

PURIM 2004

Since we met last year, we have seen a whirlwind of powerful images. Dean rolling up his sleeves in Iowa. Arnold flexing his biceps in Sacramento. Saddam's portrait of defeat emerging from a spider hole. Bush's picture of premature victory on an aircraft carrier. The Cub Fan reaching out to preserve our faith in jinxes. Kobe reminding us that we should never put our faith in athletes. Madonna spearing her tongue into Brittany's mouth. Paris Hilton, standing tall with Lionel Richie's daughter, reminding us all of the true value of fame and fortune.

Many images. But, for me, only two visions stand out. One real, one imagined. Both are related by a single expression, a pair of words. Taken together, they represent the most memorable concept of this past year.

The first vision comes from January 3, 2004. It is an actual image, born in a town that annually gives us great New Year's images – Pasadena, California. I'm not referring to the Rose Bowl, but to the celebration of NASA scientists, a celebration replete with high fives, group hugs, visceral shouting, even tears of joy. The scientists, after years of gloom had pervaded the space program, had finally tasted success. "Spirit," the mechanical rover, had safely touched down on Mars, giving us perhaps the best reason in years to rejoice at the prospects of a breakthrough in the way we understand our universe.

The goal in hurtling Spirit toward Mars was to uncover evidence of life there, not only in the past, but also the present. The rover was equipped with tools to test the Martian rocks and soil for this type of evidence, evidence that could forever dispel the notion that the universe consists solely of space, dead matter, and planet Earth. Soon, even the theologically inclined among us might come to recognize that our Earth is not the sole beloved of a universal God.

If my father were still with us, he would be positively obsessed with the Martian excursion. Astronomy had become the greatest interest of his old age. Perhaps it represented for him the most real opportunity to explore the heavens, spiritually if not physically, and thereby better understand our own condition here on Earth. Shortly after the Spirit landing, President Bush, a man to whom my father paid few compliments, announced his desire to send astronauts not only to the Moon, but also to Mars. I would have liked to have seen my dad's reaction to that announcement. I suspect he would have dismissed it as a publicity stunt grounded in the deliberate failure to close one's eyes to the realities of the Red Planet.

From what I understand, the goal of a manned mission to Mars is a great idea, and one that can be achieved in the relatively near future. It becomes utopian only when we conceive of the astronauts rocketing to Mars with enough power not only to explore the planet but also to withstand its force of gravity in rocketing back to Earth. Mars isn't the Moon, you know. It is much larger, much more difficult to leave once you've invited yourself in. President Bush didn't discuss these and related constraints in his announcement. Yet, it is inevitable that politicians will soon come to grips with the fact that, for the conceivable future, the manned mission to

Mars is best designed as a suicide mission – a one-way trip to incredible scientific discoveries, but little possibility of ever again seeing your loved ones.

Allegedly, numerous scientists, young as well as old, are chomping at the bit to attempt this kamikaze voyage. Their models aren't Armstrong, Aldrin and Glenn, but Frank, Dave and Hal, who were last seen voyaging to Jupiter, and beyond. Why not let them explore Mars? I personally know of no more grandiose a suicide mission, no more noble a journey, and I feel confident my father would agree. Who knows? Maybe he'll meet them there.

My second vision is not based on reality, at least not completely. It is a composite of two sources. The first is from March of last year, shortly after we last celebrated Purim, the holiday of good and evil. I harken back to the early evenings of the war in Iraq, which has consistently been billed here as a war between those two forces. Nobody brought the war to us quite like Fox News. Like the other networks, Fox depicted bombs exploding all over Baghdad, ensuring, or so it appeared, that the human costs of the war would be born solely on one side. But what made Fox special wasn't the visuals. It was the recognition that the American attacks had to be appreciated with multiple senses, or they couldn't properly be appreciated at all. While focusing our eyes on the words *War on Terror* and a plethora of fighting jets scurrying to their urban targets, Fox embraced the ideals of Pete Townsend: long live rock! Hard rock, to be exact. Soaring guitars filled our ears as we watched the one-sided conflict. “The other networks, they always go for that John Williams, big, grand music, but our music is always pointedly more aggressive” – so said Fox News' VP and creative director, Richard O'Brien. He went on to acknowledge that the “sound of Fox News Channel has branded us more than the look has. It's rock-influenced, for sure. We try to keep the sound and look younger and hipper than what our competition is.”

