

To Experience Awe

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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists

Summerfield, FL

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On August 26 The New York Post reported that Harvard had a new president of chaplains. The Post said, “Harvard University’s organization of chaplains is getting a new president to coordinate the campus’ Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and assorted other religious communities. Only the new president, 44-year-old Greg Epstein, does not identify with any of those traditional religions himself.

He is an atheist.... “There is a rising group of people who no longer identify with any religious tradition but still experience a real need for conversation and support around what it means to be a good human and live an ethical life,” Epstein, who grew up in a Jewish home, told the New York Times in an interview ....Harvard’s liberal values and desire to prioritize engagement over tradition make Epstein a great fit for the job, many insiders feel. Indeed, his election was unanimous.”

Epstein emphasizes “what it means to be a good human and live an ethical life.” He has written a book titled, “[Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe](#),” but what I would like to emphasize today as we recognize the Jewish High Holy Days is not the ethics of the non-religious but that atheists and agnostics can experience awe without God, even if, like Maugham’s character Philip, their reaction is to thank God that they don’t believe.

Albert Einstein said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. (The one) to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead —(their) eyes are closed.” But how does one name the mysterious, the awe-inspiring? In the lyrics for the hymn “A Firemist and a Planet” William Herbert Carruth wrote, “Haze on the far horizon, the infinite tender sky, the ripe, rich tints of cornfields , and wild geese sailing high; and over high and lowland, the charm of goldenrod – some people call it autumn, and others call it God.”

We are in the season of the Jewish High Holy Days, the Days of Awe. They began this year on Monday at sunset with Rosh Hashanah, the new year. They will end on Thursday at nightfall with the end of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur a shofar or ram’s horn is blown in synagogues. At Rosh Hashanah one might eat apples dipped in honey as a wish for a sweet new year. Yom Kippur is a day of fasting and atonement. It is said that God spends the holy days determining who will be written in the Books of Life for the coming year, thus a common holiday greeting is, “May your name be inscribed in the Book of Life.”

Who are the Jews recognizing these holidays? At least some of them are atheists. The Spiritual Life website notes that, “Jewish atheism refers to the atheism of people who are ethnically and (at least to some extent) culturally Jewish. Because Jewish identity is ethnoreligious (i.e., it encompasses ethnic as well as religious components), the term “Jewish atheism” does not inherently entail a contradiction. Based on Jewish law’s emphasis on matrilineal descent, even religiously conservative Orthodox Jewish authorities would accept an atheist born to a Jewish mother as fully Jewish. A 2011 study found that half of all American

Jews have doubts about the existence of God compared to 10–15% of other American religious groups....

“Historically, many well-known Jews have rejected a belief in deities. Some have denied the existence of a traditional deity while continuing to use religious language. In 1656, the seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated by Amsterdam’s Sephardic synagogue after advancing a pantheist notion of God that, according to some observers, is both compatible with and paved the way for modern atheism. Deeply influenced by Spinoza, Albert Einstein used theistic language and identified strongly as a Jew, while rejecting the notion of a personal god. The astrophysicist Carl Sagan was born into a Jewish family and was a non-theist....Some other famous Jews have wholeheartedly embraced atheism, rejecting religiosity altogether. Sigmund Freud penned *The Future of an Illusion*, in which he both eschewed religious belief and outlined its origins and prospects. At the same time he urged a Jewish colleague to raise his son within the Jewish religion, arguing that ‘If you do not let your son grow up as a Jew, you will deprive him of those sources of energy which cannot be replaced by anything else.’ The anarchist Emma Goldman was born to an Orthodox Jewish family and rejected belief in God, while the Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, when asked if she believed in God, answered ‘I believe in the Jewish people, and the Jewish people believe in God.’ More recently, the French Jewish philosopher Jacques Derrida stated somewhat cryptically, ‘I rightly pass for an atheist,’” [Jewish Atheism \(slife.org\)](http://JewishAtheism(slif.org).).

Half of all American Jews may have doubts about the existence of God, but I expect some number of that half are still going to do something to observe the high holy days. Herb Silverman in *The Humanist* notes that Sandy Koufax refused to play the opening game of the World Series in 1965 because it fell on Yom Kippur. “According to Jane Leavy’s description in her 2002 book, *Sandy Koufax: A Lefty’s Legacy*, Koufax was a secular, non-practicing Jew. He stayed in his hotel room on October 6, 1965, belying the reports of thousands of Jews who said they saw Koufax at various synagogues in Minneapolis that day,” [Jewish Atheists and Koufax Jews - TheHumanist.com](http://JewishAtheistsandKoufaxJews-TheHumanist.com). Though Koufax apparently wasn’t expecting God to write his name in the Book of Life, there was still apparently something special, even sacred, about the day for him. He made it a day apart.

