

Yom Kippur 5784
Wondering About
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Louis Armstrong is considered the leading trumpeter and one of the most influential artists in jazz history. He grew up in dire poverty in New Orleans, working odd jobs as a child. At age 11, he played a toy horn and sang vocal harmonies on street corners. That early training caused him to be arrested on New Year's Eve, 1913, for disturbing the peace, found guilty of delinquency, and remanded to the New Orleans Colored Waif's Home for Boys. He spent many of his teen years in and out of that home, and there, his musical training grew roots.

Armstrong became a famous bandleader, singer, film star, and comedian. Living and working in a segregated, racist country, he became one of the last century's most beloved entertainers before his death in 1971.

In September 1967, at the height of the Vietnam War, against the backdrop of global tension and Americans still struggling over the racism-driven riots in Detroit that summer, Armstrong released one of the most beautiful songs I know, "What A Wonderful World." The song is an ode to the wonders of life in this world. It has been featured in several films and a couple of tv shows and covered by artists too numerous to count. But no rendition matches Armstrong's genuine, weathered voice. Despite the uncertainties and difficulties he faced, the unmitigated warmth and tenderness he exudes inspires an unmatched sense of care and hope for people and society.

We, too, are living through a time of profound uncertainty, from the confounding state of politics in this land where we live, to the alarming politics in the Jewish State that is meant to be our refuge, to our endangered planet, spinning at the outer reach of redemption before it is too late. On Yom Kippur our awareness of our own existential uncertainty is palpable. From the global to the national to the individual, we sit here together in the tension of knowing how little control we have over our fates and how much we want our lives to be meaningful and fully lived in ways that matter.

If you're like me you travel a train of words in and out of each week, jumping from one article, post, tweet, podcast, interview, and conversation to the next with nary a rest from the frenzy. We get caught in webs of words and anxieties that threaten to overwhelm and immobilize us.

We yearn for secure ground. Yet we know that we cannot reasonably claim that the human story is anything other than a story of uncertainty. Uncertainty accompanies us constantly, like a thorn in our side, even as we hope for better times.

The Jewish People know uncertainty better—or at least longer—than any other people on Earth. Displacement and calamity are familiar to us. Our experience of uncertainty goes all the way back to our beginnings. Still reverberating from the trauma of the Golden Calf, uncertain about what it meant to be a people on a mission that surely felt like a grandiose dream, as formerly enslaved people charged with conquering and settling a land we did not know, we built a Tabernacle in the desert. It was the physical embodiment of our need for a communal center to assure us of the certainty of God's presence.

But even the Tabernacle was impermanent. We had to take it down and reassemble it over and over as we trekked through the wilderness. We carried The Ark, with the Tablets of the Law inside, on poles that were attached to rings which were affixed to the Ark. Strangely, the poles always remained attached to the rings on the Ark, rather than being stored with the rest of the transporting tools, upon each new encampment. Although a great commentator explains this strange practice of keeping the poles attached as a practical necessity, in case we needed to pull up stakes in haste (Sefer HaChinukh 96), Rabba Hurwitz suggests an alternate explanation, based on the Talmud's assertion that although the poles were firmly attached to the Ark, they *could* be loosened and removed (Yoma 72a). Perhaps, then, it was important for us to see them thus attached, so that in the midst of our trek through the wilderness, over which we had little certainty, we would order to hold onto our hope that a time would come when the Ark would rest in its final destination, and the poles would no longer be needed to carry it. The visible reminder of that hope transformed the uncertainty of our circumstance into a sense of possibility.

The whole of Torah brings us to the east bank of the Jordan River, and leaves us facing an uncertain future on the other side. Our full biblical canon ends in uncertainty as well: at the end of the Book of Chronicles, the Jewish People, having been exiled to Babylonian, where we established a flourishing life, received permission to return to Israel (II Chronicles 36). Most did not want to go back. Our sources reveal profound uncertainty over where and if the Jewish future would exist. Our biblical story ends where it began, somewhere in what is now Iraq, facing an unknown future.

Rabbi Herzl Hefter writes of what he calls “the theological uncertainty principle,” which holds that uncertainty is an essential part of the God-created spiritual landscape we inhabit. “It is precisely in the landscape of uncertainty where we develop as religious beings,” he states. I agree. The moment we fall into complacency, we lose our zeal. The need to strive for better times injects us with spiritual purpose. As Horwitz writes, “It is the reality of uncertainty that forces us to develop and grow. Everyone struggles with uncertainty, be it global, religious, or personal and with uncertainty, comes hope. It is hope that allows us to keep moving forward, day in and day out.”