Fox's younger, hipper audience might well have connected the war in their minds with their favorite rock band. But I connected it with my favorite musical. That's right. *A Clockwork Orange*. Specifically, I associate it with a scene from that classic movie where Little Alex is sitting alone in his bedroom listening to his beloved Ludwig von Beethoven and contemplating many twisted pictures in his head. “Oh bliss,” he says. “Bliss and heaven. Oh, it was gorgeousness and gorgeosity made flesh. It was like a bird of rarest spun heaven metal or like silvery wine flowing in a space ship, gravity all nonsense now. ... I knew such lovely pictures.” And so he did. A picture of fire, engulfing the world as far as the eye can see. A picture of a woman in a fancy dress thrown into a cellar by several rapacious men. A massive explosion of fire and smoke. A volcano erupting. Large rocks falling with deadly force on top of human heads. A man with sharp teeth and blood flowing freely from his mouth. Alex pictured all of those images, while Beethoven's Ninth soared majestically throughout his bedroom. The most memorable image of the scene was, of course, Alex's face as his daydreams ran wild. He looked like he was having an orgasm.

When I recall the early days of the war, I don't just see bombs exploding on the TV screen. I also picture Alex, and imagine what the architects of the war looked like last March when they nestled up in their own bunkers and watched Fox News bring to them the glories of each day. Did they resemble Little Alex? Blissful at the thought of American bombs killing

countless Iraqis – countless, I say, because a year later, most of us don't have a clue as to how many Iraqis have died. We know it's a multiple of the deaths on 9/11. But we don't know what multiple. Four? Five? Six? Who knows? And who really cares? Apparently, not many of our journalists. Certainly not Fox News.

Fiction does exaggerate a bit. It is difficult to imagine the war's architects literally orgasming while watching the news from Fox. Yet it isn't hard to imagine them celebrating, partying like the NASA scientists, when observing the technology they unleashed in Iraq. I must admit to having been impressed by the military's technological prowess, just as I was by the accomplishments of NASA. In the latter case, I wasn't just impressed, but amazed. Still, these two groups of revelers had different words for the fruits of their respective labors, words that were coined years ago, though they didn't become famous until March. I had stopped thinking about these words for a bit before hearing them more recently on a newscast. As the audience viewed images that Spirit brought back from Mars, the newscaster said, playfully, that once the pictures appeared in Pasadena, the scientists exclaimed that they, truly, were in Shock and Awe.

What a combination of words. Shock and Awe. Convulsion and Wonder. Spasm and Mystery. Those pairings just roll off your tongue, don't they? The pairing at issue took root in the title of a 1996 book written by Harlan Ullman and James Wade: Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance. It was published by the National Defense University Press, and soon became the rallying cry of many a war scholar. Eventually, the book's seminal phrase was accepted as the official strategy of the United States Armed Forces in Iraq. We would produce Shock and Awe among the enemy. We would destroy the enemy's will to resist. We would force them to accept whatever terms we unilaterally choose to impose. If we don't need no stinkin' permission slip from Germany and France, we sure don't need one from Saddam's henchmen.

Famously, Isaiah envisioned that, one sweet day, we shall beat our “swords into plowshares. ...[Our] spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall ... [we] learn war any more.” How utopian. How far afield from the kind of advice we need at the moment. My advice to those who dwell in the 21st century is to learn war quite well. And don't just learn it, support it. Support it when it is truly necessary against regimes that threaten us, as the Taliban did. Support it when it is championed by the world – as it was several years ago in the Balkans – to confront genocide or some other humanitarian horror. Of course, there are times when war should be opposed, and opposed with passion. Yet even during those times, war must be studied, and studied carefully. That is why I recommend that everyone read at least part of Ullman's and Wade's book. You can find it on the Internet. It will tell you how those gentlemen envisioned the wars of the future. It will tell you just as much about the blueprint that our generals have been using for the wars of the present.

