

Seventeen years ago when visiting with my stepson Monty and his then fiancée (now wife) Shannon, I had occasion to be driven across west Texas from San Angelo, where he lived, to a county fair at Kerrville in the Texas hill country. It was a 150 mile drive, during the course of which we passed through or near all of three towns, none with a population greater than 2500. The landscape was one of cotton plants and scrubby mesquite trees. No lofty oaks or maples. When we were making the return trip, darkness had already fallen, and, in the absence of tall trees blocking the view or light pollution from cities, the sky was filled with innumerable stars and it was actually possible to see the Milky Way. What a sense one has of the vastness of the universe and the smallness of one's own place within it!

Several years before that I was a guest at a dinner party at the University of Illinois Springfield (it may even have been back when the school was known as Sangamon State) and, as a special treat, we were taken up to the observatory atop Brookens Library and shown around by the university's resident astronomer. As we looked through the telescope at a distant star, he informed us that the light we were seeing had taken several billions years to get from its source to our field of vision. That experience too conveyed a sense of vastness and distance, but even more so a sense of the eons of time our universe has been in existence. To think – “several billion years”! What is the human life span of seventy, eighty, ninety or even a hundred years in comparison?

Religion arises in part from humans' attempts to guarantee themselves a measure of safety, security and well-being within a universe of which we are such an infinitesimally small part by placating whatever divine forces they believe to be in control. But religion also struggles with the question of meaning. In a universe with such vast expanses of space and time, *mah anu, meh chayenu* –what are we? What are our lives? How do we impart significance to an individual life so brief in its span, a life lived on a planet that, amid all the array of stars and galaxies, is but a tiny speck of dust? Every doctrine regarding life after death that our various faith traditions have taught – heaven, resurrection, immortality of the soul, or reincarnation – (and I'm not passing judgment on whether or not they're true) has come about in response to our anxiety that our lives would be meaningless without the assurance that they will continue in some manner or other after the body ceases to function.

Interestingly, the Israelites of the Biblical era were not all that much concerned with individual immortality. One was gathered in unto his/her ancestors; one descended to the nether world – whatever these phrases denoted, but the emphasis in the Torah was on the here and now and on the people as a group. In later times, the individual came to play a more prominent role in Jewish religious thought, and beliefs in the hereafter became part of our faith tradition, partly to remedy the perceived injustices of this life – the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. The locus of reward and punishment was shifted to the world to come. And contrary to what I've often heard said, traditionalist Jews to this day still speak of *olam ha-ba* (the world to come) and *gan eden*, the paradise where the righteous are rewarded after death, as literal realities.

It is our ancestors from Biblical times, however, who (I believe) point us in the right direction, at least as regards the question of life's meaning and significance. They found meaning in something that was bigger than the individual – the people. The people would continue from one generation to the next, ostensibly forever. Even if they suffered defeat and exile as punishment for their sins, a saving remnant would persist from which the people could be reconstituted and renewed. Time was a continuum. The events of the past and in particular the Exodus, were re-lived and re-enacted in ritual. The covenant at Sinai embraced all generations of the people Israel, past, present, and future, those standing at the foot of the mountain and those who were not physically present there. No matter the brevity of the individual's life, it is encompassed along the continuum, within the ongoing saga of Israel's history and her faithfulness to the covenant.

I find comfort in identifying with a people whose origins go back more than three thousand years and with a religious tradition whose earliest sacred texts (texts which I am privileged to read to the congregation each Shabbat and holiday morning) were committed to writing more than twenty-five hundred years ago. It is comforting as well to believe (as I do) that *am Yisrael chai*, the Jewish people will live and will flourish long into the future. The Judaism of the future, were I to have the ability to come back fifty years from now and experience it, might or might not be to my liking, but one can't quibble. There will be Jews, and even a petrified religious tradition or an attenuated one contains within it the seeds for potential renewal and reinvigoration.

Three thousand years of a rich and eventful past and a conviction regarding the continuity and survival of the Jewish people are impressive as part of the chronicle of human culture and civilization. Not too many peoples of the ancient world have survived as we have and maintained the continuity of their cultural and religious heritage. But a proud history still doesn't put us within range of the vastness of the universe, both spatial and temporal. *Mah adam?* What is man, who appeared at five minutes to midnight on the evolutionary clock, and what is the significance of even 3000 years in a universe whose age is numbered in the billions?

