

Homily: Standing in Awe
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With the playing of the sound of the shofar, we've come once again to our annual honoring of the Jewish High Holy Days. This most sacred time of the year for Jews commences with Rosh Hashanah, which began at sundown last Wednesday evening. The period will culminate on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which starts at sundown this coming Friday.

In Hebrew, the name given to this ten-day period is Yomim Noraim, or the "Days of Awe." Indeed, I learned as a child that one of the intentions of the sounding of the shofar during the High Holy Days is to awaken a sense of awe both in our minds and our hearts. Back then -- I was perhaps seven or eight at the time -- I didn't really understand the significance of this name, the Days of Awe. After all, "awe" is an state of being that children experience quite frequently, but really can't comprehend intellectually.

These days, I try to open myself to the experience a sense of awe on a regular basis. Awe at the mystery of life, at the infinite majesty of the cosmos, at the power of love and compassion, and at our never-ending capacity to grow and evolve. That said, I have to admit that, like most adults, I think I went through a good chunk of my adult life more-or-less unaware of the awesomeness of everything. I got caught up in the day-to-day routine of life -- making a living, being in a long-term relationship, dealing with friends and family members -- much the same as all the other adults I knew. I generally reserved the experience of awe for special events. Some were joyful and exciting, like visiting an awe-inducing natural or manmade place like the breathtaking coast of Big Sur or the monumental interior of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. Others were painful and disturbing, like seeing my mother's body before her funeral and contemplating the mystery of the vast chasm between her lifeless mortal remains and her larger-than-life spirit, a spirit I sensed then and still sense as being alive in me.

Some of my oldest memories include sitting in a Hebrew school class talking about the idea of a "Book of Life" in which our destinies would be inscribed and of the "Gates of Heaven" which were said to open especially wide between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These gates were said to open wide to receive our sincere and heartfelt repentance for any failings during the past year. I also remember learning that God would not accept my atonement for wrongs I had done to other people unless I first sincerely tried to make amends to those I had hurt. If we honestly repented and expressed our intention to try harder in the days ahead, we were told we would be written in the Book of Life for a sweet year to come.

Possessing a good imagination, I had no trouble envisioning these gates opening to receive my prayers of atonement for all the ways I hadn't been as good as I might have been. At the same time, I could easily see in my mind's eye a giant book open to the page with my name on it and watching an unseen hand writing what my fate would be in the year ahead. Needless to say, both images filled my child's heart and mind with a deep sense of awe.

As a child, I understood these images -- of a Book of Life" and the "Gates of Heaven" -- in literal terms. Not surprisingly, as I outgrew childhood, I came to realize that things weren't that simple. After rejecting these images as an adolescent and a young adult, I've since come to appreciate them as powerful symbols and honor them for what they represent. Like an image in a great work of art, the Book of Life now represents for me the sense of a destiny which I co-create through the choices I make in my life. Similarly, the I now see the Gates of Heaven as a symbol of the means by which I access to my own highest and deepest consciousness. Those gates can be said to open especially wide when I meditate deeply or enlarge my own capacity for compassion.

Interestingly, though I no longer understand these ancient images in any sort of literal way, as symbols they once again have the power to invoke awe in me. As I experience the unfolding of my life, I increasingly have the sense of a story being written by a

consciousness that both incorporates and mysteriously exceeds my own understanding and wisdom. I have a deepening sense of destiny, of the life I'm meant to be living and of the person I'm meant to become.

In my own process of opening myself to a greater sense of awe as a spiritual practice, I've found the work of a man named Rudolf Otto to be very helpful. I've spoken of Otto before, in a worship service about the experience of wonder in the face of the great Mystery of existence. For Otto, wonder and awe comprise the two essential aspects of the experience of the sacred.

Otto was a theologian who wrote in Germany in the early part of the twentieth century. Rather than focusing on the moral dimension of religion -- which he felt had been over-emphasized in the Protestant tradition -- he became interested in understanding the nature of people's direct experience of the holy. In the course of his explorations, Otto traveled extensively, visiting North Africa, the Middle East, India, and the Far East. Wherever he went, Otto took great pains to observe how religious traditions and forms of worship were actually experienced by people.

Otto was surprised to discover that the people he encountered on his travels in the East -- unlike his European contemporaries -- seemed to experience the sacred in ways that were both immediate and deeply emotional. He also noticed that this direct experience of the holy always preceded the kinds of ethical or moral concerns western religions tend to emphasize.

Otto returned to Germany transformed by what he'd observed on his travels and wrote about it in a book called *The Idea of the Holy*. Interestingly, Otto doesn't try to define the source and object of the experience of the holy, in other words, on theological questions. Instead, Otto focuses on two different, yet intertwined, emotions he consistently observed among the worshipers he met on his travels. These two emotions are wonder and awe. In the presence of the mystery known as the sacred, we are fascinated, amazed, and, enthralled by the *wonder* of what we experience.

Simultaneously, the experience of the sacred induces a feeling of profound awe, of being swept-away, overwhelmed, and made deeply conscious of our limitations as human beings.

Both wonder and awe are commonplace experiences for young children, for they have yet to become jaded by the familiarity of everyday things and experiences. Both the rapture of wonder and the frightfulness of awe are easily accessible to them. As adults, however, we need to find a way of opening to wonder and awe rather than ignoring or repressing these powerful emotions.

Of the two, the one that we'd most like to avoid is awe. After all, wonder feels wonderful, while awe is the root of the word awful as much as the word awesome. While the price we pay for shutting down our capacity for wonder is great -- diminishing both our access to a deep and abiding curiosity about life and a sense of the magic of being alive -- the cost of eliminating awe from our experience is perhaps even greater. For without a sense of awe in the face of enormity of the universe, the fragility and impermanence of everything that exists, and the unanswerable riddle of our own existence, we risk losing sight of our proper place in the scheme of things. Without a sense of the deep humility that is the result of our encounters with awe, we risk forgetting that we are but a small part of an infinite web of life. And without access to the feeling of awe, we also inhibit our capacity for reverence, the ability to experience a profound respect and veneration for life, for each other, and for the great mystery that is the source of all things sacred.

Shortly after I finish speaking, we will celebrate our Ritual of Letting Go. My intention -- and one that I invite you to share -- is to participate in this ritual with a sense of awe, awe at the potential we all have to transform our lives, to let go of whatever keeps us separate, at the possibility that we might truly begin again in love. I invite us to imagine that the proverbial "Gates of Heaven" are, indeed, open wide, waiting to receive our intentions. And that, as we act on our intentions, we may be inscribed in the "Book of Life" for a sweet new year. May it be so. Amen.