

Rosh Hashanah Day One 5784
Rabbi David Englander

The Wonder of You

I know that since this moment last year, a couple of hours into our morning service on the first day of the Jewish new year, you have been consumed with a question, a concern, maybe even a worry. I do not envy you the suspense you have experienced and I don't want to prolong it any longer. I can, with humility and pride, report to you today that the answer is yes, I finally found Gibbsboro. Nice place. And now that that mystery is solved, I would like to turn to a few others, and offer and challenge us all to reflect on one of the questions we are meant to ask ourselves on this day and answer with our lives. That question is: how do we respond to the profound unlikelihood and deep mystery of the fact of our very existence? A few stories from this year just ended got me thinking about this, knowing that in this room everyone has similar types of experiences that I hope will come to your mind as I share these with you. Stories, memories, connections, that remind us to take some time, and expend some effort and attention, to the endless sources of wonder that make us say anything from hmmm to wow to maybe 'thank you God'. Moments which call us to whisper or say or sing or shout a prayer of gratitude for our ability to recognize meaning in these unexpected and often utterly unexplainable connections that only we can see.

Though they will probably kill me for doing it I have one story from each of our kids, youngest to oldest. Our youngest went to the junior prom at Cherry Hill east, in a rented tuxedo. This story is not going where you think it is. After prom he went to a friend's house and late that night I went to

pick him up. All fine. The tuxedo came with a note that we did not have to go all the way back to the shop on Route 38 but could return it to the home of one of the store's owners. The next day we packed up the tux, shirt, tie, and shoes and I drove to that house thinking gosh this seems familiar. The drop off was at the house next door to where he had been hanging out the night before.

Our middle one who is here for Rosh Hashanah and will blow shofar tomorrow is a sophomore at the University of Central Florida. When he got to his new apartment there and got all set up he let us know he only needed one thing he didn't have with him, a shade or curtain for the one window in his room. I go on google maps, look at his address, and not fifty yards to the side of the building is a store that sells only window treatments. We still got the cheap one from Walmart but even so - it was an odd and unlikely connection to experience at that moment.

Don't like those two? How about our oldest, our daughter, who on her first day on the main campus of Penn State - We Are - met someone and became friends and in doing the inevitable Jewish geography learned that this friends' mother grew up in Cherry Hill and as a child was best friends with none other than our current president, Faye Shapiro.

And if all of that doesn't get you going a little this is the story that made me reflect and think in an even deeper way, resonant, I hope, with those stories of your life that you know are real but simply cannot explain without turning to the idea that there is something more going on here than is immediately obvious or explainable. Sometime over this past year Rabbi Krupnick and I were officiating at a funeral at Roosevelt Cemetery, just north of Philly. As

is his honored custom whenever he is there he visits the grave of his beloved father and so on our way out we detoured to the closest place to park the car for a few moments for him to go talk to his dad. I would wait in the car while he walked the two or so aisles to his family plots. From the passenger seat I look up and to my right, and see a large stone engraved with the name Englander. I have to say at first I was not impressed; mine is not the most common last name but it is not so very uncommon either, and I have come across Englander's in other cemeteries to whom as far as I know I am not related. But since I had a moment I got out to take a look. And I quickly realized I was standing at the graves of a dozen or more members of my family, including my great great grandfather Rabbi Shimshon Englander who as I've told you before was the rabbi of the Hungarian shul at 5th and Gaskill in south Philadelphia, and who was succeeded by his son Rabbi David Englander, my great grandfather and namesake, who is buried in Israel. This is not even twenty yards from the Krupnick graves.

Given all the Jews who lived and died over a century in greater Philadelphia and all the places they could have been buried in this or other crowded cemeteries and all the connected dots over the course of many generations, well, if you don't see something more going on in that story than random happenstance or long odds that happen to have hit, well, that is your prerogative. But maybe for a moment do what I don't do often enough, which is: experience the uniquely human capacity we have to open our eyes to the wonder and awe that surrounds us every moment but reveals itself to us only when we are open to seeing it. And that wonder, that awe, makes the difference between going through the motions and

reaching our greatest potential as human beings created in the image of a mysterious yet approachable God.

One more story that is even more unlikely and that is the story of you. You probably haven't thought about it recently but the odds of you being you, or of even being, are infinitesimally less likely than the strange placement of a store for window treatments, the return of a tuxedo, or even finding your relatives next to those of a new colleague. I mean, way less. In mathematical terms the likelihood of you has been estimated at one in ten followed by over two and a half million zeroes. Not one in two and a half million but trillions of times that. One metaphor puts it like this: Imagine there was one life preserver thrown somewhere in some ocean and there is exactly one turtle in all of these oceans, swimming underwater somewhere. The probability that you came about and exist today is the same as that turtle sticking its head out of the water — in the middle of that life preserver. On one try.

