

Three men stood on a jagged shore at a place called Siccar Point, about 35 miles east of Edinburgh in Scotland. It was 1788 and their eyes were locked on the rock formation before them. Philosopher James Hutton, (“philosopher” because the word “scientist” didn’t exist yet) had brought two of his friends with him - John Playfair and James Hall - hoping to **find** what they were **now** excitedly looking at. A discovery that was about to change everything. He called it a non-conformity.

For those of us desperately trying to remember our 7th grade geology class, a non-conformity is when two different ages of rock meet each other. And this one was a doozy.

Hutton pointed out to his friends how there were two distinct layers to this formation. The lower layers, made of mudstone and greywacke, had formed in an ancient ocean. They had been deposited, buried, compressed, heated, then tilted upward by a tectonic smushing (my word, not his), to stand up vertically, finally eroding into a flat surface before red sandstone could be deposited on top, forming horizontal layers above them.

Between the bottom layers and the top layers, Hutton had discovered a 65 million year gap in time.

Why did this matter? Well, up until this point, most people believed the biblical accounting that the earth was just 6,000 years old. Hutton's discovery at Siccar Point blew that wide open, proving that it was, in fact, millions, and today we know, billions, of years old. So unimaginably old that he described the earth as having "no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end."

Hutton's work would later allow Charles Darwin to develop the theory of evolution - a notion that could only be **possible** with a million and billion year time horizon, but it wasn't just science that was so transformed. It was all of human consciousness.

His mathematician friend, John Playfair, wrote about that moment: "the mind seemed to grow **giddy** by looking so far into the abyss of time."

Hutton's discovery **gave** us something. And it was joyful and curious and unrigid and hopeful - it was giddy-making - placing humanity in a much grander story, slowing **down** reality and opening **up** possibility. This concept of extraordinary expansiveness would come to be known as Deep Time.

Why am I telling you this? Here we are sitting at the edge of a new year. It's 5787! A new school year. An election is coming up that could signal a whole new chapter. What we do now could have ripple effects for many generations to come. It's go time!

And yet I think for a lot of us, we're not feeling a giddy sense of expansiveness. We're not feeling part of something grand and wide open with a time horizon full of possibility. I think a lot of us are feeling depleted. Exhausted. Over-saturated. Actually, constricted. Just when it's time to put our foot on the gas, we find that we're running on fumes. And I wonder if the notions within Deep Time can help us now. Can give us something that we so profoundly need.

Now you might not be feeling like this at all, and if you're raring to go, signing up for stuff, full of joy - that's amazing. We should talk after this service. But if you're feeling a lack of spaciousness - it actually makes a good deal of sense. And the past two years probably play a significant role in that.

In July, I came across an article which knocked the remaining wind out of **me** in which researchers estimated that within just **one** year from March 2025, 700,000 people had died as a result of the shut down of USAID grants. More than half of those were children. I remember so clearly watching those smug DOGE young men break into those offices, steal their information, and slash those funds. I remember our shared outrage. We said to each other then - people are going to die because of this. I remember most how painful it was at the time to realize that there was nothing we could do to stop it.

In fact, this has been the rhythm for the past almost two years. We've watched as men, bent over in shackles, were flown out of the country under the dark of night, toddlers sitting alone in a courtroom, told they're being deported, ICE Agents killing immigrants and protestors in the street with zero consequences. We've watched families go hungry and trans children lose life-giving care. We've watched fishing boats bombed with no evidence of criminality, and protective regulations gleefully stripped from our warming planet. Cruelty after cruelty. And that would be demoralizing enough to impact our state of mind, our state of heart. But it is heightened exponentially by the fact that we have been able to stop very little of it from happening.

We've marched, trained, delivered food, patrolled, written letters, stood vigil, and gathered our lawyers. And while some *courts* **have** successfully stopped some things, and some CBE members have seriously helped some families, for nearly two years, the painful truth is that we have often felt quite powerless. And that takes a real toll.

Bessel van der Kolk, the author of The Body Keeps the Score, writes extensively about the impact of witnessing or experiencing something terrible and being powerless to stop it. This can, he explains, result in a lasting trauma in our bodies and psyches, leading to an “emotional and physical **numbness** as a biological shutdown response.” This trauma can turn us inward, like a narrowing of ourselves toward cynicism, despair, exhaustion, burn out, short tempers, loneliness, or chosen distractions.

And indeed, we become **numb** after a time, less able to access our outrage about the **latest** brutalities, let alone **sustain** our outrage from two years ago. It was just announced that ICE has spent \$20 million dollars on electrified gloves. A more dystopic version of the future I can barely imagine - and it went by in a news cycle.

To be sure, this constriction of ourselves saps not just our energy to help those suffering today, but in our private lives, too - affecting our ability to show up fully for our kids, our aging parents, our friends, even ourselves. Our emotions become muted, our imaginations limited, as we lose our sense of what's possible.

