

Rabbi Sputnik and the Dreams of a Generation

Rosh Hashana Eve 5773

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וַיִּשְׂתַּקְוָה לְאַחֲרֵיתָךְ נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם:

And there is hope for your future, says the Lord,

that your children shall come again to their own border (Jer. 31:16)

What is your hope for the future? What borders or boundaries will our children and grandchildren know?

We gather in this time of new beginnings, this time of grand renewal for the Jewish people. Here in this awe inspiring sanctuary, we declare this day a Festival of new beginnings: Rosh Hashana the beginning of the Year. It is sacred time, full of possibility. A new destiny.

But it is fair to ask: a beginning of what? What do we aspire to? What is our dream and our vision: for ourselves, for our families, for our people, for our nation? What will this new beginning bring?

Our Jewish tradition teaches us that our fate is our own. “All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven” Rabbi Hanina famously declares in the Talmud¹. That is to say, we are given the divine gift of Free Will. We have our innate gifts and our innate challenges. But G-d’s gift to us is the ability to stretch beyond the limitations of our challenges. Each one of us has the ability to choose, to better ourselves or to give in to our more base instincts. We can dream of fulfilling our appetites, our simplest needs – to look out solely for ourselves and our own. Or we can dream large – fill ourselves, fill our world, with possibilities. We can create what we can dream. But we cannot create it, if we do not dream it.

One of my favorite experiences of the year is taking our Confirmation class to Washington, DC. I love to show these 10th grade students the powerful seat of our national government and to help them discover that the root of our democratic principle is that every citizen has the right and the ability to get involved. They learn this in a very personal way, as they study issues on the legislative agenda from a Reform Jewish perspective, through our movement’s Religious Action Center – and then personally lobby our congressional delegation. Our Senators and Representatives have been generous with their time and their staff and our young people learn directly the power of Representative Democracy.

Invariably, I feel tremendously patriotic when I share this time with our teens. This nation and our political system has been a home and haven for us as Jews which remains unprecedented outside of our own homeland of *Eretz Yisrael*. I am grateful and I want to inspire that gratitude in our young people.

But there is another kind of pride and inspiration I also want to share with them.

¹ Berachot 33b

Every year while we are in Washington, DC I take a group of these teens on another pilgrimage– to a site that has tremendous personal importance to me and to my sense of vision. I take them to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum.

Standing at the base of some of the rockets which lifted humans beyond the reach of our planet, looking up at some of the winged craft which taught us to defy gravity, I am inspired. In a scant century's time our species has moved from earth bound inhabitants of the tiniest measure of our planet, limited to walking on the earth's crust, to winged beings who can be lifted throughout the atmosphere and beyond – actual travelers in the cold reaches of Space. I walk through that great glass façade which faces our National Mall and immediately enter into lecture mode. Without really thinking about it, I give the students who choose to put up with my infernal obsession a complete guide to the early years of manned spaceflight – from Alan Shepard's Mercury capsule, through the two-person Gemini which saw the first human leave the relative safety of a spacecraft to float free in the eternal void. I show them the lunar module sitting on the mock-up of the moon's surface: the craft that ultimately fulfilled President Kennedy's daring challenge in May 1961 before a Joint session of Congress: "I believe" he said "that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth."²

I take our teens there, I tell them this story, because I want them to dream.

A few years ago, after giving this breathless tour, the teens gave me a moniker which has stuck in my mind and fills me with some pride. They called me "Rabbi Sputnik." That works for me.

I was brought up in the age of Sputnik. Actually the tiny Russian satellite which orbited the globe with its single robotic message "I am here" predates me by a few years. But the Space Age it ushered in lingered on throughout my youth. I grew up dreaming of the stars. I grew up knowing that there was no limit to the possibilities of human accomplishment. It was not just a dream. Before I was ten years old, the first man had set his footprints on the moon. Some of you remember that time, the intense thrill as it seemed the whole world held its breath, watching grainy - but live - black and white video as a man in a bulky white space suit descended a ladder and spoke those immortal words from the surface of another world: "That's one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind."

My 10th grade teens don't remember. If they've seen that video which is seared into my memory, it was probably on YouTube. Forty-three years later – more than two and half times their lifespan – the Apollo program is ancient history to them. So standing there at the base of those rockets in the Smithsonian, "Rabbi Sputnik" tries to inspire in them the sense of awe and wonder of a nine year old boy whose childhood saw human kind soar: from a robot sphere less than 2 feet in diameter orbiting the earth, to human being crossing the orbital divide and walking on our planetary satellite.

I also appreciate that my students call me "Rabbi Sputnik" because I believe my optimistic vision comes from Judaism. We are a forward looking people. Even as we are rooted in eternal values and traditions

² <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/JFK-Speeches/Special-Message-to-the-Congress-on-Urgent-National-Needs-May-25-1961.aspx>

which teach us to treasure those values, Judaism has always looked to the future. With the confidence of G-d's presence, we have valued a future of hope.

