



Torah for Turbulent Times

"Cultivating Awe"

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when contemplating the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.” (Albert Einstein) In the careful balance of life these days, in the beauty of a sparkling snowy day, in a good conversation with a friend, and yes, even in a Zoom community gathering we can experience awe and a “holy curiosity” - if we are open to it. When life feels like a bumpy ride, a simple moment of awe can provide stability and help to absorb the impact.

Awe can sometimes surprise us, but more often than not it takes effort to cultivate it. A famous story is told of a group of students wondering where to find the awe of G-d. In their visit to the Kotzker Rebbe, he asks them, “Where do you find awe? What is the place of G-d’s glory?” They respond by quoting the prophets and our prayers, “Holy, holy, holy is G-d, the whole world is filled with the honor of the Holy One.” Rabbi Menachem Mendel gave a different answer. “G-d’s glory is found wherever we let G-d in.” (in *Everyday Holiness*, Morinis, p.240) In my experience this is often easier said than done. It takes practice and intention even just to stop, breathe, and notice the world around us for a moment.

In this past week’s Shabbat Torah discussion we didn’t focus on the giving of the 10 Commandments. Rather, we reflected on receiving and what it takes to be receptive. In Zoom chat rooms we shared personal moments of awe, or what I refer to as “mountain-top moments.” This is grounded in a Hasidic commentary which elaborates on the phrase, “Moses went up to G-d.” In doing so, he ascended Mt. Sinai to experience something extraordinary. The teaching goes that authentic awe doesn’t come easily to a person but requires a regular determined effort and concentration. This is considered the “first gate,” which then opens up an additional gate, the gate of love. “Moses went up to G-d” refers to the quality of awe. He achieved this on his own through great effort and concentration. (*Speaking Torah*, Art Green)

I wonder, “What brings awe into your life? What are the hurdles to achieving it? What are the health and soul benefits of cultivating awe?” Our tradition teaches that if we put in effort and concentration, just like in all other aspects of our lives, we can experience awe. And, a little bit of awe can go a long way in grounding our day to day.

-Rabbi Mark