Or maybe for you, it's not about what's happening in our country, but maybe you're facing an overwhelming crossroads in life. A disappointment, a loss, an illness, an uninvited existential crisis that has brought you low even as all signs are pointing at go.

At a time when the most vulnerable need us and our planet needs us and also our children and our parents need us, and our community and our people need us - to be our fullest, most creative, energized selves, we need a way back to the giddy expansiveness of Siccar Point.

Unsurprisingly, long before James Hutton and his buddies felt that 65 million year high, Jewish tradition had a lot to say about the ideas of Deep Time, and the human experience of expansiveness and constriction.

About 2,000 years ago, the Psalmist wrote: *min hameitzar karati Ya, anani vamerchav-Ya*. From the *meitzar*, from the narrow constricting space, from the too-tight space where I can't breathe or be, *karati Ya*, I cry out to God. And God answers me with the *merchav* - with a wide-open expanse.

We have so many imperfect synonyms in English to try to describe this state of our being - constricted, crushed, numb, ensmallened, muted, exhausted, narrowed, sad, despairing, distracted, brought low. Our tradition nods at us lovingly and says: yeah. This is very familiar and very ancient, this way you're feeling. You are in the *meitzar*, and you are yearning for the *merchav*.

We **know** this word - *meitzar*, like Mitzrayim, Ancient Egypt, where we were so crushed down, we couldn't even see it. Torah tells us that it took us hundreds of years for us to even cry out about it. Sometimes that's the way the *meitzar* is. We become so numb from it that we don't even recognize that we're living in it. That we're not fully here.

In the *meitzar*, it's hard to see the grandeur of the long game - but once we **do** wake up, when we **do** cry out, Jewish tradition teaches, **that's** the moment that we find that the *merchav* is waiting for us - whether it's across a parted sea or in our awakened, expansive hearts. In the *merchav*, we feel free, fully present and aware, hopeful, able to see the possibilities, the connections, and our purpose all around us. If we are looking for it.

Somewhat amazingly, **at just about the same time** that James Hutton was standing at Siccar Point in Scotland, contemplating the *merchav* of Deep Time - about 2,000 miles to the east in a Ukrainian village, the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism, was having some very similar realizations.

For the Baal Shem Tov, constriction and narrowness afflict us when we see the world and everything in it as all separate, distinct parts. Where each person feels disconnected from everyone and everything else. This atomization of reality works like blinders - where we only see or experience a particular sliver of our story. So we can see suffering, but not healing, despair, but not resolution. And it is soul-exhausting only being able to glimpse a tiny fragment of a whole truth.

But, the Baal Shem Tov taught, there is a greater, more expansive truth, which is that all beings and all things - you and you and you and me and all growing trees and the oceans' waters and God - are interconnected - part of a Great Oneness. Like the pieces of a puzzle coming together into a picture that makes so much more sense than each piece does alone.

In that Oneness, we can see farther, discover that we're part of something much greater than ourselves, and are playing a role in a much longer story. This is an invitation toward expansiveness, too.

If our being all separate from each other suffocates our hearts and minds and bodies into a particular distinct smallness, the idea of this Oneness, allows us a deep breath, melting away the boundaries between us and unleashing a quite unlimited flow of energy, joy, and hope moving through us all. This is what the Baal Shem Tov dreamt up as **HE** looked at a world that struggled as we do with feelings of disconnection and constriction in the *meitzar*.

If this idea works for you esoterically to get a taste of the expanse, that's amazing. If this lands for you better as metaphor, then let me say this - in a great Oneness, we all belong to each other, able to replenish each other, instead of each disappearing, depleted, into the *meitzar*.

Now that said, the Chassidic teachers understood that being in our places of narrowness is, itself, not without merit. It's not a time to panic or give up or give in, but a time to listen and learn - from our own selves.

The Me'or Eynaim, a student of the Baal Shem Tov, taught that when we are at our very lowest - fallen, he calls it - that that low point is what allows us to reach for the expanse. If we take a moment to be there with awareness and not fight it and not give up, we can learn who we are, what it feels like to be crushed down and the contours of how we don't want to be. And it feels bad. But it's a very important part of the nature of things.

In fact, the Me'or Eynaim teaches that our movement between the *meitzar* and the *merchav* **is** the natural ebb and flow of life. Our life-force, *ratzo vashov*, ebbs and flows, he says, moves back and forth, from the *meitzar* to the *merchav* and back. This is the natural rhythm of a life, a pendular swing between constriction and expansion.

This is a gift for us. An offering from James Hutton and the Me'or Eynaim and countless other rabbis and thinkers that as dark a space as we might be in - that we **will** return again to a place of expansiveness.