The prophet Jeremiah said it best:

כִּי אֲנֹכִי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת־הַמַּחְשְׁבֹת אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי חֹשֵׁב עֲלֵיכֶם נְאֻם־יְהוָה

מַחְשְׁבוֹת שְׁלוֹם וְלֹא לְרָעָה לְתֵת לָכֶם אַחֲרַיִת וְתִקְוָה

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jer. 31:11)

אַחֲרַיִת וְתִקְוָה - "a future and a hope." That is our people. That is G-d's promise. We did not survive these thousands of years, we did not endure unbearable oppression because we were small minded. Despite the classics of Jewish jokes, we are not a people of pessimism and neuroses. Well, some of us are. After all, without that Woody Allen and Larry David would be out of a job. But on the whole, we are a people of optimism and dreams. At a time of universal polytheism we declared to the world with confidence *Adonai Echad*, G-d is One. We are a people of Albert Einstein and Karl Marx, world-class dreamers and world changers, since our beginnings. Our core story is of being lifted from slavery to freedom and emerging with the confidence to conquer a new land. From the meager handouts of the Egyptian land of oppression to G-d's Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. These are our stories and they have kept us looking ever to אַחֲרַיִת וְתִקְוָה - a future and a hope.

But big dreams can be made small and the future can become tiny. When Moses and the Israelites stood on the brink of the Promised Land, a few months after the Exodus from Egypt, Moses sent 12 spies into the land. You remember the story. Two returned with glowing reports of this remarkable land, Milk and Honey, just as G-d had promised. But ten of the spies reported that the people there were gigantic in stature. ". . . And we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so were we in their sight"³ they reported. This, according to the Midrash, was the unforgivable sin of the people – seeing themselves as tiny and limited, and convinced that others saw them the same. "Did you know how I made you appear in their sight?" says G-d in the Midrash, "Who can say that you did not appear in their sight as angels?"⁴

Who can say that we do not appear as angels? Who is to say that our dreams are to be so small? Certainly when we loosen ourselves from our earth-bound limits, do we not soar as the angels? Isn't our human capability limitless? Judaism teaches us to move ourselves – and more importantly our vision of ourselves - from grasshoppers to angels. We are only limited by our dreams.

Thus preacheth "Rabbi Sputnik" to the 10th graders of his Confirmation Class.

But the preaching is not just to these and other young people. Yes, I want the next generation to dream big. I also want us to dream big as well. I want to return each of us, no matter our age, to the expansive dreams of our youth. Before we were constrained by the voices of reason which impose limitations and

³ Num. 13:33

⁴ Num. Rab. 16, 11

brings us back to earth like grasshoppers. Why should not our dreams be as limitless as the angels? Why must we accept a world of poverty, inequality and wars fought for ever diminishing resources? When did we give up and say, this is just the way things are. Can't we imagine more? Can't we do better?

All this came to mind to me recently by the convergence of two events: the death of former astronaut Neil Armstrong and the landing of the Curiosity rover on Mars⁵.

Neil Armstrong was the first man to set foot on a heavenly body. He was a symbol of accomplishment – not just his own, for there was great courage and commitment need by him and his peers – but accomplishment built of a dedicated team and a nation which devoted the resources to achieve that goal. His “one small step” was not that of a simple human being in an awkward space suit, it was a “giant leap” for a species which had proven its ability to venture out of the safe realm of its watery home into the perils of the unknown. While Armstrong himself eschewed the title of “hero” he knew that his image had become a symbol and he embraced that symbol. After his death, Armstrong's family released this statement:

While we mourn the loss of a very good man, we also celebrate his remarkable life and hope that it serves as an example to young people around the world to work hard to make their dreams come true, to be willing to explore and push the limits, and to selflessly serve a cause greater than themselves.⁶

Less than a month before Neil Armstrong's death, NASA's Curiosity rover made a heart-stopping daring landing on the planet Mars. It is a remarkable craft; hugely complex and sophisticated with many cool futuristic gadgets, like a laser that can vaporize rock and a plutonium power plant which can keep it running steadily for 2 years. It is an amazing device and represents a huge accomplishment for which we should be justifiably proud.

And it makes me very sad.

Forty-three years and one month after the first human set foot on the moon, we have sent a robot to our nearest planet. Those of us who imagined lunar colonies with hundreds of people mining and processing the resources there and sending them to waiting builders of interplanetary craft in Earth orbit are reduced to watching an SUV with a laser rolling around a Martian crater and being driven by teams of computer operators in Pasadena⁷. Great dreams writ small. While there are plans for an international human mission to Mars over the next 20 or more years, there is nothing in NASA's Authorization Act which requires it. Budget cuts which began as Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were making their historic first walk on the moon continue to this day. In the Apollo era, the rush to beat the

⁵ Curiosity landed Aug. 6, 2012, Armstrong died Aug. 25

⁶ http://www.nasa.gov/home/hqnews/2012/aug/HQ_12_600_armstrong_family.html

⁷ [Brook Barnes, “Mow Yard. Drop off Kids. Take a Drive on Mars.” New York Times, Sunday, September 9, 2012 p. A1](#)

Soviets to the moon led NASA to be allocated fully 5% of the Federal budget. Today, it is less than ½ of 1%.⁸ A tiny sum of money to keep humanity's dreams aloft.

