

Ha-azinu: “Rosh Hashanah: Creation, Faith & Doubt?”

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

Hayom harat olam, ‘Today is the birthday of the world’ – A notion that Stephen Hawking, the famous theoretical physicist and cosmologist (d. 2018), would have found both unacceptable, if not ludicrous. But, ironically, the one thing that the publication of his ground-breaking book, *A Brief History of Time* (1988) did achieve was to focus minds around the world on the subject of God and creation, which, of course, is the core objective of our Rosh Hashanah festival. The only difference is that our objective at this time is not to discount that cause-and-effect relationship but to affirm and celebrate it.

But his work also dealt with faith and doubt, and many High Holyday worshippers must silently question themselves each year regarding which of those two states they recognise as occupying the ascendancy of their minds.

But such consideration may well be futile, for it arises from the assumption that faith and doubt are in a binary relationship and that they involve a condition of, and choice between, two mutually exclusive alternatives. However, if we regard them both as emotional responses, then, just as the latter fluctuates according to the factors that trigger them, and the situations – positive or negative; happy or sad – in which we are caught up, as well as by our body’s hormonal responsiveness, then it is inevitable that we experience periods and degrees of both faith and doubt which are not negated by any attempts on our part to sublimate them. The corollary of this is that those who find belief in the goodness of God contradicted by, say, the Holocaust or October 7th, are

not to be judged as atheists or agnostics, but rather as those whose faith was being tested, much like that of Abraham, who, on hearing of God's intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, cried out, 'Shall the judge of the entire earth not judge righteously?' (Gen. 18:25).

Interestingly, Hawking also observed that "One can't prove that God doesn't exist, but science makes God unnecessary."¹ We cannot quibble with the former statement; but the world, over countless generations, would never have progressed in its moral and ethical journey without the Torah's code – and the codes of other religions inspired by it – to serve as a guide to mankind. Science certainly has not made God unnecessary!

In many passages, Hawking affirms that it does not contradict the laws of science to affirm that the world may have been created *ex nihilo*, a process he attributes to gravity: In his words:

"Whoever said, 'You can't get something from nothing,' must never have learned quantum physics. As long as you have empty space — the ultimate in physical nothingness — simply manipulating it in the right way will inevitably cause something to emerge." This is evocative of Genesis's reference to *tohu vavohu* (Gen. 1:2) as primeval matter, and 'the Spirit of God hovering upon the surface of the waters' to 'the manipulation in the right way,' and may thus provide an echo of how, according to Dawking, the process of creation all began.

He also states that 'Science predicts that many different kinds of universe will be

spontaneously created out of nothing, and it is a matter of chance which we are in.’²

Curiously, the Midrash echoes this very concept in its statement that, ‘God created worlds and destroyed them, until He said, “This one suits Me; they did not.”’³ As has been said, ‘Science teaches us the “how” of Creation; the Torah, the “why.”’ To sum up:

If science were ever to prove, beyond any shadow of doubt, that God did not exist, then we might be constrained, out of intellectual honesty, to surrender our faith. However, before doing so, we must not forget to daven Ma’ariv!

Until then, the limitation of our knowledge persuades us not to abandon belief, but rather to address our seemingly capricious God, and ask, in abject humility – as have countless millions over the ages before us – “Why, O Lord, have you chosen to clothe Your presence in obscurity and mystery? Why do You toy with man, playing hide-and-seek with him, vanishing just when he thinks he has located You and embraced Your presence, only to re-appear, as a harbinger of hope, reassurance, and faith, just when we need You – in the face of illness, fear, and despair, or when war and man’s inhumanity make our flight from life a welcome release.

The enigma of faith is alluded to in the verse, *V'anochi haster astir panai bayom ha-hu* – “And I shall wholly hide My face on that day.” The doctrine of 'the hidden Presence' is as old as the Torah itself. And it is especially apposite that we read it in the portion of *Vayyeilech* (Dt. 31:18), at this High Holy Day period when we attempt to storm the gates of heaven and raise our voices in prayer that God might shed His obscurity and make known His purpose to our people.

No creator or designer ever creates for no purpose. We cannot know our role; we cannot fathom that purpose in the divine scheme of things. But, from what we know of the spiritual, ethical, and moral values that we have inherited and handed down to our children over the millennia, we have become convinced of its existence and its inestimable value.

God described Israel as “My child, My firstborn, Israel” (Ex. 4:22). When we think of ourselves as God's child - strong-willed, self-centered, testing the parent to the very limit of His patience and endurance – we are filled with relief that *amor vincit omnia*, God's love for us will ultimately prevail. We are also convinced that His complex relationship with us as *Avinu* and *malkeinu* – at times the indulgent father and at others, the uncompromising disciplinarian – will secure for us His forgiveness and faithfulness.

In a beautiful passage from Jeremiah that we recite to the Rosh Hashanah Musaf, the imagery of Israel goes beyond that of a firstborn child to that of the cherished babe:

Haben yakir liy Ephraim im yeled sha'ashu'im – “Truly Ephraim is my darling son, a child that is dandled on the knee. Whenever I speak of him, my thoughts dwell long on him, and my heart yearns for him, so that I shall receive him back in love” (Jer. 31:20).

Someone once said, 'For the believer, there are no questions, and for the atheist, there are no answers.' I believe that this is inaccurate. For the man of faith, who probes God's ways every day of his life, there are numerous questions and dilemmas that trouble the mind. We have only to reflect on

how rudely that faith is shattered as we struggle to make sense of the multitude of natural disasters, as well as the magnitude of hatred, violence, and terrorism – putatively in the name of religion - that stalks our world, to say nothing of the illness and tragedies we encounter in our lives and in those of our friends and associates.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that doubt is also an element in the urge to sin. For it is that lurking doubt about God's existence and His ability to reward or punish that emboldens us to sin. And that is, perhaps, why Rosh Hashanah is celebrated as both the festival of Creation and the time to petition for repentance for sin. For if we were indubitably certain of the existence of the Creator, we would not have had the temerity to sin.

If we *are* but God's infant playthings, and if erring humankind is indeed still in its infancy, morally, ethically, and spiritually – and what, after all, *is* five thousand seven hundred and eighty-four years in the overall scheme of Creation? - then we may take heart and offer the optimistic prayer that He may continue to show that characteristic indulgence and love for us and that He may nurture us to grow to maturity in a world that will indeed become wiser, safer, and more peaceful, with every passing year.

May our understandable doubts be resolved and may those who pretend to either religious or scientific certainty be granted a greater measure of humility in the years ahead. May it be a healthy, happy,

and successful year for our families, our community, our beloved
State of Israel, and the entire human race. Amen.

NOTES

1. “There is no heaven; it’s a fairy story,” Stephen Hawking: *The Guardian* (Interview, 15th May 2011).
2. ABC News Interview, Sept. 7th 2010.
3. Mid. *Ber. Rab.* 3:7.

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ונשמע רק בשורות טובות
ושלום לארצנו בקרוב.