

One answer is that awe seems to imbue us with a different sense of ourselves, a sense that we are smaller than we thought, more humble—that we are a part of something larger. Research finds that even brief experiences of awe, such as being amid beautiful tall trees, lead people to feel less narcissistic, less entitled, more attuned to the common humanity people share with one another.

In the great balancing act of our social lives, between the gratification of self-interest and a concern for others, fleeting experiences of awe redefine the **self** in terms of the **collective**, and orient our actions toward the needs of those around us.

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<sup>1</sup> “Why do we experience awe?” New York Times, May 24, 2015.

You could make the case that our culture today is awe-deprived. Adults spend more and more time working and commuting and less time outdoors and with other people. We forgo camping trips, picnics and midnight skies in favor of working weekends and late at night. Attendance at arts events — live music, theater, museums and galleries — has dropped over the years. This goes for children, too: Arts and music programs in schools are being dismantled in lieu of programs better suited to standardized testing; time outdoors and for novel, unbounded exploration are sacrificed for résumé-building activities.

I believe that awe deprivation has had a hand in the broad societal shift that has been widely observed over the past 50 years: People have become more individualistic, more self-focused, more materialistic and less connected to others.

Fortunately, we have these Days of Awe, built into the Jewish calendar some 3,000 years ago, to help us with this awe-deprivation-syndrome. Again, I hope and pray that you will experience awe in this space with hundreds of other people in the coming days. I'm reminded of the lyrics from the LEGO movie that my kids just LOVE when I sing: "Everything is awesome! Everything is cool when you're part of a team!"

But even more, these days can be a reminder that we can find awe **everywhere** in our world, if we give ourselves the gift of time to do so.

Take a moment. Find someone in the sanctuary that you don't know. Introduce yourself. Wish them a *shana tova*. And tell them a story about a time when you felt awe in your life.

TAKE A FEW RESPONSES.

One of the most eloquent writers about awe was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a thinker and activist whose words and deeds still resonate today. And in his masterpiece *God in Search of Man*, he writes:

The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal...

*Awe precedes faith; it is at the root of faith. We must grow in awe in order to reach faith. We must be guided by awe to be worthy of faith. Awe, rather than faith is the cardinal attitude of the religious Jew.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *God in Search of Man*, pp. 75, 77. Italics in original.

We Jews often struggle with faith and with belief. So maybe we need to move away from questions of belief, and move towards experiences of awe. After all, Judaism is a religion that is much more about what we **do** and how we **act** than about what we **believe**, and science is now catching up with our Jewish tradition in suggesting that feelings of **awe** lead us to acts of loving kindness.

A story is told of the moment when the Israelites first viewed the Promised Land of Israel. Looking over the vista after cresting the ridge of the Jordanian mountain range, a small boy looked up at his mother and said animatedly, “What ARE those?” pointing furiously.

The mother remembered stories her own mother had told her about the produce that was harvested in the land of Egypt. “Those big brown wooden pillars are called trees,” she told her son, realizing that all he knew from being raised in the desert were scenes of sand and rock and sparse vegetation. “Those beautiful round fruits are called apples and oranges,” she continued. “The billowing grain is called wheat. It’s cut from the stalks, ground up, mixed with a few other ingredients, and baked in an oven. When it’s done, it becomes the most delicious food, which we call bread.”

The little boy was astonished. “I guess God must have put these trees and these big sheaves of grain right into the ground for us, right Ema?”

The mother grabbed her little son’s pinky finger in her hand. “My dear little boy, I want to tell you something amazing,” she said. “You see your fingernail? Well, a farmer takes a little seed—smaller than the nail on your pinky, and plants the seed on the ground. With water, sunshine, and air, big trees grow. Wheat becomes tall, and all the many beautiful things that God has given us as God’s gifts come to us to enjoy.”

The little boy looked up at his mother. He shook his head and said, “Ema, it’s not nice to try and trick me.”

“What do you mean, sweetheart?” she asked.

“Every day I have seen how God has given us manna from heaven, and twice as much on Friday to prepare for Shabbat,” the boy said. “I see how God brings us delicious quail that we prepare and eat. Every day we take drinks from Miriam’s well, which has followed us on our trip across the desert. I’ve heard the wonderful story about how God parted the Reed Sea and led us through the dangerous waters, freeing us from the Egyptians. Those things I understand, Ema, because they’re so natural. But please, don’t try to fool me. Really, Ema. Big, beautiful trees, fruits, grains—all coming from such a small, tiny seed? Such miracles? Even I know that that is impossible!”

All too often, we are blinded—we take for granted-- things we see on a regular basis and we fail to realize how truly awesome they are. When we mindlessly say that EVERYTHING is awesome, we miss opportunities to really take the time to notice the things that actually are.

Maybe the rabbis meant for us to take these 10 days of awe to notice what is awesome about our world, about the people around us. I submit this as a lens through which to look at the Holy Days.

Doctor Keltner at UC-Berkeley has prescription for what else we might do:

[I] suggest [he writes], that people insist on experiencing more everyday awe, to actively seek out what gives them goose bumps, be it in looking at trees, night skies, patterns of wind on water or the quotidian nobility of others — the teenage punk who gives up his seat on public transportation, the young child who explores the world in a state of wonder, the person who presses on against all odds.

So look up at the beauty of the heavens and the sheer gorgeousness of God's creation. Look out to the power of what it feels like to do a random act of kindness. Look inward to the strength and power of sacred community—something that can still move us in this age of individualism. Look down into the depths and richness of your 3,000-year-old Jewish heritage. Let yourself feel awe in these days. And then, use that feeling to make life better **here** on earth, in **this** New Year.

All of us will be better off for it.