Shock and Awe as a military strategy is all about using deception to destroy the will of the enemy. We *must* use deception as a weapon of psychological destruction. *How* we deceive, however, is a matter of choice. We might choose to convince the enemy that we have more soldiers than we really have, or more bombs, or better intelligence, or that we're more ruthless than we're actually willing to be over the long run. In each case, our goal is to show that we're invincible, and that the enemy is thoroughly impotent – even when, in fact, they have a lot of

leverage, if only they knew how to use it.

Ullman and Wade went through many historical examples in which this approach was taken, in one form or another. Our own conduct in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was cited. So, too, was the Blitzkrieg of the Nazi Wehrmacht, which was applied a lot more surgically and narrowly than most people think. Another example was the strategy used by the British Special Air Service, which rescued hostages by throwing stun grenades that blinded and deafened their captors. Still another was the strategy of the Haitians in the early 1800s, who freed themselves from the French by parading the same handful of army battalions over and over in front of French visitors, misleading them into believing that the Haitian soldiers numbered in the tens of thousands.

Today's high tech version of Shock and Awe is familiar enough. We combine the demonstrated ability to destroy on an unprecedented, massive scale, with the knowhow to make pinpoint attacks in the most precise and timely manner possible. The adversary comes very quickly to appreciate us as omnipotent and omniscient – awe-inspiring, in the traditional, Biblical sense of the word. What choice do they have but to surrender, quickly and unconditionally, in the face of our satellite-guided weapons, particularly after we begin picking off their leaders, one assassination at a time? As our networks reported during the months before our invasion, if this Shock and Awe strategy works, a substantial ground war never becomes necessary.

Hopefully, you've all noticed that the common battleground in all of these examples is the psyche. Call it *total psychological warfare* – much like the kind the terrorists engage in, only on a grander scale. Ullman and Wade focus our attention on the mind of the enemy, and specifically, their will, which allegedly can be destroyed as thoroughly as Sherman flattened Georgia. Yet that's just one side of the conflict. I'd prefer instead to focus on the psyche of the would-be invaders – in the present case, ourselves. We might see ourselves as mere innocent bystanders in this struggle between our army's missiles and the enemy's will, but that is far from the truth. For my money, we in the home front of the invading country have become casualties of war, and casualties of the worst kind. Not only is damage being done directly to our souls, but this is happening without any semblance of recognition on our part.

Here on a religious holiday, we would be remiss not to begin by pointing out the *arrogance* of the role in which we have placed ourselves. Traditionally, warring countries see themselves as combatants in a conflict of attrition where one party emerges the victor, but both parties suffer gravely in the process. Not any more. Perpetrators of Shock and Awe actually see themselves as capable of waging relatively bloodless battles, at least on their end. Indeed, not only do they expect to emerge from their military encounters relatively unscathed, but they even change their self-concept. Here in America, when we go into battle, we no longer are merely a country at war. We are now objects of awe. Gods among men. Rulers of the planet.

And our enemies? Our ability to strip them of their dignity is critical to maintaining our self-respect. We must view them as militarily inferior, for starters, but not just inferior – militarily bankrupt. When they fight back in the only way they know how, we have a pejorative

word for that. It used to be called guerrilla warfare, but that became too honorable a description. Now, it's just called terrorism. Our enemies are no longer soldiers. They are terrorists – ugly, uncivilized, inhuman. Whenever they claim to engage us in battle, we call it a mere act of desperation, a cowardly, terrorist act of desperation, hardly an act of war.

