

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah  
October 3, 2024 – 1 Tishri, 5785  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
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When I was ten years old, I had a L'Dor VaDor moment. Following in the footsteps of my parents and my sisters, I got my first pair of glasses.

Since then I've worn glasses or contacts every day of my life, and I've been able to see pretty well. But now I'm at that age. With glasses, my distance vision was fine, but reading became an athletic pursuit. I would pull my glasses off and shove a book under nose, or keep my glasses on and push the page further away. So my doctor told me it was time: Progressives.

The new lenses are amazing! It took me about a day to get used to them, but now I can see quite clearly what's out in the distance, and I can comfortably sit and read a book.

The use of lenses dates back to ancient times. The Romans used lenses as "Burning Glasses" – where a piece of glass was used to refract sunlight to ignite a piece of paper or kindling. Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, so called "reading stones" were created from cutting a glass sphere in half, and were used by monks to assist in illuminating manuscripts. By the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, an unknown inventor in Pisa fashioned the first set of eyeglasses.

On this very day in 1608, Dutch eye-glass and spectacle-maker Hans Lippershey applied for a patent for an instrument designed "for seeing things far away as if they were nearby." The next year, Galileo took the Dutch design and refined it to create a leaden tube with a convex objective lens in one end and a concave eyepiece lens in the other. Pointing his lenses toward the stars, it came to be called the Galilean Telescope – from the Greek meaning: "far-seeing."

He had no idea.

On Christmas Day 2021, the \$10 billion James Webb Telescope launched into space. It took 30 days to travel nearly a million miles to its permanent home: a stable location in space where it orbits the sun while constantly staying in line with the Earth. After testing all of its components and instruments, the first images came back and appeared covered in smudges. But then, looking more carefully, they saw that all those smudges were galaxies.

"It's an emotional moment when you see nature suddenly releasing some of its secrets," said Thomas Zurbuchen, associate administrator for NASA's Science Mission Directorate. "It's not an image. It's a new worldview."<sup>1</sup>

We call this day by many names. Rosh HaShanah - the Head of the Year. Yom HaZikaron - the Day of Remembrances. But the rabbis also call it Yom Harat Olam - the Day of the Universe's conception.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cosmosmagazine.com/space/james-webb-first-full-colour/>

This day asks us to take a good hard look at ourselves, at what we believe, at the lives we lead, at the choices we make.

But what we see when we look at ourselves and this moment in time depends on the lenses we choose to wear. And we need corrective lenses, because humanity tends to be incredibly near-sighted, practically to the point of blindness.

On any given day, we find ourselves consumed with our own individual needs and wants and desires. Our gaze hardly ever looks past our immediate surroundings. We grow obsessed with our looks, our weight, our reputation, what's in fashion. We think about ourselves, our household, our jobs and careers, our kids and our livelihoods. Most of the time it's hard to think about anything more than how to get through the day.

We get even more myopic when we're in pain. Ever throw your back out? You can't think about anything else. You may be sitting at a meeting or with friends, and all you're thinking is, "Maybe if I shift just a little, it will relieve the pain."

Spiritual pain works the same way. It too makes us myopic. When we're lonely or hurt or afraid, our sense of broken-heartedness makes it almost impossible to see anything or anyone else. We fall into black holes of despair or rage or resentment.

That myopia, uncorrected, can lead to fanaticism – an almost maniacal preoccupation with one's own narrative and perception of the truth. Fanatics are everywhere. I'm not talking about the fanatics you may find at a European soccer match or an American football stadium. I'm talking about fanatics with much more dangerous aims. Philosopher Ruth Tietjen writes, "In their struggle for what they take to be good, against what they take to be evil, the fanatical group is ... willing to sacrifice their own or others' well-being or lives."<sup>2</sup>

On October 7 of last year, thousands of radical Hamas militants stormed over the Gaza border into Israel. In their rampage, they massacred 1200 people, burning families alive, butchering men, women and children, laughing as they committed the most inhuman of atrocities, and kidnapping more than 250 people as hostages, including infant children and the elderly.

Why? What could possibly have inspired such vicious acts of murderous hate? Fanaticism. The same fanaticism that drives the menace of Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iran – the infantile fanatical belief that Allah, the Master of the Universe, has decreed that "the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf (holy possession) consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day."<sup>3</sup> The myopic fanaticism that is responsible for the deaths of thousands of people across decades of suffering – the maniacal belief that to serve God I must supplant or destroy the other.

