

**The Chief Rabbi's Rosh Hashanah Message 5784**

The term 'Yamim Noraim' (Days of Awe) contains within it the key to transformative living.

Unetaneh Tokef, at the heart of our High Holyday Musaph prayers, commences: "Let us now proclaim the power of this day, for it is awe-inspiring..."

Awe is an emotion that is often elusive and fleeting, but when experienced, it can be unforgettable and life-altering.

Dacher Keltner, Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, defines awe as the experience of "vast mysteries." In a widely acclaimed paper, written together with the noted social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, Keltner identifies five spheres of experience which give rise to the feeling of awe.

1. Threat. When we encounter someone or something which has the power of life and death, such as a powerful natural disaster.
2. Beauty. When we see a striking piece of art or place of rare natural splendour.
3. Ability. When we appreciate in someone or something, an extraordinary talent.
4. Virtue. When we experience extraordinary acts of goodness which inspire us.
5. Supernatural Causality. When we feel the manifestation of the Divine in our lives.

Fascinatingly, these spheres of experience combine in the most extraordinary way on our Days of Awe.

Standing before our Creator on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we meditate upon our mortality and the gift of life. We are struck by the beauty of the sea of white in our Shuls and the rousing melodies of our prayers. We recognise in Hashem the capacity to help shape our lives and His boundless virtue to forgive us, no matter how frequently we err. Above all, our Days of Awe enable us to experience the hand of Hashem on our shoulders, comforting us, guiding us, and pushing us to fulfil our potential.

Significantly, in an extraordinary series of studies, Professor Keltner showed that people who had reported experiencing more awe in their lives, were more charitable and more altruistic. Reflecting on these studies, he wrote, "awe imbues people with a different sense of themselves, one that is smaller, more humble and part of something larger. In the great balancing act of our social lives, between the gratification of self-interest and a concern for others, fleeting experiences of awe redefine the self in terms of the collective, and orient our actions towards the needs of those around us." No wonder, therefore, that our Unetaneh Tokef prayer concludes with a call to engage in prayer, penitence and charity.

With this in mind, may our forthcoming Yamim Noraim, filled with heartfelt introspection and awe, inspire us to be more compassionate, more giving and more connected to our fellows. Let us strive to live each day with a renewed sense of purpose and a deep appreciation for the awe-inspiring moments that await us.

Valerie and I wish you all a shana tova umetukah, filled with awe and bountiful blessings.



**Chief Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis KBE**