So we belittle our enemies' military might and the legitimacy of their battle tactics. But the bigger insult by far is the way we characterize their resolve. In order for Shock and Awe to be effective, we must conceive of our enemy as willing to quit almost immediately. This may be accomplished by treating them like even *they* realize that their cause is an evil one. More often, though, we treat them as if they were mere children, led innocently by a single blameworthy dictator. Consider the way we characterized our foes in Iraq: one evil man, two evil sons, a few scared minions, and tens of millions of innocent victims. Back in March, one television pundit after another speculated that as soon as Saddam was captured, the resistance would fall like dominoes. We had in mind the Wizard of Oz all over again. All Hail Georgy! The Wicked Saddam is Dead.

Arrogance on our part, thorough disrespect for our enemies. Those are the first two components of our Shock and Awe mind set. They are crucial to giving us the self-confidence that we need to put wind behind our sails. We want to see ourselves as vanquishers of evil and liberators of the innocent. We certainly felt that way about waging World War II. Of course, that was a real war, an honest war. Today, our confidence comes at a price. It's the price we pay for our willingness to engage in deception. This is the third element of the Shock and Awe mind set. It is also, perhaps, the most critical.

Deception is inherent to literally every facet of Shock and Awe. Ullman and Wade will tell you that we must, fundamentally, deceive our enemies. But I'll tell you that, even more than the enemy, we must deceive ourselves. Our arrogant self-concept is itself an act of deception, for to be human is to know one's limitations, and to know that neither we nor our creations are properly objects of awe. Not even Beethoven. Certainly not General Jack T. Ripper. Similarly, we deceive ourselves when we hurl so many insults at our opponents. Cowards? Hardly. Terrorists? Sure, but they also count as soldiers when their weapons are aimed at our fighting forces. Afraid to fight back? Some, but not all. Never all, at least when war is waged on a massive scale by a foreign invader.

Truly, a whole heap of self-deception is needed in order to underestimate the resolve of one's opponents. That resolve will be fortified by plenty of propaganda, you can be sure about that. The U.S. is hardly the only country that uses military propaganda. It is universal, and it can be more powerful than any bomb. Even 9-11 can be rationalized as an act of humanitarianism, believe it not. Read leftist literature, and you will see references to how the 9-11 perpetrators deliberately spared the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent Americans when they flew their planes into symbolic targets like the Pentagon and Twin Towers, and away from more deadly targets like nuclear power plants. It might sound like propaganda to you and me, but in the Middle East, I assure you that it is believed, just like many Americans continue to believe that we invaded Iraq because we had reliable evidence of weapons of mass destruction.

Shock and Awe, then, is inevitably met with no small measure of self-deception. Never is self-deception so great, however, than when the party who wishes to wage total psychological warfare is entering a war for questionable reasons. When we waged war against the Taliban, I suppose it's possible that our military used some Shock and Awe tactics, but I don't recall hearing much about them, since the military never had to resort to salesmanship to market that war. Its basis was self evident. That war was steeped in self-defense, the holiest of all grounds for combat. In Iraq, by contrast, the grounds weren't so clear, so they had to be, what is the word, *embellished* a little. Saddam Hussein had ties to Bin Ladin. Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Deceptive? Sure. But that doesn't seem such a big deal, in context. Our tactics and our self-concept are already based on deception. Why not also the justification for the war?

After the invasion, we learned that the resolve of our enemies wasn't so weak after all, and that despite our Pollyanish hopes, a ground war became necessary. As for WMDs, we never found them. Fortunately, it turned out that we didn't need to. Pundit after pundit, including many so-called liberal ones, came to the rescue. We didn't need WMDs any more than we needed permission slips from Europe. Saddam is a bad guy. That's all the justification we needed. He slaughtered huge numbers of his countrymen. "How recently?" you ask. "What's it to you?" the columnists answer. Thomas Friedman, the self-appointed guru of all things Middle Eastern, rejoiced in the war, not because of WMDs, but because America will now be able to create a shining city on a hill in the Arab world. Once our boys take over Iraq and plant the seeds of democracy, and once all the other Arab countries get a whiff of how blissful it is, the moderates will gain hegemony throughout the Middle East. That's Friedman's vision. And, to him, that vision alone justifies the Iraq War. That, and the fact that Saddam is a bad guy.

