

4 Wonder

A LEGACY OF WONDER

Among the many things that religious tradition holds in store for us is *a legacy of wonder*. The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is *to take things for granted*. Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin.

Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered. All enigmas can be solved, and all wonder is nothing but "the effect of novelty upon ignorance." The world, he was convinced, is its own explanation, and there is no necessity to go beyond the world in order to account for the existence of the world. This lack of wonder, this exaggeration of the claim of scientific inquiry, is more characteristic of writers of popular science books and of interpreters of science to the laymen than of the creative scientists themselves. Spencer and others "seem to be possessed with the idea that science has got the universe pretty well ciphered down to a fine point; while the Faradays and Newtons seem to themselves like children who have picked up a few pretty pebbles upon the ocean beach. But most of us find it difficult to recognize the greatness and wonder of things familiar to us. As the prophet is not without honor save [in his own country] so it is also with phenomena."¹ "The facts of the case, we venture to say, are so wonderful that from first to last no general impression of Nature

reached along scientific or any other lines can be even in the direction of being true that does not sound the note of joyous appreciation and of reverent wonder."²

"The history of European thought, even to the present day, has been tainted by a fatal misunderstanding. It may be termed The Dogmatic Fallacy. The error consists in the persuasion that we are capable of producing notions which are adequately defined in respect to the complexity of relationship required for their illustration in the real world. Canst thou by searching describe the universe? Except perhaps for the simpler notions of arithmetic, even our most familiar ideas, seemingly obvious, are infected with this incurable vagueness. Our right understanding of the methods of intellectual progress depends on keeping in mind this characteristic of our thoughts. . . . During the medieval epoch in Europe, the theologians were the chief sinners in respect to dogmatic finality. During the last three centuries, their bad pre-eminence in this habit passed to the men of science."³

A TINY SCREW

When the electric streetcar made its first appearance in the city of Warsaw, some good old Jews could not believe their own eyes. A car that moves without a horse! Some of them were stupefied and frightened, and all were at a loss how to explain the amazing invention.

Once while discussing the matter in the synagogue, a man entered who in addition to studying the Talmud was reputed to know books on secular subjects, to subscribe to a newspaper, and to be well versed in worldly affairs.

—You must know you how this thing works, they all turned to him.

—Of course, I know, he said. And they were all hanging on his every word with total concentration.

—Imagine four large wheels in a vertical position in four corners of a square, connected to each other by wires. You get it?

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—Yes, we get it.

—The wires are tied in a knot in the center of the square and placed within a large wheel which is placed in a horizontal position. You get it?

—Yes, we get it.

—Above the large wheel, there are several wheels, one smaller than the other. You get it?

—Yes, we get it.

—On the top of the smallest wheel there is a tiny screw which is connected by a wire to the center of the car which lies on top of the wheels. Do you get it?

—Yes, we get it.

—The machinist in the car presses the button that moves the screw that brings the horizontal wheels to move, and thus the car runs through the street.

—Ah, now we understand!

TWO KINDS OF WONDER

Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things. To find an approximate cause of a phenomenon is no answer to his ultimate wonder. He knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. Looking at the world he would say, "This is the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalms 118:23).

That "wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder" was stated by Plato⁴ and maintained by Aristotle: "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize."⁵ To this day, rational wonder is appreciated as "*semen scientiae*," as the seed of knowledge, as some-

thing conducive, not indigenous to cognition.⁶ Wonder is the prelude to knowledge; it ceases, once the cause of a phenomenon is explained.⁷

But does the worth of wonder merely consist in its being a stimulant to the acquisition of knowledge? Is wonder the same as curiosity? To the prophets wonder is *a form of thinking*. It is not the beginning of knowledge but an act that goes beyond knowledge; it does not come to an end when knowledge is acquired; it is an attitude that never ceases. There is no answer in the world to man's radical amazement.

"STAND STILL AND CONSIDER"

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man does with his higher incomprehension. The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés. Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is.

Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act of man. While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see.

The grandeur or mystery of being is not a particular puzzle to the mind, as, for example, the cause of volcanic eruptions. We do not have to go to the end of reasoning to encounter it. Grandeur or

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mystery is something with which we are confronted everywhere and at all times. Even the very act of thinking baffles our thinking, just as every intelligible fact is, by virtue of its being a fact, drunk with baffling aloofness. Does not mystery reign within reasoning, within perception, within explanation? Where is the self-understanding that could unfurl the marvel of our own thinking, that could explain the grace of our emptying the concrete with charms of abstraction? What formula could explain and solve the enigma of the very fact of thinking? Ours is neither thing nor thought but only the subtle magic blending the two.