This fanatical thinking is as myopic as it is evil. And our tradition has something to say about the evil of fanaticism.

In the Torah portion we read today, we meet another fanatic. Abraham, the Torah teaches, grows to be so fanatically consumed with his devotion to the God he has

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<sup>2</sup> "Fear, Fanaticism, and Fragile Identities," by Ruth Rebecca Tietjen in *The Journal of Ethics*, January 2023, p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> Hamas Charter Article 11, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/hamas.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp)

discovered that he hears that God command him to take his son, his only son, whom he loves, Isaac, and take him to the land of Moriah, in order to offer him up as a burnt offering.

Abraham not only agrees, but embraces his mission with fanatical devotion. Abraham gets up early in the morning, saddles his donkey, splits the wood for the burnt offering, and sets off with two young male servants and Isaac his son. They travel for three days, Abraham's eyes focused down on the mission he set before himself.

When Abraham reached the top of the mountain, he built an altar, bound his son, and laid him on top of the wood – His hand went forth to take the knife –

And an angel of God calls out to him: “Abraham, Abraham! Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him.” And Abraham lifted his eyes, and behold there was a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham sacrificed the ram instead of his son.

Some traditions offer this story as a celebration of Abraham's devotion to God. Look how pious he is! Look how strong his faith! He would even sacrifice his own son!

But others read this story as a rebuke of Abraham's fanaticism. Sephardic congregations in their worship include a 12<sup>th</sup> century poem from Rabbi Yehudah ben Shemuel ibn Abbas. The poem suggests that it is Abraham's myopia that blinds him even to his own son. In the poem, knowing he is destined for sacrifice, Isaac asks his father: “where is the lamb as the halacha demands; have you forgotten your religion?”<sup>4</sup>

What is demanded and desired of us, the Torah teaches, is not blind fanatical devotion to our warped interpretation of what we imagine that God demands. Instead, Torah teaches us to look up from our fanatical myopia to see the world as God sees it.

Let's do that – let's take a look at our world through the lenses of the Creator of our Universe.

Thanks to the Webb Telescope we understand that somewhere between 13 and maybe even 26 billion years ago, from a single point in space there erupted a massive surge of energy.

As the universe expanded, it formed the creation of somewhere around 200 billion galaxies. Each of those galaxies is comprised of somewhere around 100 billion stars.<sup>5</sup> There are actually more stars in the Universe than grains of sand on the earth's seashores.

Coming in closer, we approach a spiral galaxy we call The Milky Way. On one arm of that spiral galaxy is a fairly average, ordinary star we call the Sun.

The third planet orbiting that star, a magnificent blue orb floating in space, is just the right size, with just the right mineral content, and just the right distance from that right-sized star, that the average temperature lies in an extremely narrow band somewhere between 0-100 degrees Celsius – that allows for liquid water, which allows for this utterly rare thing called life.

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<sup>4</sup> “When the Gates of Desire Open” by Rabbi Yehuda ben Shmuel ibn Abbas

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.skyatnightmagazine.com/space-science/how-many-galaxies-in-universe>

Beneath the swirl of clouds, we marvel at the wild biodiversity of trees, plants, flowers, grasses, and all that grows from the earth. See the extraordinary array of creatures who live in the seas, the birds who take wing to soar through the skies, the animals who creep and gallop and roam across the land.

Peering through God's lenses at all the infinite variety of flowers, is one superior to another? Among the fascinating varieties of cats, dogs, birds, and bears, can we judge one to be "better?" We would see why God simply calls them good. And then with God's lenses, we look at ourselves, this wondrous, extraordinary creature we call human.

How must God marvel at us, this brand-new creature. On a planet that is 4.6 billion years old, humanity only appeared 100,000 years ago. Only in the last 6,000 years have we lived together in civilization.<sup>6</sup>

Humanity comes in so many glorious colors – with dark skin and tan skin and light skin – with blonde hair and black hair and red hair – afro, curly, wavy, and fine. We clothe ourselves in innumerable different fabrics and fashions. We speak to each other in more than 7100 different languages. We write stories and poetry. We make sculpture and art. We design instruments and lift our voices to create symphonies of soaring melody, harmony, rhythm and sound.

