

Kol Nidrei 5786

Rabbi Rachel Timoner

I've decided to take a risk tonight. If your takeaway from this sermon is that I went on a cool trip during my sabbatical and you like my photos or you don't like my photos, or they're blurry, or do I have the newest iphone, my experiment will have failed. This is not a sermon about travel or photography. I'm hoping instead to use images to transport you, to take you with me into a different state of consciousness. Let's see. [LIGHTS DOWN]

Six months for the purpose of returning to one's soul is not only a gift; it is also a challenge. These forty days since the first of Elul, these ten days since Rosh Hashanah, this one day, we've all been given this gift and this challenge. See how we squirm, see how we want to avoid what's here. Do we have the will, do we have the discipline to clear away the noise, to be with our beating hearts, to be with our one, brief, precious life?

To do this, I travelled far away and removed distractions – no media, no social media, nothing from work at all. Instead, silence, prayer, music, books, and most of all, walking. Hiking up into mountains many hours a day, across rivers, into forests, onto glaciers, up a volcano, along ridges, under waterfalls, through deserts, into caves, along shorelines. At sunrise, at sunset, in the high heat of day, in slick mud, in overpowering winds, in torrential rain, at sea level, at altitude, under billions of stars.

[START IMAGES] I am here to tell you what you already know – that this world we live in is magnificent, spectacular, glorious, majestic, breathtaking, resplendent. Day after day after day after day after day, I was immersed in beauty. Astonishing, astounding, overwhelming, incomprehensible beauty.

There were two nights in the high desert of Atacama, Chile, [STARS PHOTO] guided to see stars being born and stars dying, nebulae and entire galaxies, and to realize what every amateur astronomer knows, that we exist within and are part of a vastness.

I could see the Magellanic clouds. These are two galaxies orbiting the Milky Way, 150,000 and 200,000 light years away. I was standing in the chilly desert night

looking at light that was 200,000 years old, meaning I was seeing 200,000 years into the past, when the earth was between ice ages.

I could also see the movement of the stars through the telescope, meaning I could see our movement. We are rotating right now at 1,000 miles per hour. We are circling the sun at 67,000 miles per hour. Our solar system is moving around the Milky Way at 490,000 miles per hour. Even though we can't feel it or comprehend it, that's actually real. I could see so clearly that we're not at the center of anything, except each other's lives.

I spent time looking at a cluster of stars within our Milky Way that is 17,000 light years away. Meaning I was looking at a time when, on earth, humans were building shelters from mammoth bones. All of the things we spend our thoughts on – all of our projects, institutions, monuments, governments — everything we think is permanent— is many magnitudes younger and will be over in a fraction of that time.

The only sensible attitude is awe. Radical amazement, as Abraham Joshua Heschel called it. The fact that we can be any other way, that we live as if this is not always true, as if the night sky is not always there, that we even live as if life is a little bit boring, is testament only to our limitations of mind, of emotional capacity, perhaps. We live in delusion. And that delusion diminishes our lives.

When we see how small we are and how brief our existence is, we can either decide that nothing we do matters, which is tempting given the scale, or that everything we do matters. If you love anyone, then everything we do matters. If you care about another living being, then even if it's over in a heartbeat, even if it doesn't register beyond this planet or a few square miles on this planet, it matters. Once you realize that you've decided that it does matter, and it's over in a breath, all you want to do is love. In the great expanse of black space, on little lonely earth, you just get completely overwhelmed with a desire to use every ounce of your being to love. You marvel at the idea that you would waste time on anything other than love.

You see, our primary problem is consciousness. If we are in the consciousness of radical amazement, if we really see where we are and are able to have the discipline of thought to keep bringing that to the front of our awareness, all we

want to do is use the brief flash of light that is our lives to love. All we want is to do good with our hands and our words. Radical amazement doesn't just feel great, it does. Radical amazement isn't just an indication that we are conscious to what is true, it is. Radical amazement is what will save us.

In radical amazement we see with utter clarity that we exist within a Oneness. There is the Oneness of the singularity that exploded 13 billion years ago into the observable universe. (The word universe means Oneness.) And there is the Oneness that all earth science, biology, zoology, botany, geology, meteorology, ecology, environmental science point to – a single living system that encrusts this planet, a single, interdependent system that we're part of. And then there is the Oneness of our tradition. Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad. Listen up, Israel, Adonai, Yod Hey Vav Hey, which is the verb "to be" in past, present and future, "was, is, will be," "being becoming" existence – what we call G-d, Adonai is Echad/One. Not just Judaism, but every major world religion and most indigenous belief systems point to a Oneness within and beyond everything.

