

CHAOS...

Growing up, a TV child of the 60's, my first association of the term always goes directly to the international underground espionage ring criminally seeking to undermine the world, as the show was known—trying to *Get Smart*.

The bumbling Maxwell Smart, along with sidekick Agent 99, fought to foil CHAOS, spearheading the national defense detective organization known aptly enough as CONTROL.

The operative premise:

Whenever CHAOS loomed large, you simply turned to CONTROL To overcome the onslaught—defeat the demons of CHAOS and set the world back on track.

If only it was all so easy as on TV-Land to counteract the madness that confronts our lives.

Consider most any nation today...

Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan...

And, assessing the general state of dysfunction, if not disarray, Norway, Spain, Greece...

Multi-cultural malediction, socio-economic polarization, bankruptcy, Egypt, Tunisia...Yemen...

Spring rebellions giving way to fall regime shifting on very shaky ground. Syria's brutal crackdown,

Libya's fight to overcome Qadafi fear...

Great Britain, France, The U.S. of A....

Economic inequities & partisanship systems' failure calling government's efficacy to question.

Painting the picture of a brewing global pandemonium, such disequilibria engenders great human distress...

And as chaos confronts, yet again coinciding with our annual celebration of the world's beginning, the incongruity begs the question:

Where do we turn when the world all around,

Even our little corner, appears to be falling down?

Though you may be sitting in Sanctuary on the holiest days of our year, Don't start thumbing through your prayer books for the secret page.

Counter-intuitive to our normative Jewish assumption, yet very true to our people's rabbinic-age roots, the answer's not in here—its out there.

One of my favorite “New Atheists,”
Putting his name at the potential head of the hit parade with
The End of Faith, his blistering book on the irrationality of religion
A couple of years ago, published a curious comebacker this year.

Philosopher turned neuroscientist, Sam Harris,

Argues in The Moral Landscape: *How Science Can Determine Human Values*,

That the answer to abandoning any semblance of religious faith
Is simply to turn to the observable truths of our natural world.

Hyping his newest book on the Jon Stewart Show,

Harris wasn't shy about sharing his perspective:

*“The only people on the planet who think they have the answers
are religious demagogues, folks who still actually believe the
world is 6,000 or so years old...The only way forward toward a
global civilization rebalancing itself is the domain of ideas that a
scientific understanding provides.”*

Spending most all of my time in the realm of religious faith/feeling,
I decided to take Harris' challenge to heart.

But rather than a read of his current studies in neuroscience,
I went back to the beginning, the birth of modern science itself.

And what we find, traveling back some 350 years

as the “Age of Genius” takes shape, is the story of the greatest
scientific minds the world has ever known, confronting chaos...

coping with a bleak reality by trying to read God's Mind...

1660...

The world was dark, even in the light of day.

Disease was rampant; human waste filled alleyways and even streets.

Life expectancy across the European continent was about 30;

the murder rate about five times what it is in Newark today.

The aftermath of the Thirty Years War still left its devastation
and displacement to the population of Germany, France, Sweden...

not to mention the Protestant principalities & Catholic Church still at odds

England's internal struggles lead to a Civil skirmish

that ended with the beheading of the King...[Charles I]

The natural and supernatural were so intertwined that,

To most people's minds, the how's & why's of life were beyond explanation.

With no way to shed light on an earthly existence largely in the dark,

it was all up to God...

Problem is, to quote Jonathan Edwards most famous sermon,

most people believed they were “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

With the prevailing view of an oppressive Heavenly Ruler,
the rigid faith of a wrathful God who meted out punishment
through the workings of the world
brought a sense of impending doom, an almost End of Days despair.

And in the midst of this tumult—a civilization teetering on the brink,
One could say—of chaos, two “Acts of God” so devastate Britain
It is as if they’d taken a page directly from our HH Day p-book.

“Who by plague...Who by fire?”

The mysterious madness of the plague of 1665 was killing
over 6,000 a week in London alone ;
by the end of August—over 100,000 dead all tolled.
With too few in the city’s service to tend to burial,
mass graves have to make due.
Surveying the incomprehensible loss all around,
King Edward III chocked it up to that old time religion:
“A just God now visits the sons of man & lashes the world.”
And after the plague parted as mysteriously as it came,
The very next year—The Great Fire erupted.
From the early morning of Sept 2nd it raged for four days,
Taking taverns and tenements in its wake,
Well over 10,000 buildings engulfed in the inferno.
Starving it of fuel, the only way to stop it was to destroy all other
buildings in its wake. When the winds finally die down,
Acre upon acre is gone; the street grid—unrecognizable.
The city, a silent Sodom...

And in a world riddled with mystery
Where a critical eye or a skeptical mind was discouraged by the church,
asking questions of the Divine could border on heresy.
Yet amidst the ravages of this seeming apocalypse,
A small group of men have the gall to look through the confusion and see
Not the world’s end but its new beginning.

