

September 2016, *Menorah Newsletter*

Days of Awe

by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

At the end of this month, if all goes well, I will earn my certificate in Positive Psychology. Positive Psychology, to sum it up in a single sentence, is the study of human flourishing from a social science perspective. Over the last century, psychologists have conducted massive numbers of experiments to help us understand and lift people out of anxiety, depression, delusions, phobias, violence, racism, trauma – in short, dysfunctions, disorders, and disasters of every description. Yet relatively little work has been done to understand how to help people go from “good to great” – and increase their wellbeing, engagement, sense of meaning, and positive contributions. (I will discuss some of my favorite ideas and strategies that dovetail with Rabbinic advice on Sunday, September 18 from 10:30 to 11:30. The subject will be: "The Spirit and Science of Transformation– Just in Time for the High Holidays!")

I conducted a rough-and-dirty survey of the tables of contents of both popular and scholarly works in the field. Here is my summary of the most frequent topics in Positive Psychology: Awe, Gratitude, Forgiveness, Humility, Hope, Joy, Satisfaction/Contentment, Mindfulness, Kindness, Resilience, Habits & Rituals, Caring for the Body, Caring for the Spirit, Nurturing Community and Relationships, Identifying and Building Character Strengths. These topics are among the most frequent in books on religion and spirituality, as well. Frankly, they should also be on everybody’s lists of personal aspirations, what to look for in a mate, and how to raise your kids.

As the Days of Awe approach, it’s worth reviewing a few facts, experiments, and insights about the topic I listed first: awe.

- Goosebumps are common throughout the mammalian kingdom as a response to a threat (indicating fear). Only humans get goosebumps in response to beauty, truth, amazement, or human connection (indicating awe).
- Positive emotions have been shown to improve overall health and decrease inflammation in the body, while a preponderance of negative emotions has the opposite effects. Using saliva samples and personality tests, researchers have shown that awe has the most beneficial impact of any positive emotion tested so far on markers related to inflammation. Awe is good for your body!
- In other experiments, researchers evoked awe by asking people to write about a past experience of awe, watch a five-minute video with breathtaking nature scenes, or to look for one minute at a grove of rare trees, some 200 feet tall. (By contrast, other treatment groups were asked to write about memories of pride or amusement or to look at the façade of an unremarkable building for one minute.) Those experiencing awe were more likely to share resources and make sacrifices. In one experiment, they were more willing to donate a portion of the lottery tickets (fake!) they received with other, unidentified (fictitious!) participants who had (so they were told) received none. Those participants primed for awe were more likely to help a “passerby” (actually, a co-conspirator in the experiment) to pick up items that spilled. Awe is good for your soul and good for your community!
- Professors Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner, of UC Irvine and UC Berkeley, respectively, concluded, based on their research: “In the great balancing act of our social lives, between the gratification of self-interest and a concern for others, fleeting experiences of awe redefine the self in terms of the collective, and orient our actions toward the needs of those around us.”
- They further observed: “You could make the case that our culture

today is awe-deprived.” Art and music programs in schools have been curtailed or cut, and attendance by adults of live music, theater, museums, and houses of worship has declined. On average, we are inside more, working more, and alone more than previous generations. We are more rushed, with less time to simply be in and appreciate the world. Our schedules and daily lives do not typically prime us for awe.

So, here is an idea: What if we set aside, say, ten days as Days of Return or Days of Awe? What if we dedicated that time to being with family and community? What if we began by appreciating and celebrating Creation (we might call that kick-off the Birthday of the World) and then examined our habits, our relationships, and our very souls to make sure that we were living in alignment with our highest and best selves? What if we took plenty of time for song, prayer, and meditation, to connect with a Power greater and more awesome than ourselves?

Am I overselling this? You get the idea.

Of course, some of us are “awe-deprived” even during the High Holidays. To correct that, we can consciously direct our time in synagogue with an intention for awe. Admire the artistry of our ark curtains. Look through the windows and see the magnificent trees that surround the synagogue property. Meditate on the words of the liturgy, especially prayers that uplift you or call you to notice the Most High. “Today the world is born.” “We give Power to this day.” “The Great Shofar is sounded, and a still small voice is heard.” “Profoundly revered on the Day of Judgment, God forgives, in judgment.” Take time to connect and have a meaningful conversation with one of the (literally!) awesome CBI members you know – or don’t yet know. Use the silences of the Amidah to recall experiences of beauty, truth, grace, connection, and wonder from the last year. Focus on the Cantor’s voice; that always does it for me.

The same **approach works** for family holiday gatherings. “Radical amazement” – Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s notion of a reverence – becomes easier to attain when you eat a juicy orange after a 25 hour fast or observe how your sister’s kids have grown since the last family get together or sing a blessing, rooted in thankfulness, with three generations.

The Days of Awe are not just a time on the calendar, a Jewish identity builder, or an excuse to eat honey cake. They are a grand spiritual opportunity to truly see ourselves and see past ourselves, if we will use the time for the holy gift they were meant to confer. These days can help to recalibrate and prime us for awe – and other meaningful, constructive experiences.

My goal for myself and for our entire community, is not just to have Days of Awe that are truly awesome, but to have more days of awe (no caps, no special occasion) throughout the year.