

Expecting the Unexpected - Yom Kippur 2022
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“Silence is a private moment into which we invite God. And God appears at times least expected. No one has seen the wind, yet we know its power! Often, what is most important is known but cannot be shown. What can put truth in a box? Who can wrap and deliver humility? Who has touched wisdom? Where is the location of mercy? God, You help us see the unseen, know the unknown, sense what is close yet very distant. We take a moment to thank You for giving us eyes and ears and minds that capture what is most important but is lost to so many.”¹

My summer highlight reading was Avi Loeb’s book, Extraterrestrial. Extraterrestrial is not science fiction, rather, Avi Loeb is an Israeli-American Astrophysicist who heads the Department of Astronomy at Harvard University.

His hypothesis that other intelligent life exists in the Universe is based entirely on scientific probabilities. And the emergence of this book, published in 2021, was the result of what he believes was intergalactic technology junk traveling through our solar system in 2017.

Though Loeb himself reads as an atheist, without ever declaring himself as such, some of his statements can readily be applied to the spiritual life.

One such point of wisdom is this: “If you don't expect the unexpected, you'll never see it.” Let me say that again: If you don't expect the unexpected, you'll never see it.

¹ Written by Rabbi Stephen Pearce & found in “The Sweetness of Honey” a children’s machzor

In other words, we need to be constantly aware of our limits and be seeking to expand them. If we are sure that what we experience or know is as we predicted, then we don't leave room for growth. Really, embracing the unexpected, is intimately tied to growth. What we don't know may be right in front of us, we just don't understand it.

There is the story of a village plagued by drought, which sent for a rabbi famed for the power of his blessings for rain. The villagers went to considerable expense to bring him in. The entire community gathered to hear his blessing, but when the time came for him to pronounce it, he said nothing.

"Why don't you say the blessing?" they asked.

"Because it won't work."

"But we paid you a lot of money to come here and say the blessing."

"You paid me to come here. The blessing I would pronounce for free if you only had faith it would work."

"Isn't the fact that we paid your expenses faith enough?"

"If you had faith enough," the rabbi said, "you would have brought umbrellas."²

Sometimes we think that we are open to what we don't know or haven't experienced before, but really we are just trying to prove what we already believe or know. We haven't made the space for the unknown. We haven't expected the unexpected.

Just think about the hurricane that we all experienced last week. If you turned on the news, or went on the Internet, constant predictions, expectations, and warnings were made. While some of these were for the sake of health and safety - of preserving life - once a person

² I heard this story from Rabbi Mitch Chefitz

decided to shelter, nothing more could be done. The human desire to predict and control is quite strong. But no matter how much time and energy was spent on predicting the exact path of Hurricane Ian, not one of us could control it, and only its aftermath could tell us its exact path.

In other areas of our lives, how does our desire to predict and control actually affect the outcome? How do our calculations, at times, actually determine the course of events?

The bedrock of humor or comedy is saying the unexpected. One of our natural responses to being surprised is laughter.

The philosopher, Henri Bergson said in his essay *Laughter*, that laughter is triggered by the realization of our own mortality.

As each of our lives on this planet is but a blink of the eye, we must be able to laugh - to find humor through the pain and beauty of being alive and knowing that it is but for a short time.

If some, or all, of our beliefs become fortresses of mangled truths, we risk losing our ability to see the humanity in others - to laugh together and at ourselves - regardless of our shared or disparate thoughts and beliefs. Rather than arrogance, let's embrace humility.

Astrophysicist Dr. Loeb also said: "Truth and consensus may never be conflated." As a society, we are dangerously falling prey to this conflation. But let me repeat again: "Truth and consensus may never be conflated." If consensus rules, mystery becomes irrelevant. While creating community around shared values is important, we also need to be able to think as individuals and be safe doing so.

For Loeb, that each of our lives on this planet is brief, may be all that there is for each one of us. Though it is without question that our soul's journey to this planet is but a blip in the cosmic breadth, I believe that the soul's journey is far more expansive - both existing before and after we have been incarnated into our bodies on this earth.

Rabbi Bunam, a Hasidic Polish rabbi from the 1700's said: "Man is always passing through two doors: out of this world and into the next, and out and in again."

In a traditional Jewish wedding, the bride is veiled. Unlike other neighboring traditions and religions, when the bride and groom first see each other, the bride is not veiled. It is the groom who veils her. Why? Because we recognize that even in the deepest of intimacies - that between a married couple - there remains a mystery.

When a marriage fails, it is often because the unearthed mystery is not wanted or the unexpected is too far out of the zone of what was imagined. Nonetheless, it is a choice to enter into the mystery, or reject it.

Through the veil, a bride's face may still be seen. She is visible, but that small bit of obfuscation tells the story of our existence. Joining together in marriage - and life itself - requires trusting in the unknown - having faith (while expecting the unexpected).

The Jewish tradition teaches that there is a thin veil between this world and the other worlds. All we need to do is peel back the veil to see the other world what is right there underneath the sheer shroud.