Which means that we are not done. We have not failed. We are not weak. Sometimes we get so stuck in the *meitzar* that we can't remember ever having been another way and we can't imagine ever getting out of this place. But that's not the case. We have felt big before; We will feel big again. This is not an end, but rather perhaps a time of preparing for what's coming next, a building of a protective chrysalis so we can rest for a moment as we get ready to re-emerge.

And there are practices that may help us answer this ebb with a flow. Cultural Anthropologist and author, Victor Ialenti, writes that the practice of contemplating Deep Time - just spending some minutes in our day reflecting on how unimaginably old the earth is, can "help replenish our mental energies during adversity, and offer a meditative source of catharsis amid the frenzy of now." It can evoke "a momentary sense of awe." And awe, says anthropologist Barbara King, is "mind and heart expanding."

We don't have to be a scientist or a rebbe in the late 1700's. Even just spending a few minutes inside that mind blowing time horizon - maybe standing at the shore of what feels like an endless ocean, or under a ridiculous amount of stars - or just **thinking** about it - can begin to nurture us back toward the *merchav*.

There's an incredible artist, Katie Paterson, who's built a kind of deep time library in Norway in and among the trees to help humanity contemplate deep time. She's invited authors to write books whose manuscripts are then placed in its walls, not to be read for another century - expanding their and our time horizon far beyond ourselves. Those who have visited report feeling a sense of deep connection to each other, a renewed awareness and awakesness to the impact of their own actions, and an expansiveness that's hard to describe.

We could even access deep time right this very second. Yom Kippur is expansive time. We have nowhere to be but here. This long 25 hour day. Nowhere to rush with nothing to distract ourselves.

Only to take a deep breath. To think. To feel. To slow down our speaking, our walking. To take the time to look at each other and our families with a patient compassion and love, imagining that we are part of each other, a great Oneness. Yom Kippur invites our most expansive **thinking** - of what's possible for our souls and the world - and it demands our most expansive **feeling** - which we gotta know - is a big part of getting back to the *merchav*.

Being in the *meitzar* mutes and tempers how we express our emotions - **that's** the numbness - and it protects us from our perceived powerlessness. But Jewish tradition encourages us to let ourselves feel fully. Yom Kippur asks us to break our hearts open to one another, to wail like the cry of the shofar. This **matters** right now. **First** because when we stifle our emotion - our grief, our despair - we become walled off, unavailable, to the people who need us most. **Feeling** expansively allows our loved ones to get close to us again.

And second - have you ever laughed until you cried? I don't mean like "oh, my eyes teared up a little." I mean laughed so hard that you started weeping and everyone looks at you like you're out of your mind? This can't be just me. That's because sadness and joy are much more similar to each other than either one is to numbness or neutrality. When we allow ourselves to really feel our deepest grief or sadness or **outrage** again for the harsh world we are living in, we also unlock our deepest joy. Laughter. Silliness. Freeness. Hope. And we need all that now more than perhaps ever before.

Because expansive feeling leads to expansive thinking leads to expansive action.

There's a beautiful story in the book Longpath, by Ari Wallach. He was preparing family dinner one night when his daughter's school sent him a notification that she hadn't handed in a Spanish assignment on time. Immediately, he felt all kinds of things rise in him. Fear for her future, anger, shame as a parent who let this happen. The *meitzar*. His instincts to yell, punish, blame - were strong.

But he took a beat and gazed out at an unimaginably long time horizon and thought instead: What do I want for my daughter, really? How can I express love for her in this situation? And what could I do **now** that might even impact how **she** raises **her** children and how **they** eventually raise **theirs**? He **felt** the *meitzar*, but he **chose** the *merchav*. Just one dinner time to practice, one flow in the face of our inevitable human ebbs.

Every minute is a chance for us to practice returning to spaciousness. To hold ourselves gently wherever we are in the *meitzar*, but also to reach with all we've got for the *merchav* that's waiting for us. Our loved ones, our neighbors, our planet, our democracy for goodness sake, are counting on it.

I want to leave us with one final image that a dear friend recently sent me, not knowing how much I needed it, from a book called Nature and the Human Soul. "But this much *is* known: inside the caterpillar's body are clusters of cells called, of all things, imaginal buds. ... The imaginal buds contain the idealized image, the blueprint, for growing a butterfly. While the caterpillar goes about its Earth-bound business, these cells, hidden inside, are imagining flight."

On this day of reflection, on this day of expansive time, on this day that is the beginning of whatever is next, may we remember that even when we are constricted by the *meitzar*, even when it is squeezing our kishkes and our courage and our energy out of us, that there is something inside of us, always and at all times, that is imagining flight.

May we hear its rumblings, may we flow from our inevitable ebbs, and may the giddiness of Siccar Point find us here and lift us back toward the great expanse that we are yearning for. Amen and G'mar Chatimah Tovah.