

Telescope

I am not a devotee of social media, and I certainly do not believe that everything on the internet is true. However, about a year ago, I came across this heartening statement of fact about Miss Universe. Yes, Miss Universe.

Every Miss Universe contest has been won by an earthling. Go us! (I'd put my money on our winning the next one, too.)

Maybe the Miss Universe pageant isn't your thing, and I understand that you might be put off by the obviously earth-biased judging, the terra-jingoism, or other-worldly physical ideals. But these kinds of competitions, or exhibitions, are places where many see beauty.

For beauty, we don't need to attend or tune in to a pageant; we have so many sources close by: In our own gardens, children's faces, kids' sidewalk chalk drawings, a skillfully plated dinner, a grandparent's laugh. We also can look deeper to appreciate the beauty in a personality, in a gesture, in an idea, in a piece of music, in a team working as one, in a teacher-student relationship, in the waves slithering, glittering, ashore on our beaches, in those spectacular sunsets.

Beauty is all around us, though at times we seek it out in special, often far away places: cruises to Alaska or the fjords of Scandinavia, African safaris, the mountains of America's West. Our quest for beauty might take us to art museums around the world, legendary golf courses, spa retreats....

Sometimes, we get to create — or help create — beauty. It could be our children,

our artistic or musical pursuits, programs or events we enable, the smiling response to our small kindness.

I wonder how often we're able to see the beauty in our selves. In our mirrors. In our generosity, our loving gestures, our interactions with family, friends, neighbors, delivery folk, baristas, cashiers... in the rituals of a Jewish life.

There are many different kinds of beauty in our lives, yes, even in such extravaganzas as Miss Universe. BTW, we wish good luck to the next pageant's contestants, no matter their planet or galaxy of origin.

Speaking of outer space, the New York Times daily puzzle page recently offered this observation as a cryptogram:

Astronomers searching for intelligent life point their telescopes away from earth.

Astronomers searching for intelligent life point their telescopes away from earth.

Hello!? My grandchild is a genius. Intelligent? She can't read yet, but we know! How about looking at her?

Some astronomers seek answers to questions like How do stars work? What's at the other end of a black hole? How many billions of year until the sun goes out? To where is the universe expanding and will there be zoning issues?

Other astronomers look for signs of intelligent life out there in the cosmos. Countless planets could support some form of life, life forms that we can't begin to imagine, though some science fiction writers have tried. (Even when I was a kid, it struck me as curious that all the aliens on TV had two arms and two legs and faces with the

same basic features as humans, however modified they might have been!)

The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, SETI Institute, has the mission to explore the possibilities of life elsewhere in the universe, and share discoveries with the public.

They've been keeping an eye — more to the point, an ear — on things like radio waves generated long, long ago, and far, far away.

So far, forty years on, they've recognized no signs of intelligent life out there.

The cryptogram line about astronomers amused me, sure, but it also intrigued me. When we look for something vital, do we sometimes point our telescopes in the wrong direction?

I believe we earthlings do not do enough to seek out the best intelligence humanity has to offer even though it is all around us, right here on earth!

Well, maybe not always and everywhere. We continue to do things that are against our better interests, and we look to others, elsewhere, to take care of the ways we mess up — if we care about them at all. For example, we might contribute to organizations addressing poverty or hunger; fighting the exploitation of natural resources; or seeking better educational outcomes for all students.

We send money, which is important! — but most of us do not have a hands-on investment, sweat equity, in these organizations. Of course it's overwhelming: so many tsores, so much need in our world! There are an awful lot of things to fix, and we have only so much time and attention — and money — to give. Still, we donate what

we can to feel that we have even a wee share in solutions.

That telescope quip was published near the beginning of Elul, just as we Jews are turning to look inward, to explore our actions and attitudes with an aim to define them and perhaps change them.

Coincidence? Maybe not. (I tried to contact the puzzle writer, but couldn't find a way to contact him without paying Twitter, or whatever it is now.)

It's an interesting idea, that the timing of an aphorism about looking for solutions in the wrong places might be intentional. So let's shift from the cosmic and other big issues out there that are hard to embrace, and consider something more intimate and personal but no less challenging to encounter.

Where do we seek spiritual fulfillment?
Spiritual fulfillment.

Last week, as Ellie and I were walking to Sundaze in Ventnor to celebrate the end of the summer season with soft-serve, I told her I was a little stuck on this talk.

In the draft, I'd written that spirituality might be sought in solitude: a walk on the beach — where the sunrise, the constant motion of waves, the ever-changing nature of nature can be uplifting.

Or that we might find spiritual inspiration with others, walking with a spouse perhaps, riding in a small gang of bicyclists, or with gym buddies, or communing in a book group. A spiritual experience does not need to include anything overtly religious, I wrote.

I wrote it, and I felt I was putting my position, my calling, my Jewish community in jeopardy!