We invent ever more extraordinary machines that connect people to knowledge and each other with ever greater power and speed. We construct all manner of buildings in which we live and work and gather and learn, and quiet spaces to explore our inner self. We fashion machines so we can travel the globe, and that even "slip the surly bonds of earth." We make medicines to heal ourselves from injury and disease, and to expand the quality and time we may have to live.

And yet... we are so devastatingly myopic and narrow-minded.

With fanatical arrogance and ignorance, we wantonly destroy our home, the only planet on which we can live, ignoring the needs and plight of those with whom we share our world and those who will inhabit the earth long after our generation is gone. We wage war over arbitrary border lines on maps we draw. We persecute and oppress others based on the most inane factors – where someone was born, what language they speak, what gender they are, what color their skin, whom they choose to love. We murder. We rape. We steal. We lie. We are maddeningly oblivious to our shared destiny with all else that lives. We are selfish and myopic.

How ridiculous are we! How absurd! How blind! Do we truly suppose that the Master of a Universe billions of years old, with 200 billion galaxies and trillions of stars, actually has a preference for which followers of which religion occupy a tiny sliver of land on one particular planet? What kind of infantile belief teaches that the Master of the Universe desires one group to massacre, torture, burn, and rape those who belong to the other?

It doesn't have to be this way. It shouldn't be this way. Humanity is too smart, too sophisticated, too well equipped with the capacity for understanding, for wisdom, and for

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/world-history-beginnings/origin-humans-early-societies/a/where-did-humans-come-from>

awareness. We don't need to be blinded by ancient superstition. We don't have to prance around our planet like fools, our eyes smugly closed with arrogance and ignorance. We have focused on all the wrong things.

The Jewish people are not precious because God prefers us to any others. How utterly ridiculous and offensive a notion! The Jewish people are precious because ours is a tradition that endeavors to teach us how to transcend our petty human myopia and to see the world through God's lenses.

If you use God's lenses, then you will see that the same energy that spawned our incomprehensibly vast universe is the same energy that formed our sun, our world, all that exists, and all that lives – you and me. Abraham may have seen himself as, “but dust and ashes,”<sup>7</sup> but the Mishna teaches us to see every single human being as unique and holy and infinitely precious. God's lenses let us see how to balance a love for ourselves with a responsibility for all creation. How to cherish life but to appreciate death. How to pursue paths that propel us forward to progress while inspiring us to awe and wonder and gratitude. How to balance the pursuit of justice with compassion and lovingkindness. How to champion the cause of the vulnerable and the weak, to lift up the downtrodden and powerless. God's lenses open our eyes ever wider to understanding, to awareness, and perhaps, ultimately to wisdom. How to love. How to live.

Walt Whitman wrote in his 1877 essay “Democratic Vistas”:

“There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity – yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me. Miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth's dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts. In such devout hours, in the midst of the significant wonders of heaven and earth, (significant only because of the Me in the centre,) creeds, conventions, fall away and become of no account before this simple idea. Under the luminousness of real vision, it alone takes possession, takes value ... it expands over the whole earth, and spreads to the roof of heaven.”<sup>8</sup>

In this new year, let's rid ourselves of our maniacal fanaticisms. Let's move past our near-sighted conceit and our myopic self-concern, and instead choose a new vision – one that, as Rabbi Sam Feinsmith writes, “might ferry us across the chasm to a new, more healing, embodied, sustainable, expansive, embracing, and humane way of being Jewish. One that clarifies our deepest, most timeless values and isn't afraid to shed outer forms that no longer serve us. One that points away from the notion of the Jewish people as a nation that stands alone and points instead toward a vision of Judaism that celebrates mutuality, interdependence, and kinship with all life on earth.” Maybe then perhaps we will have found a way to attune ourselves to the frequency on which God's energy passes through the Universe, and begin to transform our lives and our world so that we can truly maximize the experience of what it is to be human.

As the Psalmist writes:

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 18:27

<sup>8</sup> “Democratic Vistas” by Walt Whitman. Washington, DC: 1877, pp. 37-38.

אֲשָׂא עֵינַי אֶל-הַהָרִים מֵאֵין יָבֹא עֲזָרִי : עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ :

I lift my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come? My help comes from the ETERNAL, the maker of heaven and earth.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 121:1-2