Newsflash, folks. Saddam is indeed a bad guy – a brutal, imperious bastard. Of course, that can be said about a number of other petty dictators throughout the world. We haven't invaded their countries. But if we had, and if we had done so by employing all the tactics of Shock and Awe, what do you bet we could have rationalized those invasions too? That's really been the story of the Iraq war, hasn't it? Not so much that the country went into a war for the wrong reasons, but that we immediately rallied around one rationalization after another to defend our conduct after the fact. Not surprisingly, the better part of a year elapsed since we took over Iraq and found no WMDs before we heard any kind of public outcry calling for an investigation of exactly what went wrong with our military intelligence, and why our politicians chose to use propaganda with such reckless abandon.

On second thought, why should we investigate? The cause of this war was transparent enough. It's the mind set of a country hooked on Shock and Awe -- on the tactics of intimidation and deception -- as the basis not only of its war strategy, but its foreign policy as well.

When I think about my own reaction to these events, the word "awe" certainly doesn't come to mind, but "shock" might indeed not be far from the truth. I am shocked by the ability of the people of this country to go about their business, seemingly unscathed by this entire experience. If, in fact, we have unnecessarily killed countless thousands of people ... if, in fact, we are in the process of spending countless scores of billions of dollars on a questionable war that otherwise could have been spent to save the lives of millions in Africa, or to declare war on

poverty domestically... if, in fact, we have been caught misleading the world about why we needed to invade another country ... and if, in fact, we have no reason in the future to trust our mass media or our politicians to level with us concerning the very topics that have come to dominate our national consciousness since 9-11 ... how can we not be in a state of shock? This is *our* country we are talking about. We share responsibility for its failures. We share *grave* responsibility for its atrocities.

We each must judge for ourselves whether this country's foreign policy has been atrocious. We also must judge whether the real issue for Americans is not what we should do in Iraq going forward, but what can be done to make sure that *never again* will our country invade another for the wrong reasons. We Jews shouldn't use the phrase "never again" lightly. Yet when it comes to waging unnecessary wars with the most powerful military in the world, the phrase surely fits.

I admit it. This was a hard year to be a political liberal, at least if you expect your ideas to be well represented in the national, political marketplace. Fortunately, we're outside the Beltway here – only meters outside, but outside nonetheless. We're allowed to recognize that there is much more to life than politics. We have, for example, our religion.

Thank God for religion. Whereas politics offers us shock, religion offers us awe – awe at the unity of life, awe at the grandeur of our universe. Life on Mars? What about life in Andromeda? Intelligent life, perhaps more intelligent than ours. Who are we to say there isn't?

Religion offers us awe at the thought of supernatural beings, but even more to the point, religion offers us awe at the thought of *Being* itself.

We fellow Reform Jews, can we call ourselves People of Awe? For decades, it would hardly seem to be the case. In large numbers, we turned our backs on many of the cornerstones of the religion – the Sabbath, the laws of kashrut, the synagogue, prayer, even God. Perhaps we suffered through Jewish school, B'nei Mitzvahs or High Holy Day services, but for the rest of the year, we lived like secular humanists. Where was the role of awe in our lives that we felt so little need to express this feeling through ritual, or through communal worship?

I, for one, am thankful that Reform Judaism is becoming more observant all across the nation. The very rituals that were ignored for so long are now being revisited sympathetically. Jews are rediscovering the value of kosher laws, and the joys of observing the Sabbath. Some are even taking a second look at the relevance of God. I refused to accept God's existence throughout my childhood. Once I warmed to the concept, however, the meaning in my life increased geometrically, and the awe I experienced increased even more.

