

The New Big Picture

Rosh Hashanah Sermon – 5771

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On December 21st, 1968, Nasa's Apollo 8 mission with its three astronauts lifted off from the John F. Kennedy Space Center on its way to becoming the first manned rocket ship to escape earth's gravitational pull and achieve a sustained lunar orbit. Much of the excitement around the Apollo 8 mission was focused on the amazing technological achievement it represented, but what turned out to be the most impactful aspect of this mission were the photographs of planet Earth taken by the astronauts several days into the operation, as they orbited around the moon. "Earthrise"—as this set of images came to be called—stunned everyone. Astronaut Frank Borman called it "the most beautiful, heart-catching sight of his life." NASA, at that time, clearly saw humanity's future out among the stars, and so they were unprepared for the paradoxical reaction that the "Earthrise" images provoked. Rather than turning people's eyes toward a future in space, it refocused them on the Earth itself. For many astronauts, the sight "hit with the force of a religious experience," which echoed throughout the world.

Prior to Apollo 8, the meaning of space exploration for most people was all about technological triumph and unprecedented mastery of the material world. But in fact, the most powerful outcome of this mission had an undeniable spiritual dimension; in the way that it transformed our thinking about the Earth and its environment across all sectors of our culture. In the words of one observer, "as we gazed upon our whole planet for the first time, we saw ourselves and our place in the universe with new clarity."

Now today is Rosh Hashannah, the beginning of our people's sacred calendar, and this is a time of year when many of us are used to stepping back and viewing our lives from a vantage point that allows us to ask ourselves whether and to what extent we are truly living in accordance with our own deepest values, goals and vision.

Within that context you might be legitimately wondering what in the world the Apollo 8 mission and its impact has to do with the primary purpose of our gathering today. A partial answer to that question involves noticing that there is another important theme to this day that often gets overlooked, namely, the symbolic commemoration of the creation of the world, or as we might more properly say in modern terms, the creation of the universe. While these two themes may seem at first blush to point us in very different directions spiritually, I believe that there is vantage point from which they quite nicely integrate with one another. In order to explore this point of integration, let's turn our attention for just a moment to what may seem like an unlikely Rosh Hashannah resource; the Google Maps web site.

Over the past several years, I have grown very fond of Google Maps, not only because it serves the very practical purpose of helping me to find my way to an unfamiliar destination, but it also expands my horizons in a more general sense by giving me the opportunity to see how that destination fits into the larger geographical picture of our region. I really enjoy using those two

great tools on the web site that allow me to move the focus of the map in any one of the four cardinal directions and to zoom in or zoom out, giving me either more detail on the exact location or a greater sense of how it is situated within the framework of nearby larger roads and cities.

This ability to zoom in and zoom out, to view a goal or a situation in great detail or within an enlarged context, which is so essential to generating successful travel experiences, is also essential to successfully navigating our moral and spiritual journeys through life. The problem is that we human beings have a tendency to get stuck at the level of the particular experience or situation; in other words, all the way zoomed in, and we often forget that we have the ability to pull back periodically, in order to get the complimentary perspective of how our particular experiences fit into the larger picture. How helpful would it be if we had the equivalent of a Google map for our lives that could help us to see more clearly the nature of the territory that we were navigating and the larger forces that were operating upon us?

Often, at this time of year, I think we do succeed to some extent at zooming out, as we consider the character of our relationships and the quality of our inner and outer lives. But of course, with Google maps, we know that there are in fact many degrees of zooming out that are available to us and similarly, there are many different ways of seeking out the big picture as we consider our journeys through life.

For example, imagine that we move back by one degree on our Google life map. Instead of merely observing our present situation within the context of who we aspire to be as individuals, we can now view it all from the perspective of the larger family systems in which we are rooted. Or, perhaps from the standpoint of the most recent two or three generations of personalities and experience that have informed, in one way or another, our own choices and values. From this position, thanks to both genealogy and psychology, we stand a pretty good chance of increasing our own self-understanding, and increasing our ability to go beyond the influence of our family system if we so choose.