“Who could contemplate that chaos and see order?”

[asks Edward Dolnick in his masterful new book, [The Clockwork Universe](#)]

The Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural
Knowledge brought together geniuses and social misfits,
Men bound by a quest: faithfully committed to discovering the code
that would discern a subtle, if not hidden Divine Design.

They did not refer to themselves as scientists,
But rather natural philosophers,

For the volatile reality which they daily confronted
Made curiosity their common bond.

In the face of earthly disarray,
What this first ever scientific society sought to do,
and, as the centuries would bear out—successfully accomplished,
was to uncover some semblance of order amidst the chaos.
But they were not after the basic instruction manual...

“All disorder,” wrote Alexander Pope, “was harmony not understood.”
And though the Royal Society—studying, observing, recording,
questioning & quantifying the natural world,
developed the equations & theorems by which to understand it
being—first & foremost—men of deep faith,
Science was not their ultimate aim...

Perceiving the congruence between the Heavens and the Earth,
a cosmic code unfolding w/all the apparent anarchy surrounding, they
were determined to peer beneath it; to discern God at His Drawing Table

And just WHY is all of this so compelling for a kid who,
despite a 90ish overall High School average,
never got anything higher than a 75 in Chem or Bio?
Because the pursuit of these founding fathers of modern science
And our ultimate aspiration in being here are one & the same:
to confront the chaos and, refusing to relent in its wake,
to sense a sacred order, a greater purpose that transcends it.

Consider three life-theories learned
from men who laid the foundations of modern science,
transcending the reality of their topsy-turvy world,
and uncovering not alone monumental scientific truths
but, paradoxically, reason to rediscover/revive our faith...

Life-Theory #1...Pondering God’s Plan...And There was Light.

Q: HOW does Isaac Newton spend the plague-stricken years of 1665-66?

A: SINCE the University is closed, he returns to his mother’s farm and,
just barely 23, works tirelessly to unravel the mystery of motion.

After attending some math lectures at Cambridge,

He bought a few textbooks and studied Descartes’ geometry w/diligence

Over the course of the next 18 months, his discoveries were

nothing short of miraculous...First, came differentiation—a key

piece of Calculus, then—using a prism he bought at the Stourbridge Fair, he discerned the properties of light. Then, after proving the Calculus theories he put forth, Newton moved on to the nature of gravity itself... Before the age of 24 he knew and applied more mathematics than anyone else in the world. [The Clockwork Universe, page 232] And all of this without an instructor—Newton taught himself.

People all around him had fallen prey to a fatalism That left them helpless, victims of a repressive faith. But Isaac Newton—a man of deep religious conviction, Felt compelled by his faith to question the world; to search for the why... to try and put the puzzle together even if some pieces remained ever beyond his grasp...

“WHY would God operate in such a round about way? If His intent was to proclaim His majesty, why not arrange the stars to spell out “Behold” in blazing letters? ...Because when it came to these core questions, intellectual coercion was the wrong tool. God created human beings and endowed us with the power of reason, and thus meant for us to exercise our gifts...” [The Clockwork Universe, pg 144] For the 17th century scientific theorists, this meant observing the world to discern the perfection of God’s Divine Plan... For us, it might mean virtually aiming to do the same: To find a sense of sacred purpose/ God amidst the apparent at times glaring imperfections...

Sitting every two weeks alongside my wife on the 4th floor of MSK’s 53rd st. day hospital, as I walk to the other end of the small auditorium-sized waiting room to get her some apple juice, passing clusters of people, I am struck by what I hear; not what I understand, mind you...

A veritable league of Nations, every language imaginable: Spanish and French, Chinese, I think Korean, Portuguese I’m pretty sure, Hebrew, and right next door, Yiddish, And every American twang and drawl...

The colors of our human fabric, woven together by cancer. Most folks tend to carry on their own conversations, to speak their own language—barriers being what they are. But not Susan.

Finding ways to strike up a conversation with an older couple, she gives the gentleman—a former pro-baseball player, she discovers, a new dietary regimen in light of their shared treatments...

Connecting with a young woman, not yet 40, who's beat three different diagnoses, she shows her the bracelet a sweet LT friend gave her—a beautiful silver piece engraved artfully with the words: "F--- Cancer."

Minutes later, Susan suddenly jumps up, to bring an older African American woman some apple juice—the same one we see wheeled in every Thursday... And with a smile, my wife listens to her tale of woe, though she's heard it before.

My tendency is to duck and cover—to take care of myself and my own. Yet each visit Susan finds new ways to connect; new reasons to laugh, to touch people with whom she shares not just cancer, but a resilience of spirit that can transform them inside.

