

Ethics Informed by Awe

ROBERT POLLACK

I pray from either of two different *siddurim*, depending on the *minyan*. The Conservative *siddur*, “*Sim Shalom*,” or the Orthodox Artscroll *siddur* both open morning prayers with a short prayer of gratitude for being given another day:

“*Modeh ani l’fanecha, Melech chai v’kayam,*”

“I thank you eternal King, for returning my soul to within me with compassion.”

Both *siddurim* follow with a short prayer to be said after rinsing one’s fingers. The Conservative *siddur* provides a blessing for having been given the commandment to wash one’s hands. The Orthodox one says to pray,

“*Reshit chochma yirat haShem,*”

“The beginning of wisdom is Awe of *haShem*.”

I prefer this second prayer, and say it every morning, and often at other times, with or without a *minyan*. But *awe* of what, exactly, is the beginning of wisdom?

At first I thought this awe was the internal subjective emotional state instilled by contemplation of the incomprehensible grandeur of nature, as in Psalm 92, a psalm the Levitical priests would recite in the Temple on Shabbat:

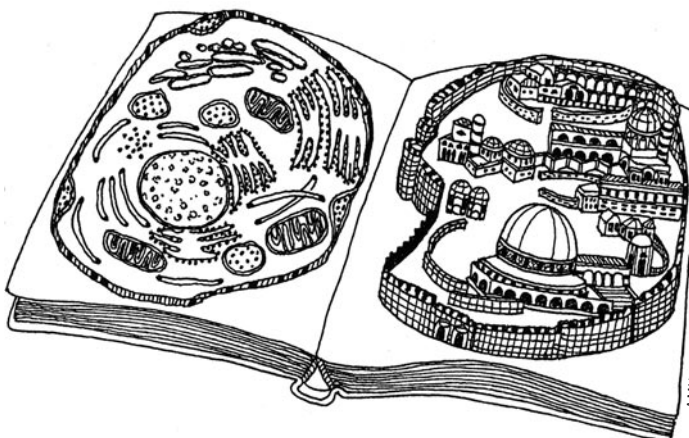
“*Ma gad’lu ma’asecha haShem, me’od am’ku mach’sh’votecha*”

“How vast are Your works *haShem*, Your designs are beyond our grasp.”

But soon I realized that in this age of science we no longer have the luxury of incomprehensibility. The natural world is all too comprehensibly dependent upon death for novelty. In earlier times there were no humans, and even earlier there were no mammals, nor vertebrates, nor any organism bigger than a single cell. From those earliest times until now, all that we might want to think of as progress has been simply the selection of one subset of DNA sequences or another from a constantly refreshing pool of copying errors. We can be fairly certain that replacement or death will be the fate of all humanity as a species, just as death is the certain fate of every person.

Worse, we also know — if we are honest about the data of natural selection and cosmology — that nature is devoid of data suggesting intentionality, direction, other than death, perfectibility, or purpose. The living world, ourselves included, is intrinsically imperfect and

intrinsically not perfectible. It changes, but even the changes that make each of us individually unique and interesting to each other are meaningless differences in DNA, creating the differences among us toward no purpose beyond the possible improvement in survival of one or another particular version of DNA over time.



I am not exaggerating the seriousness of this problem: scientific insight into the meaninglessness of DNA-based life is not simply missing meaning. It is the demonstration that a satisfactory, even elegant, explanation of the workings of this aspect of nature actually conflicts with the assumption of purpose and meaning. Poets seem to have an easier time accepting these facts than people less skilled at self-awareness. Edna St. Vincent Millay, for example, explored the emptiness of the natural world’s beauty, in her poem “Spring”:

“*To what purpose, April, do you return again?*

Beauty is not enough.

*You can no longer quiet me with the redness
Of little leaves opening stickily.*

I know what I know.

The sun is hot on my neck as I observe

The spikes of the crocus.

The smell of the earth is good.

It is apparent that there is no death.

But what does that signify?

*Not only under ground are the brains of men
Eaten by maggots.*

Life in itself

Is nothing,

An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.

It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,

April

*Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing
flowers.”*

Robert Pollack is a professor of biological sciences and the director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion at Columbia University. Amy Pollack is an artist whose work has appeared in many journals. This article and the drawing comparing the nucleus of a cell with its DNA to the Temple in the city of Jerusalem, are adapted from *The Faith of Biology and the Biology of Faith*, Columbia University Press, 2000.

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Yet I see grounds for awe in what we may choose to do. Awe emerges not from nature's beauty but from the thought that despite the dismal facts of nature that allow such beauty to emerge, right choices exist for me to make. And what determines the right, the ethical choice? The capacity to choose is necessary but not sufficient for an ethical life. For that, one must choose to act out of love as well as self-love, and to choose even if it contradicts one's own individual interest.

Hillel distilled three necessary questions to shape ethical behavior.

"Im Ain ani li, mi li? Uch'she'ani l'atz'mi, ma ani? V'im lo ach'shav, aymatai?"

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

And if I am but for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

One must be willing to step outside of the biological constraints of natural selection in order to choose an action that confronts these three questions. What is right according to these questions is not merely to act in self-interest nor only for the preservation of DNA sequences found in oneself and one's relatives, but to act out of self-interest for the sake of another person of any heritage, even at the risk of the survival of one's DNA. That is what it takes to be a serious religious person in awe of God. It may also be a useful way for someone without religious convictions to construct a personal ethical framework. It is the basis of creating an ethics informed by awe. 🌟

A Revolution in Science and Religion

HOWARD SMITH

The New Year season, an annual opportunity for introspection, is not really over until after the story of the creation is read again in the weekly Torah cycle: "In the beginning." And so each year, in the waning moments of the Jewish calendar's period of

tions that used to be the sole domain of religion, especially the two big ones: How was the universe created? What is the nature of life?

In my field of physics and astronomy, the big bang description has been resoundingly confirmed while other options have been rejected. New instruments expect to achieve astonishing accuracies of one percent in their measurement of details in the unfolding of creation. Meanwhile, in biology, the human genome project has successfully placed life and its complexity under a microscope. All this means that for the very first time in human history we can plausibly, if timorously, respond "yes" on behalf of Job, whom God challenges: "Speak up if you can understand [the creation]." (Job 38:4)

Sophisticated readers of *Sh'ma* may feel like shrugging off my observation as old news. Whatever the details of creation — billions or millions of years — most people assumed that science would find answers. But as the pieces of the world puzzle come together, our relationships with God and Torah are changed irrevocably. For those of us who are religious, this revolution means that faith is not the result of being ignorant but is an acknowledgment of a sanctified relationship. It also means that attentiveness to Torah requires a deeper new understanding of its message. An example: We, like Adam, are made of "*adamah*" — the dust of the earth. But today we know that this is not just poetic speech but concrete certainty. That dust, however, was not made during the big bang but

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self-reevaluation, we are asked to think about our origins and the mysteries of existence and to wonder what to make of a Bible that seems to address — and answer — questions of science. While tradition assigns an age of 5770 years to the world, the measurements that comprise the "big bang" description find the universe is 13.7 billion years old. What does this apparent conflict between science and religion mean, especially when the power and truth of science are acknowledged by virtually everyone?

There is news for anyone committed to intellectual honesty or spiritual wholeness: the "god of the gaps" — the derogatory term used to describe a divinity invoked whenever we do not understand something — is now dead. For centuries scientists speculated or bragged about the possibility of deciphering all the puzzles of nature, but only in the past 20 years or so — not earlier — has science been able to answer with some confidence the fundamental ques-

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