If we go back another degree or two, we come to the level of the big picture at which our membership in the Jewish people is located. We can sense how we are connected to a culture that is one of the oldest on the planet, and how our patterns of thought and action have been shaped by ancient words and by the evolving understanding of their meaning which continues into the present. Whether or not we are personally observant in our own lives, we are nonetheless inheritors of a hundred generations of voices singing around the Shabbat table, a hundred generations of voices arguing over the meaning of a text, and tragically, a hundred generations of men and women who lived each day with the anxiety of wondering when the next bigotry driven assault would rear its ugly head. But of course, the scope of the big picture does not come to an end with our connection to the Jewish community.

We could also choose to explore the meaning of our lives from the perspective of our membership in the larger human community, or, to move back yet one more degree on our

map, the implications of our relationship to all living things on our planet which is attested to by our shared possession of the DNA molecules that reside within each of our cells.

For each new layer of the “big picture” that we discover and allow to influence our view of life, we gain new insight into the nature of our identity, both the potential we carry as human beings, and the challenges we face as well. In this process, our sense of self is enriched and deepened, and we often gain greater understanding of why we struggle with certain aspects of our day to day experience. We may also gain greater clarity about which directions we must take if we hope to mitigate, or even move beyond those struggles.

Accounts abound about people whose lives have shifted dramatically as a result of discovering some new piece of a bigger picture that adds depth and texture to their lives. Just a couple of months ago there was an interesting news story that broke about all star NBA center Amare Stoudemire who apparently had recently discovered some Jewish branches on his family tree. This discovery moved him to plan a visit to Israel on which he toured a wide range of important historical and religious sites and invested serious time and energy in learning some rudimentary spoken Hebrew.

While cynics joked that this was a PR ploy to ingratiate Stoudemire to the (admittedly abundant number of) Jewish fans of his new team, the New York Knicks, I believe it much more likely that this was an authentic response to encountering and wanting to make sense of a new facet of his identity. And I have no doubt that at least some of his attitudes and behaviors are undergoing an evolution as a direct result of this discovery.

For many people in the modern context, the big picture of human identity hits a limit once we arrive at the level of our planet. After all, are we not the quintessential earthlings? Isn't our vital connection to the earth as a whole beautifully captured in the many examples of linguistic correlation between our species and our planet? In English, we have the association between the words humus and human and the parallel connection in Hebrew between the word for human, Adam, and the word for ground Adamah. But what if we discovered that our human identity transcended the boundaries of our planet? How might such a perspective on our lives change us? What could it mean to situate our own individual narratives within the larger story of the creation of the universe itself?

It is exactly these questions that are addressed by the husband and wife team of astrophysicist Joel Primack and science writer Nancy Abrams in their recent book entitled *The View from the Center of the Universe*. In this book, the authors propose and explore an extraordinary and challenging idea; namely, that the scientific understandings that have emerged over the past 20-30 years related to the origin and development of the universe have the potential to play a

transformative role in the coming years with regard to how we human beings understand ourselves as individuals and as a species.

Just as the snapshots of Earthrise from Apollo 8 forever changed our sense of human identity and our connection to our planet, so too do the newest understandings from the science of cosmology have the capacity to impact on our deepest sense of what it means to be a person and a member of society.

Primack's and Abram's main thesis has to do with the profoundly intimate connection that exists between humanity and the larger cosmos in which we find ourselves. They put it in the following way: "We are humans, which means we can trace our lineage back fourteen billion years through generations of stars. Our atoms were created in stars, blown out in stellar winds or massive explosions and carried for millions of years through space to become part of a newly forming solar system, our solar system. And back before those creator stars, there was a time when the particles that, *at this very moment*, make up our bodies and brains, were mixing in an amorphous cloud of dark matter and quarks.