What is our response to this lightning bolt of extreme unlikelyness? That is one of the key questions we are being asked right here and right now. If we are open to it, this is the question we are always being asked but it gets swallowed up in the mundane, the everyday, drowned out in unending noise, distraction, and going about fulfilling or avoiding the responsibilities we carry with us. We face many risks in this world but one of the greatest and least talked about is existing without seeking to elevate our existence. That comes from being open to the possibility of feeling awe, from being open to the experience of feeling wonder.

Channeling the dad in My Big Fat Greek Wedding, who spent lots of effort proving that all good ideas were Greek ideas, I am not of the mind or belief that all good ideas are Jewish ideas and you shouldn't be either. But when I see books with the titles *The Power of Wonder: The Extraordinary Emotion That Will Change the Way You Live, Learn, and Lead*, and *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, and *The Wonder Paradox: Embracing the Weirdness of Existence and the Poetry of Our Lives*, all released this year - this year! - I can't help but think, hang on, I have seen this idea before, and from a most authentically Jewish source at that.

More than anyone else it was Abraham Joshua Heschel who re-introduced the idea and connected goals of experiencing awe and wonder and his term for the combination of both, radical amazement, to Jewish learners everywhere. This for sure permeated a broader audience because it speaks to a human capacity and not a specifically Jewish endeavor. As another teacher of mine once said, some authors write great books, some use fancy words, others are good for a compelling chapter or two but Heschel? Heschel wrote sentences, one after the other and I want to invite you to let these wash over you, and more than that, to absorb something of the invitation embedded in each of them. Doing so can change your year, and can change your life.

“Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. ...[to] get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.” And...

“Never once in my life did I ask God for success or wisdom or power or fame. I asked for wonder, and [God] gave it to me.” And...

“The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living.” And...

“I have one talent, and that is the capacity to be tremendously surprised, surprised at life, at ideas. This is to me the supreme Hasidic imperative: Don't be old. Don't be stale.”

In a Rosh Hashanah sermon I could call on Presidents and Prime Ministers to do what I want them to do but as far as I know they aren't here. I could tell you that you should come to synagogue more often and while I hope you will, very few people are motivated to do that because of a sermon, and as I will always tell you, I'm glad you are here today, in person or online. I could tell you all of the great things Beth El has planned for this year and all of the ways we are seeking to make sure this place is reflective not only of its name as the House of God but worthy of your associating your name with ours, living up to the expectations of past generations and yours as well. And I could tell you that to do that we need your continued partnership to achieve all of that, and I am optimistic that you will express that support and intertwine your lives with the life of our beloved Beth El in ways that will be personally meaningful to you and beneficial to the community at large.

And all of that is important, even critical. But it will all be enhanced, motivated by, and otherwise elevated if we access our uniquely human capacity to be open to something extraordinary, something that is available to us, but to which we are often closed off or from which we are too easily

diverted. And that is to experience our world in full, to connect to those we love and those by whom we are fortunate enough to be loved, and to expand our capacities to learn, grow, and improve our lives and those of others as well. In short, to offer gratitude in thought, word, blessing and prayer for the exceedingly unlikely opportunity we have been gifted on this one miraculous journey of our lives.

It is not always easy. Loss and setbacks, illness and injury, caregiving for loved ones and being overwhelmed, as we sometimes can be, by any or all of those things, closes off our broader vision for the wonderful and wonder-filled aspects of our lives and world that remain. If this has been a particularly hard year for you, your Beth El family stands with you and I pray these holy days, steeped in tradition and grounded in communal gathering, will be of support and comfort. May you know of no more sorrow, and may you and your loved ones experience no more pain, so that the veil will be lifted and the miracle of our world, and the miracle of you, will once again be revealed.

Are you open to one last little wonder story? When we moved to New Jersey one of the more mundane tasks we had to take on was re-titling our cars, resulting in new license plates. I did the paperwork, made the appointment, finally got called to the window, and they handed me my Jersey plate. E41-RHY. E - clearly for Englander, returning to the area in which my ancestors sought to inspire people to live their best and most fulfilling Jewish lives and in which I have been blessed with the chance to try to do the same. 41 - even more clearly for the greatest New York Met of all time, my favorite player, Tom Seaver, of blessed memory. And RHY - for Rosh Hashanah, and for Yom Kippur, once a year opportunities for our

Beth El family and our people to gather, reflect, and ask ourselves the questions to which a loving and patient God awaits our answers in the form of our lives. May we live with kindness and decency, with compassion and respect for others and for ourselves. And may we seek to live with an unending sense of awe and wonder, for the little and the big mysteries that have somehow led us to be heirs to a beautiful tradition, and to be deemed worthy of being created in the image of a wondrous God.

Shanah tovah.