And of this Oneness, how much do we understand? We don't know why or how the Big Bang happened. We don't know why or how life started on earth. So with radical amazement comes radical humility.

That old debate between science and religion? What a waste of time. Science used to be about breaking the world into pieces and seeing the pieces as separate, but we've long known better. Now science is all about interconnectedness. So why are we stuck on an old conversation about whether we believe in G-d or not – everyone agrees that we exist within a vast Oneness that we're still really early in understanding. It continues to be largely mysterious and unknown to us, and the more we find out about it – things like subatomics, mycelium, bacteria, the plant kingdom (you have to check out the latest science on the plant kingdom) – the more we learn about where we are, the more worthy of radical amazement it is.

Within the bigger Oneness, there's this little rock we live on [ADVANCE PHOTOS], spiraling through the great expanse. We know that everything we see comes from the same source, is part of the same living system, is dependent upon that living system for its survival and well-being.

We marvel with reverence at the display of life. We see that the One expresses itself in the many, and the many are an essential feature of the health of the One. If you lose or reduce that diversity, you lose vibrancy in the One. Mishna Sanhedrin (4:5): "And this serves to tell of the greatness of the Holy One, [who] stamped all people with the seal of ...the first, and not one ... is like another." In radical amazement you see that every unique created thing is a representative of the whole, worthy of wonder. You are stunned by the billions of life forms, the colors, the sounds, the talents, the sheer diversity of it. Psalm 104: "How many are the things You have made, O Adonai; You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of Your creations." Every living thing, every thing we find on earth, is an expression of the Oneness. Every rock face, every cascade, every leaf, every creature. You and me. A face of the One. Any moment that we are not in radical amazement, we are taking a nap.

And then we see that the whole thing is changing, and since that first explosion it always has been. It's all in motion, dynamic, developing right before our eyes. Change is the defining feature of the interdependent Oneness in all of its diversity. Mah norah hamakom hazeh! How awesome is this place? And here we are waking up in the middle of that unfolding evolution, aware in a new way of our place in it, newly capable of choosing how we will take part in that process of change.

[STOP AT RAINBOW, THEN PHOTOS OFF].

And that's when we come to Yom Kippur. The Rabbis describe sin as simply a lapse in consciousness, as ignorance or distraction from what is true, as an illusion of separateness from the One, as forgetting the Oneness. In Talmud Sotah (3a), Reish Lakish teaches, "A person does not commit a transgression unless a spirit of folly enters them." If one saw reality clearly, sin would be impossible. Maimonides in his Guide for the Perplexed (III:51): If one truly comprehended G-d's Oneness, one's whole being would align with it, and one could not come near sin. Maimonides in the Mishneh Torah (Yesodei HaTorah) knowledge of G-d's Oneness leads to love and awe, and in love and awe one would never want to sin. In the Zohar, sin is an illusion of separateness. When a person truly knows Yichud (Oneness), they cannot separate themselves through sin. "When Israel forgets Oneness, sin comes to them; when they know the secret of Oneness, no sin can touch them." In the Tanya, "Every sin is a

temporary forgetting of G-d's unity. If a Jew fully felt God's presence, he would never sin, just as no one would put their hand in a fire willingly."

We just read Al Cheyt. "We have sinned against You unwillingly and willingly; We have sinned against You through hardening our hearts. We have sinned against You thoughtlessly. We have sinned against You by speaking ill of others, by the way we do business, by resorting to violence, through denial and deceit, by taking bribes, by clever cynicism, by greed and oppressive interest, through arrogance, through condescension, through baseless hatred, by betraying trust, by succumbing to confusion."