Intimately woven into each one of us are billions of bits of information that had to be encoded and tested and preserved over the course of billions of years of cosmic evolution in order to create us. Despite our outward appearance as finite, discreet entities, each composed of a package of living organs sealed off neatly in a bag of skin, every one of us is actually the tip of a great cosmic iceberg of cultural, genetic and molecular history moving among and through each other."

This perspective on who we are as human beings gives new meaning to the term, "multi-dimensional," and invites us to look with new eyes at ourselves and one another. As I reflect on the implications of these ideas, my mind is drawn to memories of conversations I've had with people who have recently returned from a trip to the Grand Canyon. Not surprisingly, the description of the experience often takes on an almost religious character growing out of the deep sense of awe and wonder that such a visit seems to invariably evoke.

At the Grand Canyon, people encounter in an unambiguously concrete way, evidence of the powerful and dramatic forces that have impacted on our planet and of the immense time frame within which, those forces have operated. And as I think about what Primack and Abrams are saying about us, it strikes me that we should experience at least an equivalent amount of awe and wonder in the presence of any form of life at all, most especially a human being, but most often we do not. Perhaps this is because the power and immensity of the forces that are responsible for our own existence are hidden at the microscopic and molecular levels of our being.

The advantage of encountering a place like the Grand Canyon or an image such as Apollo 8's Earthrise, is that the new perspective, the new information is visually accessible. So, until someone comes up with a machine or a tool that can render atomic and molecular history visible to the naked eye, we are just going to have to practice seeing in a new way.

One person who has spent a lot of time in his life learning to see beyond the surface level of things is the well known Buddhist teacher and activist, Thich Naht Hanh. In his book, *Every Step is Peace*, he offers a powerful meditation in which he encourages us to contemplate a flower and attempt to see beyond its current form into the process or the elements that have made its existence possible. He suggests that we try to envision how the sun and the rain and soil, everything that contributed to the growth of the flower, are still present within the flower in some way.

What if we could learn to do that with ourselves and one another? What would it be like to sit across the table from a friend at a coffee shop and see, as part of who they truly are, the presence of 14 billion years of cosmic history? Even more intriguingly, what about sitting across from someone who on the surface seems to be very different from us? How might this awareness change the way we deal with tensions and disagreements between individuals and groups in our world?

It seems to me that at the very least, there would be a dramatic increase of wonder, respect, gratitude, compassion, love and patience in the world. Maybe we would collectively embrace at a new level the ancient Talmudic teaching that the saving or destroying of a single life is equivalent to saving or destroying an entire world.

But the truth is that it's hard to imagine what could be, in a world influenced by this kind of big picture, since it is so new and so far beyond the identities we have developed up until this point in our history. Primack and Abrams are convinced that humanity's ability to integrate this new dimension of our human identity will predict our success at learning how to live together on this small planet over the course of the next decades and centuries. And given the rising level of acrimony and bigotry within our country and all around the globe in recent years, it's not hard to imagine that they may be right.

Maybe all of us here today could take at least a first baby step along this path of reaching towards this new cosmic aspect of human identity, and in the process, catch a small glimpse of our place in the universe with new clarity.

With that in mind, I would like to conclude this talk by inviting us all to zoom back into this room on our imaginary Google life maps, but to the best of our ability, stay connected with the amazing perspective we have just been exploring. I have a short poem that has an affinity with this cosmic outlook on our lives that I'd like to share as a prayer for the new year. At the conclusion of the poem, I would invite us to simply sit together in silence for about 30 seconds or so, and then, I would like you to turn to one of the other people near you, a creature who, like yourself, was 14 billion years in the making, and wish that person a *shannah tovah* with all of the awe and wonder that you can muster.

We are all on a journey together . . . to the center of the universe . . . look deep into yourself, into another . . . it is to a center which is everywhere . . . that is the holy journey . . . notice and

honor the radiance of everything about you . . . the smallest plant, the creatures, the objects in your care . . . be gentle and nurture . . . listen . . . as we experience and accept . . . all that we really are . . . we grow in care . . . we begin to embrace others as ourselves . . . and learn to live as one among many . . .