I'd had that feeling before.

I was an 18-year-old junior counselor at Camp Ramah. Visitors' Day. The father of one of my campers took me for a brief walk to charge me with a task, a mission: "Jonathan, our rabbi back home is pretty good," he said, "but I need you to give my son a deeply religious experience this summer."

My bunk was a dozen ten-year-old boys.

My mind raced: How was I to do that? What did "a spiritual experience" mean to the father? What might it mean to his son? If I failed, would I ever again work as a counselor at this Camp Ramah, at any Camp Ramah? If he didn't have that experience, would this sweet child's spiritual growth be forever stunted?

I don't recall meeting the father's expectation. I do remember that it was a fulfilling summer all around and, as far as I know, the camp administration received no complaints about my work.

In encouraging, or acknowledging, that there are many places outside the synagogue community, even outside of Judaism, where one can find spiritual fulfillment, I felt that I was letting down Shirat Hayam, that I was not being enough of a cheerleader for this place and these people — for you! — who have so much to share with one another in so many ways.

Still on our way to the ice cream parlor, Ellie asked me: "What does nearly every person say when they hear truly noteworthy news?" I mentally reviewed our tradition's formulaic response to learning of a death — *baruch dayyan ha'emet* — and the blessing for

surviving a potentially injurious circumstance — we recite the *gomeil* blessing.

She answered her own question: "Oh, my God!"

"Oh, my God!"

What triggers the reflective response of "Oh, my God!" as in "Oh, my God! That's terrible", meaning, I'm grateful it didn't happen any degree closer to me. Or "Oh, my God!" meaning, What an unfortunate thing to do to oneself. I would never... Or, on the other hand, "Oh my God! That's amazing!"

Even for people who aren't too connected to Judaism or any religion, even for avowed atheists, "Oh, my God!" is often a first response to particular kinds of news.

Is God truly being invoked in a case of tragedy? If so, invoked as a verbal formula to ward off that kind of catastrophe happening to me? As if summoning a Greater Power to DO something about it, to help the situation?

Or is it merely an unconsidered, reflexive response learned in childhood?

To me, "Oh, my God!" sounds like just the beginning of a prayer, even if the rest of it doesn't follow at the moment. Anyone hearing "Oh, my God!" understands. So, perhaps, does God.

Often, we look to others to craft spiritually meaningful experiences for us. (And we clergy at Shirat Hayam are happy to help!) Rather than start with outsourcing, we might look within; we might seek our inner spark or ember that wants fanning, so that we can bring out that flame, meld it with the

light of others and together create uplifting experiences.

We know we can do it. We're doing it here, today! We've been doing it all summer with Friday evening services at congregants' homes.

What "IT" are we doing? Today, we are here, in community, seeking a shared experience of sacred time steeped in the tradition of individual introspection; at a time of year that, on paper, looks downright depressing: We confess, we are judged, we are contrite, we acknowledge the worst, and hope for the best.

Yet, we sing, we pray, we greet one another with joy! Could we ask for a potentially more spiritual moment than to see, even if only this once a year, an old friend with whom we share history and Jewish experience? Or, to see friends' children, grandchildren, growing up so fast and beautifully. Or, to renew our acquaintance with our tradition and liturgy.

The beauty of our liturgy should not be lost on us. Prayer: So many words — an array of prose, poetry, biblical text, ancient teachings, modern interpretations; with melodies that help make some of those words so expressive...

What are we doing when we pray?

- We give thanks for all that is good
- We voice appreciation for natural marvels
- We ask for strength and resources to repair what needs fixing
- We reach out to the unknowable
- We seek healing through our voices and hearts
- We manifest sorrow in community

- We look for help to lighten our load
- We embrace, we extend a hand, to create connection with God, with one another.

We have opportunities, and we can make more, to add depth to spiritual experiences that are enriched by Jewish context. Like Torah, these opportunities are not distant or esoteric. Rather, as we read in Torah just last week, "they are close at hand, *b'ficha uvilvave'cha la'asoto*, they are close at hand; by what you say and by how you feel, you can make them happen."

Learn. Sing. Pray. Read. Discuss. Play. Eat. Share. Participate in our communal endeavors — organize one! — to enjoy the beauty of Judaism, to appreciate Jewish wisdom, and to uplift and revitalize our Jewish souls; and to make new connections and rebuild old ones.

Oh, my God: may we see the beauty that is all around us — in our loved ones, in our creativity, in Your creation.

Oh, my God: may we learn to look within ourselves and around us — even up at the stars — for inspiration and uplift.

Oh, my God: may we come together in community throughout the year — here in these history-filled spaces or in our homes — to celebrate, to solace, to learn, to teach, to participate, to seek spiritual fulfillment through our hallowed traditions and through the ways we make those traditions new ... and our own.

Shana tova!