Makeesha Fisher in an article on the Atheist Republic wrote, ‘I think one of the amazing freedoms we have outside of religion is acknowledging our need for and exploring the ways in which we can experience awe – sacred moments, transcendent moments, moments of inexplicable wonder.’ Her comment reminded me of a passage from Bertolt Brecht’s play, *Galileo*, which I particularly like.

“Every day something is found. Even the centenarians have the young shout in their ears what new thing has been discovered. Much has been found already, but more can be found in the future. And so there is still much for new generations to do. The old teachings, believed for a thousand years, are on the point of collapsing. There is less wood in the beams of these structures than in the supports which are supposed to hold them up. But the new knowledge is a new building of which only the scaffolding is there. Even the teaching of the great Copernicus is not yet proved. But (humanity) will soon be properly informed as to its dwelling place, the heavenly body where it has its home. What is written in the old books does not satisfy (humanity) anymore.

“For where Belief has sat for a thousand years, there today sits Doubt. All the world says: yes, that is written in the books, but now let us see for ourselves.

“The most celebrated truths are tapped on the shoulder. What never was doubted is doubted now.

“And thereby a wind has arisen which blows up the gold-brocaded cloaks of princes and prelates, so that fat or skinny legs are seen beneath, legs like our legs.

“The skies, it has turned out, are empty. (The people) laugh merrily at that.

“But the water of the earth drives the new distaffs, and five hundred hands are busy in the rope and sail shops at the dockyard making a New Order.

“Even the sons of fishwives go to school. In the markets, the new stars are talked about.

“It was always said that the stars were fastened to the crystal vault so that they could not fall. Now we have taken heart and let them float in the air, without support, and they are embarked on a great voyage –like us, who are also without support and embarked on a great voyage.”

Embarked on a great voyage without support—that sound like awe and wonder to me.

In 2013 Staks Rosch said on Dangerous Talk, ‘Many religious believers seem to think that they have the monopoly on awe and wonder in the universe. Some actually cite awe and wonder as evidence for their deity of choice. This I think is an insult to the human experience.

“A rainbow is a beautiful thing. It is beautiful because our eyes are limited in what they allow us to see. We now have the knowledge to understand how and why rainbows are formed and why our brains translate the sight of them into a feeling of awe and wonder. Understanding this fills me with even more awe and wonder.

“Our understanding doesn’t diminish our sense of awe and wonder; it adds more layers to our feeling of awe and wonder....Learning about the universe we live in from an objective scientific point of view is what enriches our experiences.

That is really why we value our sense of awe and wonder – that sense enriches our lives. So while we no longer attribute our sense of awe and wonder to magic and superstitions, we still have that sense. Solving the mysteries of the universe doesn’t detract from our sense of awe and wonder and it does enrich our lives. Would we be better off not knowing anything about the world we lived in and just chalking it all up to magic or gods? I don’t think so. To quote fictional doctor atheist Gregory House, “It is always better to know,” [Awe & Wonder In Atheism - Dangerous Talk \(skepticink.com\)](#).

Many things may inspire awe in us; beauty, new understanding, love, power as in a hurricane, a tornado, an earthquake, massive buildings falling in, even how deep human depravity can go. Sometimes awe for these latter may move to fear or to rage which can immobilize us or destroy our own humanity. But sometimes such awe can lead to a new commitment, a new sense of dedication. Gregory Epstein, the new atheist president of chaplains at Harvard was one of the students quoted by Barbara Kantrowitz in an article titled “Generation 9-11” in the November 11, 2001 issue of Newsweek magazine, "Our generation, as long as we've had an identity, was known as the generation that had it easy," says Greg Epstein, 24, a graduate student in Judaic studies at Michigan. "We had no crisis, no Vietnam, no Martin Luther King, no JFK. We've got it now. When we have kids and grandkids, we'll tell them that we lived through the roaring '90s, when all we cared about was the No. 1 movie or how many copies an album sold. This is where it changes," [Generation 9-11 \(newsweek.com\)](#). Rabbi Laura Geller shared this prayer in The Huffington Post a decade ago when the high holy days came a bit later in the year. She said, “The tenth anniversary of 9/11 falls during Elul, the month of preparation for the New Year. Our work is chesbon ha nefesh, an accounting of the soul, as individuals and as a community. Where have we been? Where are we now? What is the vision of the future we long

to create? We hear the sounds of the shofar, the ram's horn. May these sounds remind us of those whose lives were lost and bring comfort to those who loved them. May these sounds challenge us to ask what we have done over these years to bring healing to our world. May these sounds empower us to work together for peace," [Prayers For 9/11 | HuffPost](#).