Hope is neither naive, nor passive. Hope amidst uncertainty does not mean having faith in the impossible. It means believing that we are not helpless, that nothing is inevitable in the human story, and we have been given free will. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, “To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair...Judaism is a sustained struggle...against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet...Throughout history, when human beings have sought hope they have found it in the Jewish story. Judaism is the religion, and Israel, the home of hope.”

But it is easy for us to lose hope when we are enmeshed in a web of emails, articles, and infocasts, slinging words about, treading water in a sea of thoughts and words that concern, confuse, martial, and divide us. That web spackles over what’s really happening to us beneath the surface, where we fear for humanity, society, and the world itself.

We must understand our experience of these uncertainties as spiritual crises. Inasmuch as we experience emotion about things that matter to us, emotions are always keys to our souls. The uncertainties we face cut to the heart of what it means to be morally responsible people. We care about our survival because we believe that our lives are meaningful. We care about truth and justice because we intuit that all is not relative, that there are absolutes and we thrive best when we are aligned with them. All of that falls solidly in the realm of the spiritual. Therefore our struggles with uncertainty and our reach for hope comprise two ends of the rope we hold in our hands throughout our lives.

This moment cries out to us to wrench our spirits free from the mire of uncertainty and strengthen our spiritual core. We must find the courage to trust, in a world that daily crushes our ability to trust, and relearn how to listen for points of shared concern instead of critique. We need to breathe trust and hope into our lives, to allow ourselves to be shaken to the core by the amazing, miraculous fact that we are here at all. Most essentially, we need to return to a way of being in the world in which we are available to and engage in the experience of wonder as part of our regular lives.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel named wonder as the fundamental orientation underlying all religious awareness and insight. He taught that the future of humanity depends on reawakening wonder as an essential quality, and he saw that reawakening as the primary purpose of Jewish practice. “One of the crucial tasks of religion,” he wrote, “is to struggle against the anesthetizing effects of our over-familiarization with life and reality, and to instill in us a sense of perpetual surprise, a willingness to encounter the world world again and again as if for the first time...All worship and ritual are

essentially attempts to remove our callousness to the mystery of our own existence and pursuits...the main function of [our religious] observance is in keeping us spiritually perceptive” (as described by Shai Held in Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence,” p. -30).

When we are amazed that we are here at all we understand that we are part of a larger whole and we find the humble courage we need to give our best from our most grateful hearts. When we wonder not just *how* something is but *that* it is, we will loosen our minds from tangled webs of words and find the simple ones we can all understand because they come from a place where we have nothing to prove, only to give.

Heschel saw wonder less as the aesthetic pleasure of Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World” and more as an awareness that we are called into being to answer the ultimate question: what can we offer in response to the wonder of being alive? In his words: “How shall we ever reciprocate for breathing and thinking, for sight and hearing, for love and achievement?” (*Man is Not Alone*, p. 39).

Today is the day we seek our source for the wonder implanted within us. Yom Kippur brings death in front of our eyes so that we can remember that life is a gift we did not earn and will not have forever and feel how urgently we are called to the cause of justice and compassion. The success of this day will be measured by our ability to remain sensitive to that call and not obscure it with cynicism, defeatism, or apathy.

We cannot amble about in a constant state of wonder, but we can nurture our openness to it and allow ourselves to linger in it—whether in prayer, nature, the embrace of a friend or lover, the arts, contemplation, and simply slowing down enough to behold and be in the moments we are granted. We will always live with uncertainty. We can relearn what came to us naturally as children: how to “wonder about” despite life’s uncertainties. We will never have all the answers we seek. Wonder makes that reality livable, even beautiful.

*“I hear babies cry
I watch them grow
They’ll learn much more
Than I’ll ever know
And I think to myself
What a wonderful world
Yes, I think to myself
What a wonderful world.”*

(Armstrong, “What a Wonderful World”)

As Heschel said, “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.” May we seek and make the most of opportunities to open ourselves up to wonder. May knowing deeply how blessed we are empower us to be the blessings we are called into this world to become.