In the midst of a plague-stricken pasture,
Susan refuses to be anything but herself—outrageously outreaching,
And so brings light and joy, even hope, to many
whose sickness has virtually stolen it from them.

Even if ultimate answers lay beyond her grasp,
though her treatments have proven effective
and things are continuing to move in the right direction,
Susan Sirkman makes her rounds—celebrating a spirit
that is as surprising as it is sacred, proving the theory:
even amidst the seeming darkness, we can kindle God's Light.
Even amidst what appears God's glaring absence,
Her poignant Presence can be felt.

Life-Theory #2...The Best of All Possible Worlds...?

The most advanced intellect of his age—a leading historian, thinker, theologian—though a lawyer/diplomat by trade, the only other mind on par with Sir Isaac Newton—four years his junior, for Gottfried Leibniz, "faith was a matter of philosophical conviction."

Or, more specifically—of scientific truth.

The universe was perfectly ordered—governed by essential laws put in place by the Master Mind behind it all;

The Master Mathematician, that is—God Him or Herself.

If the Creator is then The Ultimate Mind

behind a harmony which we aspire to find, our purpose is to figure out the formula, the equation that explains the workings of this world.

For Leibniz, such a devout belief in a rational universe,
Where all the pieces fit together in Divine accord,
Even if we cannot immediately understand them,
Means that God created, as he wrote himself,
“the best of all possible worlds.”

But this brought an obvious problem:

HOW could the master scientist of his day see the suffering,
the apparent chaos around him and still be willing to say,
the world’s design is in fact divine?...

So frustrated by this perceived blind faith were the major critics

That Leibniz became the object of derision, albeit literary.

Voltaire’s play *Candide* lambasted Leibniz in the guise of Dr. Pangloss,

The greatest philosopher in the world,

who faced crisis after life-crisis only to rise up and proclaim:

“But God created the best of all possible worlds.”

What sane human being would say such a thing?...

Having faith was one thing—but surely life proved such faith to be folly.

I figured with a course called “*The F Word*” [5 letters, not 4]

I’d attract a crowd of teens who had no idea why they were really here.

Imagine my surprise, then, when at our opening class,

Sitting in a circle at the Eisner Camp library

I asked these 14/15 year olds:

When was the first time you questioned God...?

And to a person, they responded with deep personal revelations:

WHEN...My mother and father said they were getting a divorce...

WHEN...My dad lost his job and my mother said we should move...

WHEN...My cousin was diagnosed with leukemia...he was 11.

WHEN...They said the medicine wasn’t helping with my depression.

WHEN...My world was closing in on me & I had nowhere to turn

WHEN...My Global teacher said Religion had caused history’s wars

Their responses were not alone mature; they were our answers.

So let me share w/you the essential F-Word truth I tried to teach.

God did, indeed, create *the best of all possible worlds*...

But just as the great Gottfrid Leibniz understood,

Having himself lived through the Thirty Years War,

That did not mean that everything would be roses and sunshine.

Young people would die...Families would fall apart...

Life’s hardships would knock down the people we love.

But because we have a world that somehow still stands,
Even amidst the daily devastation—natural and man-made,
And because—like the Mind of the Universe,
we are endowed with insight and understanding,
we too can find a way to piece our lives back together;
to stand up in the face of chaos...

And in the strength of spirit we summon;
Through the wisdom of the heart by which we stand,
God is Present, standing alongside us...

When Rabbi Harold Kushner was told by doctors
back in November of 1966, that his 3-year old boy suffered
from an extremely rare rapid aging disease called progeria,
one which would cause death by his early teens,
he was angry—with God. And all of the feel good lines he used to
use with congregants just made him feel worse...
It was only through his crisis of faith,
that Kushner came to discover a different God.

“Once I cut the Gordian knot, I understood that God was not
doing this to my child...Where did we ever get the notion that we
add to God’s glory by holding God responsible for every
earthquake, every hurricane, every automobile accident, every
human disaster, including the Holocaust?...God was on my side,
not on the side of illness. God was on the side of good people,
not on the side of the people who victimized them...The truth is
that life is unfair, and we gain nothing by hiding from the truth...
And the truth is that the role of God is not to weave a magic circle
around us to make sure bad things happen only to other people.
The role of God is to strengthen & comfort. The role of God is to
be with us—for that’s what God’s Name means, “*the One who is
With you.*” The role of God is to hold our hands and, when we find
ourselves in the “*valley of the shadow of death,*” to take us by the
hand and lead us through that valley, till we come out into the
sunlight again.” [[Jews & Judaism In The 21st Century](#), Ed Feinstein, pgs 82-83]

“If to believe in God,” wrote Rabbi Neil Gillman,
“is to believe that the world manifests a fundamental order, an
intrinsic justice, a sense of cosmos, then how do we deal with the
blatant injustice, the incipient chaos that lurks on the fringes of
our experience...?... We may never understand why bad things

happen to good people, but religion can provide us with the resources to respond to the chaotic in our life experience—to cope with it, to endure it, and thereby restore a measure of order in the midst of the disorder...” [Traces of God, pg169-170]

Perhaps God did not create a perfect world;
At least not as far as we can see...
But with all its apparent flaws,
It's the best one, the only one we've got...
And the best we can hope for often is
to create wholeness even when we are broken,
to remain sane even when rational explanations fail...
to find harmony even within the hardship,
to know that sure as the sun will rise up tomorrow, so can we...