What fills us with radical amazement is not the relations in which everything is embedded but the fact that even the minimum of perception is a maximum of enigma. The most incomprehensible fact is the fact that we comprehend at all.⁸

The way to faith leads through acts of wonder and radical amazement. The words addressed to Job apply to every man:

Hearken unto this, O Job,
Stand still and consider the wondrous works of the Lord.
Do you know how God lays His command upon them,
And causes the lightning of His cloud to shine?
Do you know the balancings of the clouds,
The wondrous works of Him who is perfect in knowledge,
You whose garments are hot when the earth is still
because of the south wind?
Can you, like Him, spread out the skies,
Hard as a molten mirror?
Teach us what we shall say to Him;
We cannot draw up our case because of darkness.
Shall it be told Him that I would speak?
Did a man ever wish that he would be swallowed up?
And now men cannot look on the light
When it is bright in the skies
When the wind has passed and cleared them.
Out of the north comes golden splendor;
God is clothed with terrible majesty.

Job 37:14-22

Come ye and behold the works of God,
Sublime in His dealing with the sons of men;
Psalms 66:5

The great marvels do not crush the soul; sublimity evokes humility. Looking at the star-studded sky the Psalmist exclaims:

When I behold Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers,
The moon and the stars which Thou hast fashioned—
What is man that Thou shouldst be mindful of him?
And the son of man that Thou shouldst think of him?
Psalms 8:4-5

In radical amazement, the Biblical man faces "*the great things and unsearchable, the wondrous things without number*" (Job 5:9). He encounters them in space and in time, in nature⁹ and in history;¹⁰ not only in the uncommon but also in the common occurrences of nature.¹¹ Not only do the things outside of him evoke the amazement of the Biblical man; his own being fills him with awe.

I will give thanks unto Thee
For I am fearfully and marvelously made;
Wondrous are Thy works;
And that my soul knoweth exceedingly.
Psalms 139:14¹²

"FOR THY CONTINUAL MARVELS"

The profound and perpetual awareness of the wonder of being has become a part of the religious consciousness of the Jew. Three times a day we pray:

We thank Thee . . .
For Thy miracles which are daily with us,
For Thy continual marvels. . . .

In the evening liturgy we recite the words of Job (9:10):

Who does great things past finding out,
Marvelous things without number.

Every evening we recite: "He creates light and makes the dark." Twice a day we say: "He is One." What is the meaning of such

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repetition? A scientific theory, once it is announced and accepted, does not have to be repeated twice a day. The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder, there is a need for daily worship.

The sense for the "miracles which are daily with us," the sense for the "continual marvels," is the source of prayer. There is no worship, no music, no love, if we take for granted the blessings or defeats of living. No routine of the social, physical, or physiological order must dull our sense of surprise at the fact that there *is* a social, a physical, or a physiological order. We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food. Each time we are about to drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation, "Blessed be Thou . . . by Whose word all things come into being." A trivial act and a reference to the supreme miracle. Wishing to eat bread or fruit, to enjoy a pleasant fragrance or a cup of wine; on tasting fruit in season for the first time; on seeing a rainbow, or the ocean; on noticing trees when they blossom; on meeting a sage in Torah or in secular learning; on hearing good or bad tidings—we are taught to invoke His great name and our awareness of Him. Even on performing a physiological function we say "Blessed be Thou . . . who healest all flesh and *doest wonders*."

This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things.

In the Song of the Red Sea we read:

Who is like Thee, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness,
Sublime in glorious deeds, doing wonders.

Exodus 15:11

The Rabbis remarked: It is not written here: *Who did wonders*, but *Who does wonders*. . . . He did and still does wonders for us in every generation, as it is said:

Wondrous are Thy works,
And that my soul knoweth exceedingly.
Psalms 139:14¹³

Rabbi Eleazer says: "Redemption and the earning of bread may be compared to each other. There is wonder in earning bread as there is wonder in redeeming the world. And as the earning of bread takes place every day, so does redemption take place every day."¹⁴

Said David the king: "I shall testify to the love of the Holy One, blessed be He, and to the benefits He confers upon Israel, hour by hour, and day by day. Day by day man is sold [into slavery], and every day he is redeemed; every day the soul of man is taken from him, and delivered to the Keeper; on the morrow it is returned to him; as it is written: *Into Thy hand I commit my spirit: Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, Thou God of truth* (Psalms 31:6). Every day miracles such as those that occurred at the Exodus come upon man; every day he experiences redemption, like those who went forth from Egypt; every day he is fed at the breasts of his mother; every day he is punished for his deeds, like a child by his master."¹⁵

HE ALONE KNOWS

Awareness of wonder is not the same as knowing the wonders that happen to us. Wonders happen without our being able to notice them. The Psalmist (136:3) declares:

O give thanks . . .
To Him who alone does great wonders.

And the Rabbis remarked: "Is there anything that He does with the aid of someone else? What is the meaning of the word alone? He alone knows what wonders He does. . . . As it is said:

Many things hast Thou done, O Lord my God,
Even Thy wondrous deeds and Thy thoughts toward us.
There is none to be compared unto Thee!