Yes, fiscal realities sometimes determine the extent that dreams can be put into reality. And this is a very difficult economic time. High unemployment, a deep recession from which we are told we are beginning a slow recovery. Perhaps now is the time to live in reality and not in dreams of the future. As the president has said:

The first and basic task confronting this nation this year was to turn recession into recovery. An affirmative anti-recession program, initiated with your cooperation, supported the natural forces in the private sector; and our economy is now enjoying renewed confidence and energy. The recession has been halted. Recovery is under way.

That President was John F. Kennedy – in the very same speech where he proposed the goal of sending human beings to the moon.

Imagine the world of the 1960's: war in Vietnam, a global superpower enemy with the ability to rain nuclear destruction on us, race riots which threatened to tear our nation apart. This is the world I grew up in. And yet it was the words of a President spoken when I was too young to be aware, but backed up by actions which lifted my vision, and the vision of my generation to the stars. I want my children and the children I teach – and all of us – to have that vision once again.

Every four years in our country we have an opportunity for a national conversation about how we see our future. Far more than the selection of our Chief Executive, the Presidential election should be an opportunity to sharpen our values and let our leaders know the course we select for our country. Democracy – this wonderful institution of our nation – gives us the ability to choose our nation's destiny.

Listening to the current political conversation, I am disappointed. I am not hearing great dreams for the future. I am not hearing bold visions. I am not seeing images of a grand and hopeful new world. I am hearing increments, slightly better. Small dreams at a time when we need big dreams. I want to know about angels, not grasshoppers.

It does not need to be about space travel. That was the dream of my generation. But what is the dream that will inspire a new generation? What is the vision that will inspire them to dedicate themselves to building a future far greater than our own? When they look at this world of brokenness, poverty, war, educational and economic inequalities – I want them to see not what is but what can be. I want that dream for them. I want that dream for us. They can build it – but first, we have to dream it.

The prevailing conversation during the 1960's was not only about race and war, it was also about the "Generation Gap" – the enormous gulf which separated the ideals of young and old and made communication almost impossible. While I was preparing for this sermon, I accidentally discovered a sermon written by my father, Rabbi Moshe Cahana (z"l), delivered on the occasion of a Bat Mitzvah in

⁸ <http://news.discovery.com/space/armstrong-nasa-costcutting-budget-politics-120827.html>

May of 1969, two months before Neil Armstrong's historic walk. My father, of blessed memory, did not often write out his sermons. This one must have been important to him. It was called "Bridging the Gap." Speaking of the Generation Gap, he wrote:

There have always been differences between one generation and another. If the young did not pioneer there would be no progress. Today the separation between generations is wider and deeper. The young speak a language that sounds strange to the older generation. Their values differ from ours, and we do not understand one another.

I wonder if he was talking about me.

But, he continued:

Thank God for this Big, Big difference. This wide gap exists because we of this generation have been eminently successful in realizing the dream of mankind since the very beginning – to have abundance of material possessions, live in comfort and have untold security. . . We offer all this to our children and they are not excited about it. Abundance and comfort does not pose a goal and the young need a goal – they need to be challenged. . .

This rebellious generation is looking for a goal and they have found it. THEIR GOAL IS TO MAKE LIFE MEANINGFUL. They are much more idealistic than we ever were. They don't want to just live – they want to live with justice, honesty and fairness. They want a life that makes sense.

My father, a rabbi born in the Jazz Age of Lois Armstrong, saw the vision of a new generation dedicated to a changing the world. I, a rabbi born in the Space Age of Neil Armstrong want a similar vision for our new generation. A generation living in a world that is struggling but that can be great. We can see ourselves as soaring above the angels. We can solve our problems of injustice and inequality. We can insure that every human has the physical resources to thrive and the spiritual resources to dream. We can reach beyond the pettiness of blame and strive together to bridge our political gaps and work together for a world of peace and prosperity. And we can dream of worlds beyond: unimagined opportunity and infinite possibility. If we help them, a new generation of dreamers can soar far beyond our accomplishments.

Rosh Hashana is the beginning of a new year. What will this new year bring? More of the same? Dreams of tiny, incremental steps – maybe this year won't be as bad as last year? Or will it be a year of expansive dreaming – the first step towards a greater tomorrow. Long before I was "Rabbi Sputnik" I was a child dreaming of the stars. I will not give up on those dreams, we must not give up on those dreams, though they tarry. And we must demand that our leaders not give up on those dreams either.

The prophet Jeremiah – ever the expansive dreamer said it:

וַיִּשְׂתַּקְוָה לְאַחֲרֵיתָךְ נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם:

*And there is hope for your future, says the Lord,
that your children shall come again to their own border (Jer. 31:16)*

May our children come to their own borders and go beyond. May they, through their dreams and ours, enter into a world of infinite possibilities. And may we inspire in them אַחֲרֵית וְתִקְוָה - a future and a hope. Amen.