It's all just a failure of consciousness. We're just not getting it. We're operating at too base a level. We are animals who are occupied with feeding and sheltering ourselves and our young. Of course, the easier we make feeding and sheltering for everyone, the more rapidly we'll advance. If we had awareness of the Oneness as a regular feature of our lives, if we could keep radical amazement in the front of our minds, we would never ever allow ourselves to hurt anyone. It just would make no sense given that we're on a tiny, interdependent floating island in deep space. We would never want to increase wounding or anger, hatred or violence because of course it would just come back to us. We would never want to deplete the resources or despoil the survival system. We would never want to do anything except work together to figure out how to thrive. That is why we need religious practice and study – scientific and otherwise – these are our best methods for keeping focused on what is true.

We are on the brink of the consciousness we need. We can see it, our scientists are trying to tell us about it, our religion is trying to tell us about it, sometimes we wake up and remember, but we can't keep it in our minds, so we live as if it is not real. We forget it all of the time because we're functioning in a different paradigm – mechanical, reductive, atomized, separated.

But when we have planetary consciousness, when we live with radical amazement, everything will change. We will have clarity about our mission, which is collective well-being. We will see humans not as separate from earth but as an emergent aspect of the earth. From the perspective of a split-second life on a raft hurtling through black space, we wouldn't spend time trying to collect the most coins as if we're in a video game. And why would we fight, ever? We would

know that you and I are merely expressions of a great Oneness pulsing through this living system, we are temporary and magnificent manifestations of the whole.

We are all going to understand this soon. We just don't know if soon is 100,000 years or 1,000 years. We do seem to be accelerating. Climate change, the internet, social media, migration, the globalizing economy, AI, are all forcing us into planetary existence if not planetary consciousness.

We live in the anthropocene. Humans are shaping change. We are exercising power over the entire earth, but we don't yet have this consciousness to go with it. That combination is of course dangerous. We're powerful enough to destroy life but not wise enough to save it.

In the Talmud, Niddah 33b, Rabbi Simlai taught that when we are in the womb there is a divine light above our heads and we know G-d's Oneness and we can see from one end of the world to the other and we know the entire Torah, which is the blueprint for the whole world. But when we are born, an angel slaps us on the mouth and we forget. And then we spend our lives learning it, or remembering it, all over again.

This consciousness is waiting within us. We're in the process of birthing it. If we survive this stage of our development, there will be a time when this is all obvious to us, when we don't have to strive to see it or remember it. And then, mark my words, we will feel that this whole world is suffused with a great and all-encompassing love, and all we will want to do is love. The mystics of every religion have been trying to tell us: It is all One. We are not separate but part of the One. Therefore love. Love the One, and love each one within the One. Shema Yisrael. Veahavta et Adonai Eloheicha b'chol levavcha uvchol nafshecha u'vechol meodecha. Listen Israel, Love the Oneness with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your being.

Radical amazement isn't something we wait to experience while traveling, or something that can only be evoked by exceptional beauty. In fact, we're an adaptive species, so even exceptional beauty becomes ordinary and not amazing when we see it every day. No, radical amazement is a state we nurture within ourselves through practice, it is a way of seeing, thinking and feeling that we build with intention. We do this simply by focusing on what is amazing in

ordinary, everyday life. There are thousands of amazements we could notice right here, right now if only we would try.

On Rosh Hashanah, I suggested that we use Judaism as the structure and guide we need for how to live through these challenging times. That we fill our days with words and study that remind us of who we are and where we are and what our mission is, with actions that build out our web of relationships and fill it with care, with investment in community to create a microcosm of the world that should be, with rest and joy, and collective actions for humanity in the public square. That prescription, whole-life Judaism, is meant to be infused with radical amazement, and it is meant to reinforce and reinspire radical amazement in us, every day, every hour of every day. Judaism was not meant to be performed in a rote manner. It was meant to wake us up, to help us evolve into the consciousness that will save us.

[PHOTOS OF BROOKLYN]

You don't have to travel around the world to see the beauty surrounding us, to wake up to where we are, to experience radical amazement. It helps to break routine. Take a different way to work. Stop to notice a detail. And whenever you can, because the sky is always there waiting for us, just look up.

G'mar Chatima Tova.

Thank you to Nate Jaffe for his collaboration on this experiment.

Aleinu
LL announcements

Kaddish: Shiva, Shloshim, Shana, Yahrzeit. We all rise together in memory on this Yom Kippur.
p. 247.

Yigdal p. 250

Tzom Kal – may your fast be easy, may your fast be true. May it lead to atonement. May it lead to forgiveness. See you in the morning. This concludes our service.