Life-Theory #3...The Push & Pull of God...

Whose picture did Albert Einstein keep above his bed,
as a teen today might have a poster of LeBron James or,
if you're a NE Patriot's fan, Tom Brady...

Einstein adorned his bedside with Sir Isaac Newton, for, he once said:
“Nature to him was an open book, whose letters he could read w/o effort.”

Truth is, it took intense speculation and calculation,
and no effort of Newton's was greater than the 3 volume work of over
500 pages, 200 plus theorems, propositions and corollaries known as
The Principia, initially a 9-page response to a London coffee-house conversation
Between 3 of the Royal Society's Scientists, wondering about the orbit of the planets,
in 16 months of writing, Newton put, in logical sequence,
using abstract geometry, calculus and physics, not alone the
motion of the planets and all objects here on earth,
but the universal principles that keep the universe on course...
And at its heart, a breathtaking leap of reason...

“ There is a power of gravity pertaining to all bodies, proportional to the
several quantities of matter which they contain—All bodies everywhere.”

Newton's Theory of Gravitation—a single force
that extended to the farthest reaches of the universe, as he wrote
“Everything pulled on everything else...
the entire universe bound together in one vast, abstract web.”
With his theory, Newton had done more than explain
the calculations behind the structure of Heaven & Earth...

He proved that there was a force, unseen, most often unfelt,
a life-energy that touched everyone, everything,
which held our world together...
and made life a cosmic cross-weaving of connection.

Maybe its little surprise, then, that Newton's contemporaries
found his *Theory of Gravity* crazy—an affront to common sense.
For its innate mystery meant asking rational minds to believe there
could be a power, both invisible and ultimately, beyond our grasp,
that can impact, even guide the course of our lives...[Hmmm...]

What *is* surprising however is that Newton, himself,
also voiced great misgivings: “The very idea of gravity extending
the vast reaches of space is so great an absurdity that I believe
no man who has in philosophical matters any competent faculty
can ever fall into it.” [Dolnick, page 305]

In other words—Newton—who knew it worked,
questioned gravity's viability...

And though he came finally to realize,

“To us it is enough that gravity does really exist...

though the cause of gravity I cannot pretend to know.” [Dolnick, pg 306]

Newton had his doubts...

For at its core, gravity, like God, was a Force,
intangibly intuited, to be taken largely on faith.

Today we've grown accustomed to thinking of modern science
as unfathomable, at times, even absurd...

With all its talk of black holes, particle theory, time travel.

“We are all agreed your theory is crazy,”

declared Niels Bohr, 20th century's foremost physicist.

“The question that divides us is whether it is crazy enough
to have a chance of being correct.” [Dolnick, page 302]

Let me leave you, then with my most meshuganeh,
inconclusive yet inexhaustible theory:

There exists a Life Force,

Invisible to the human eye but discernable, at moments,
In the human heart...

a Cosmic Energy—ever-present though not always felt,
which has the power to see beyond the seeming chaos
by linking us in common bonds we may not readily realize
are even there...

An Infinite—and at one & the same—Intimate Push & Pull
which inexplicably infuses us
with an infinitesimal fraction of its radiance,
empowering us to fashion order out of chaos,
to inspire hope, to dispel darkness—kindling light
by the choices we make—the attitudes we take,
the lives we live every day...

R' Larry Hoffman reminds us of our post-New Year reality:
“Life will always be messy because it is part & parcel of a universe
governed by entropy. We are, at best, in the salvage business,
restoring temporary sanity to a personal world that is inherently
unstable and imperfect. But as messy as it is, life is still a blessing.”

[Jewish Week, Sept 23, 2011]

This New Year, as you face the chaos,
and confront the feeling that life is spinning out of control,
may you discover the truth Susan & I, thanks to you,
have come to know:

That with every hand reaching out to help,
every heart wishing/praying for the best,
strengthened by a care—and a love which is unconditional
messy as it all might be, we are immeasurably blessed.

So with mutual blessing abounding amidst a disordered world,
may we all find the strength to withstand the chaos,
and through the tears and tension—the heartache & hope,
the light & love we share,
to discover God, standing there, alongside...

AMEN.