All that is true. And yet, there are times when the awe and reverence that any of us can muster don't seem to amount to a hill of beans. Arguably, they are necessary components of a Jewish life, but, unquestionably, they are far from sufficient.

Six years ago in my Purim sermon, I recited what has probably become my single favorite quotation in all of Judaism. It comes from Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great theologian who marched with Martin Luther King. Heschel destroyed the popular notion that rabbis can interpret the holy books to their hearts' content but have no business serving as political activists. To Heschel, rabbis are Jews, and Jews are political.

Here again are Heschel's words: To the Biblical prophet "no subject is as worthy of consideration as the plight of man. ... To us [human] injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people, to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world. ... Indeed, God Himself is described as reflecting over the plight of man rather than as contemplating eternal ideas."

That, my friends, is the spirit of Judaism. More importantly than our awe for life or our reverence for God, we must care for widows and orphans. More importantly than our restoring the glory of the Sabbath Bride, we must work tirelessly for *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. It's not an either-or proposition, of course. I would like to think that our spiritual pursuits can inspire our political activism. But things don't always work that way, and whenever we find ourselves at a time when the people on this planet aren't being cared for, we simply cannot forget our own responsibilities in that area.

Given the volatile times in which we live, it is reasonable to ask the question: Where is the Jewish community on all this? What are our leaders saying? How are we serving as a light unto the nations? Merely to ask the questions is to answer them. Presently, the Jewish community seems to be as quiet as a church mouse, at least when it comes to challenging the status quo. In Israel, we're graced with the regime of Sharon -- uncompromising, hawkish, hated throughout the world. In America, the triumvirate of Wolfowitz, Perle and Kristol had become so associated with the war on Iraq that New York Times columnist David Brooks took a momentary hiatus from Dean bashing to announce that opposition to the war could be seen as an act of anti-Semitism.

Believe it or not, I supported the right of Sharon to march at the Temple Mount. And I support the right of the Jewish neo-cons to sound the drums of war. But somewhere, you'd think, the more egalitarian, pacifistic wing of the Jewish people -- the majority wing for so long -- would have its own say. If that's happening, however, I'm not hearing it. Certainly, I see no unified clarion call from that direction. The only unified message that I hear from the national Reform movement involves the need to be more observant, more steeped in ritual -- more like Heschel, you might say, when he was *not* addressing what was most important to his God.

All this might sound bleak. Certainly, it can be quiet alienating. As long as Jews ground their faith on the ephemeral, whether it's manifested in current political realities or our leaders' unwillingness to fight for change, we are bound to be shocked into a depression. The holier we are, the more often this happens. Take it from Heschel the empath, he who at 65 had a face that

looked older than Methuselah's, so gripped was he by the suffering of his fellow human beings. But Heschel knew that there is more to life than alienation and suffering. There is also the opportunity for great joy, great wisdom.

Long before I studied Heschel's views on the prophets, I was taken by his thoughts on the origins of true religiosity. Consider his words:

The question ...where shall wisdom be found? is answered by the Psalmist: *the awe of God is the beginning of wisdom. ... The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe.* Awe is a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality.

Awe is an intuition for the creaturely dignity of all things and their preciousness to God; a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something absolute. Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to Him who is beyond all things. It is an insight better conveyed in attitudes than in words. The more eager we are to express it, the less remains of it.

The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.

There you have it, from one of the most overtly political Jewish theologians of the 20th century. We may feel as much pain as we want over the plight of our species, but we need never relinquish our love for this planet and for the God in whom Earth is encompassed. We may steep ourselves all we want in the politics of the present, but we need never forget the beauty of the eternal. We can proclaim with Heschel that God cares most about the plight of widows and orphans and that we ourselves are committed to *tikkun olam*, but we must never become so obsessed with it that we lose sight of what grounds our sanity, and our love.

The sense of awe is our rock. It is our foundation. No matter what any arrogant general tells us, it must remain forever associated with God. And never with the war machines of man.