And here precisely is where the development of a spiritual outlook and practice might be beneficial to us. Spirituality for me means the ability to look at the bigger picture, to see ourselves not as lone and isolated individuals but as part of a larger whole. We're part of *am Yisrael*, the people Israel, to be sure, but beyond that, we are part of the unfolding of Creation in all its diversity and splendor. Ten days ago on Rosh Hashanah we celebrated *harat olam*, the world's birthday and acclaimed God as sovereign of Creation, and in the daily morning prayers, we praise God through whose goodness the Creation is renewed each day. To see ourselves in all our individuality and uniqueness as God's creatures along with every living thing and every physical feature of the natural environment, to view all of Creation as governed by a single system of laws and possessing an underlying unity - these are the marks of a spiritual sensibility. The blogger Andrew Sullivan in a recent post noted that people who were able to "look beyond themselves" were found to be less fearful of death and better able to cope with their mortality. I am reminded of the line from the book and the play *Tuesdays with Morrie*, where Morrie views his impending death as the crashing of a wave against the shore but is comforted to think that he has been and will always be part of the ocean.

Spirituality is the cultivation of an attitude, a way of looking at things. Although we need to acknowledge the integration of body and spirit and the influence that such things as breathing, posture, and stress reduction can have on our spiritual state, we tend to think of spirituality as something internal, intangible, and not perceptible through the senses. Like spirituality, memory too is intangible. You can view a photo or touch a memento, the act of which evokes a memory, but the memory is within and can arise or be summoned without the presence of the tangible object. When I conduct a funeral I

refer to memory as a legacy that, unlike the physical presence of the deceased person, can never be taken from us.

Memory is both individual, when a person recalls departed loved ones (more about that shortly), and collective, what we as a group “remember”. It is collective memory that facilitates the identification with our people which enables us to transcend the limitations of our finite life span. Recalling the different eras of Jewish history and the stages through which our faith tradition grew and developed and familiarizing ourselves with the Scriptural, rabbinic and liturgical texts that have been bequeathed to us from our past, give us a greater feeling of affinity with our people, a sense that we are part of something larger. I have to note that one of the most gratifying experiences for me over the past year has been the welcoming response to both Dr. Adam Porter’s classes and my own Lunch and Learn sessions. There is a thirst in our community for learning about our past history and about our heritage which I very much applaud.

Allow me here to qualify my remarks. It has been pointed out (most notably by Professor Yosef Yerushalmi) that memory and history are not quite the same thing. The shapers of the Jewish tradition – the Scriptural writers and the rabbis of the Talmud – had little interest in the academic discipline of history, as it might be taught at a college. Events as recorded in the Bible do not aim for historical accuracy. What we “remember” may not have happened exactly as described. Genesis 1 is not meant to be a science textbook, and Biblical descriptions of past events are not intended as a history text. Memory is focused less on reading about the past and more on ritualized re-enactments such as the Passover Seder that have a theological purpose that goes beyond relating information. Whether there were 600,000 Israelites who left Egypt or 600, cherishing freedom, celebrating the defeat of oppression, and being sensitive to the plight of the stranger are still part of our collective memory. When I speak, therefore, about memory’s role in enabling us to identify with the history and destiny of the people Israel, I refer to memory in two different senses- the history that we might learn about in an Adult Education class and the past as “remembered” by our tradition along with the lessons derived from it.

A major focus of this season is on mortality and on the remembrance of our departed – we visit the cemetery either during or preceding the Days of Awe, and we

hold a Yizkor service on Yom Kippur in memory of our departed. Memory softens the grief we feel when a family member or friend has passed away; it allows them to be spiritually present with us long after their physical demise. I never had an opportunity to really know my paternal grandfather, who died when I was 2 years old, but hardly a day went by in my childhood that my father did not mention him or quote some wise saying in Yiddish that he had been accustomed to say. As a child I never thought too much about it, but in later life I experienced a sense of regret that I hadn't known my grandfather. Our departed are part of us through the gift of memory and through the subtle influences they exert that have touched us in ways we can't always know. And they, like us, are part of the larger whole, the ongoing story of humankind and of Creation.

We humans are Johnny-come-latelies in the evolutionary saga, occupying a small space in a vast universe. And yet we are distinctive in several ways. We possess the attribute of consciousness that allows us to reflect on ourselves and our place in the scheme of things. We possess unprecedented powers no species before us ever had that make it possible for us to bring the entire human experiment to a crashing and destructive end. And, on the other hand, we have the capacity to channel the struggle for the survival of the fittest into new directions and enshrine co-operation and compassion as guiding principles in the realm of human affairs.

Through the remembrance of our dear ones we can preserve for them an enduring impact that goes beyond the number of their years. Through a life of mitzvot and good deeds we can assure that we ourselves will be remembered for good by our posterity. Through identification with our heritage and our people's ongoing commitment to Torah, we can enhance and enlarge our sense of who we are. Through spiritual practice we are able to see ourselves as part of something vastly larger than ourselves. And through involvement in sustaining human life and the fragile environment of the planet on which we live we can achieve something of genuine significance for our tiny corner of the universe.

A Texas nightscape and a glance through a telescope prompt the question, *Mah adam?* What is man? To which I answer – a finite and fallible creature but one endowed with spirit, with memory and with the responsibility for making momentous choices.

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Sadness about the departed memory keeps them alive

Yes memory is fallible