A veil also appears in our Torah reading for today. Amidst what may feel like a strange ancient animal blood ritual, the text reads: Then the Cohen shall kill the goat of the sin offering, that is on behalf of the people, and bring its blood within to the veil - sprinkle the blood on the veil - and before the veil. You may notice, the priest does not sprinkle the blood behind the veil.

In our Torah reading, the mystery of the beyond is honored and witnessed by not lifting the veil.

In Midrash Tanchuma, Jewish Legends, two parallels are made between the Creation of the World and the creation of the Tabernacle (where this blood ritual is taking place): In Genesis and in Psalms (104:2) it says: God created the heaven and the earth - and stretched out the heavens like a curtain. The midrash is insinuating that the curtain of the heavens is like the curtain or veil of the Tabernacle. All one need do, is peel it back to see what is hidden behind. But if we did peel it back - would we understand it?

And in Genesis, about the second day of creation it states: Let there be an expanse between the waters and divide the waters from the waters (Gen. 1:6). About the Tabernacle it is written: And the veil shall divide between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (Exod. 26:33).” What cannot be seen regularly is attributed as being more

Holy - because we cannot feign to understand it. We must accept that we are both incredibly capable glorious creatures and extremely limited.

In Maimonides', Guide to the Perplexed, he writes about the mysteries of the Natural Sciences: "Do not imagine that these most difficult problems can be thoroughly understood by any one of us. This is not the case. At times the truth shines so brilliantly that we perceive it as clear as day. Our nature and habit then draw a veil over our perception, and we return to a darkness almost as dense as before. We are like those who, though beholding frequent flashes of lightning, still find themselves in the thickest darkness of the night."

No doubt this has happened to many of us - in meditation or prayer, accessing some great understanding - but later not being able to retrieve what insight we had. It can also happen in the creative process - accessing a written line - a corner of a painting - a line of musical notation. Brief encounters of light within the blanketed darkness.

Our Hasidic Masters explained that by embracing our physical existence on this planet, we are not be able to fully grasp the Great Mystery of All. The Kedushat Levi³ explains: ". . .serving the Lord under the auspices of the ψ (with our physical beings), results in a person being given an *aspaklaria*, a lens, through which a vision [of the Holy One] is screened by a veil. Living in the ψ (the material part of the universe), results in all of one's sensations being affected by

³ on Parashat Lech Lecha

phenomena found only in this domain of the universe.” In other words, what we experience and know is filtered through our limited capacity.

Most of us want to live in this world and have physical pleasures even though it means that our vision and understanding of the Universe and her Creator is clouded. Being physical beings also gives us the capacity for gratitude for all that we have and all we can elevate to a more spiritual plane.

And even though we are limited, our search for The Source of All - the Holy One - Whom we call God - Yah - and our search for our place with Him, must be expansive and push against our perceived limits. We should not get cozy with childhood fantasies or emotional responses to the hand we have been dealt in life. Instead, we must try to bring the veil of separation into our vision, and if we are brave enough slowly peel it back - through meditation, prayer and deep listening to others and ourselves, with curiosity.

Another story: The community supported Rabbi Samuel through his week of mourning the death of his wife, then allowed him space and consideration during shloshim, the first thirty days. They noticed when he came to the minyan for morning prayers and laid his tefillin, he did so slowly, taking much longer than usual. At first, they thought it was because of the heaviness of his heart, but with the passing of the weeks, laying tefillin continued to be for him a slow and deliberate process. At last, they ventured to ask him about it.

“It’s like this,” he said. “I begin with the shel yad, the box for the arm, on the bicep binding me securely into the world of action, then the windings on the forearm to settle my emotions. The shel rosh, the box for the head, I place securely with the knot representing the union of

all four worlds pressed securely at the nape of my neck, the two straps descending left and right from my shoulders. All of that is as it was before. But when it comes to the words *arastich li*, the moment of betrothal, when I wind the strap as if it were a ring around my finger, I take time to invite my wife from the adjacent world, and I hear her inviting me. We say *arastich li* to each other, 'I betroth you to me.' And that's why I might seem to take more time than usual."

The Hasidic Radziner Rebbe wrote: "Truly, one must know and understand, that from God's point of view, it is all one, whereas the concealment of God's presence and separation [of the worlds] exist only from man's point of view."⁴

We must venture into the unknown. We must be willing to simultaneously see and know our limits and our limitlessness. To enter into growth - as a planet - as a community - as a person - we must expect the unexpected. As the great Jewish poet, Zelda, wrote in 1967: "And the light of the rose seems so near, and its fragrance so near, and the silence of its leaves so near, that island so near- take a boat and cross the sea of fire."

If we do not try to cross the sea because we are afraid, we may simply be consumed by the fire. On this Yom Kippur day, as we empty our bodies of physical sustenance, may we empty ourselves of preconceptions and begin a new journey towards expecting the unexpected -

Gmar Chatimah Tovah - May you be sealed in the Book of Life.

Amen. _____

⁴ Shaar HaEmunah Ve'Yesod HaChassidut