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If I would declare and speak of them,
They are more than can be told.

Psalms 40:6

I have no right to set forth Thy praise; I am unworthy to relate Thy wonders."¹⁶

The belief in "the hidden miracles is the basis for the entire Torah. A man has no share in the Torah, unless he believes that all things and all events in the life of the individual as well as in the life of society are miracles. There is no such thing as the natural course of events. . . ." ¹⁷

The sense of wonder and transcendence must not become "a cushion for the lazy intellect." It must not be a substitute for analysis where analysis is possible; it must not stifle doubt where doubt is legitimate. It must, however, remain a constant awareness if man is to remain true to the dignity of God's creation, because such awareness is the spring of all creative thinking.

Such awareness was the wellspring of Kant's basic insight. "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and the more steadily we reflect on them: *the starry heavens above and the moral law within*. . . . The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an *animal creature*, which after it has been for a short time provided with vital power, one knows not how, must again give back the matter of which it was formed to the planet it inhabits (a mere speck in the universe). The second, on the contrary, infinitely elevates my worth as an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world—at least so far as may be inferred from the destination assigned to my existence by this law, a destination not restricted to conditions and limits of this life, but reaching into the infinite."¹⁸

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 4

¹ Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Cambridge, Mass., 1935, vol. V, p. 65.

² J. Arthur Thomson, *The System of Inanimate Nature*, p. 650.

³ A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, New York, 1933, p. 185.

⁴ *Theaetetus*, 155d.

⁵ *Metaphysica*, 12, 982b, 12.

⁶ "The special philosophical disposition consists primarily in this, that a man is capable of wonder beyond the ordinary and everyday degree . . . the lower a man stands in an intellectual regard the less of a problem is existence itself to him; everything, how it is, and that it is, appears to him rather a matter of course." Schopenhauer, *Supplements to the World as Will and Idea*, ch. xvii.

"The feeling of wonderment is the source and inexhaustible fountainhead of [the child's] desire for knowledge. It drives the child irresistibly on to solve the mystery, and if in his attempt he encounters a causal relationship, he will not tire of repeating the same experiment ten times, a hundred times, in order to taste the thrill of discovery over and over again. . . . The reason why the adult no longer wonders is not because he has solved the riddle of life, but because he has grown accustomed to the laws governing his world picture. But the problem of why these particular laws and no others hold, remains for him just as amazing and inexplicable as for the child. He who does not comprehend this situation, misconstrues its profound significance, and he who has reached the stage where he no longer wonders about anything, merely demonstrates that he has lost the art of reflective reasoning." Max Planck, *Scientific Autobiography*, New York, 1949, pp. 91-93.

⁷ *Mechanica*, 847a, 11.

⁸ See *Man is Not Alone*, pp. 11, 13f.

⁹ God is He "Who giveth rain upon the earth, And sends waters upon the fields. He sets up on high those that are lowly, And those who mourn are exalted to safety. He frustrates the devices of the crafty, So that their hands achieve no success. He takes the wise in their own craftiness, And the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end. They meet with darkness in the day-time, and grope at noonday as in the night. But He saves from the sword of their mouth, Even the needy from the hand of the mighty. So the poor has hope, And iniquity shuts her mouth" (Job 5:10-16). "O Lord, Thou art my God I will exalt Thee, I will praise Thy name, For Thou hast done wondrous things. . . . For Thou hast made of a city a heap, Of a fortified city a ruin; A castle of strangers to no city, It shall never be built. . . . For Thou hast been a stronghold to the poor, A stronghold to the needy in his distress" (Isaiah 25:1-4). See Psalms 107:8.15.21.31.24; Isaiah 40:26.

¹⁰ Exodus 3:20; 34:10; Joshua 3:5; Jeremiah 21:2; Micah 7:15; Psalms 72:18; 86:10; 98:1; 106:22; 136:4; Job 9:10.

¹¹ "God thunders wondrously with his voice; He does great things which we cannot comprehend. For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth'; And to the shower and the rain, 'Be strong.' He seals up the hand of every man, That all men may know his work. Then the beasts go into their lairs And remain in their dens. From its chamber comes the whirlwind, And cold from the scattering winds. By the breath of God ice is given, And the broad waters are frozen fast. He loads the thick cloud with moisture; The clouds scatter his lightning. They turn round and round by his guidance. To accomplish all that he

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commands them On the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction, or for his land, Or for love, he causes it to happen" (Job 37:5-13).

¹² "Didst Thou not pour me out like milk, And curdle me like cheese? Thou didst clothe me with skin and flesh, And knit me together with bones and sinews. Thou hast granted me life and steadfast love; And Thy care has preserved my spirit. Yet these things Thou didst hide in Thy heart; I know that this is with Thee" (Job 10:10-13).

¹³ *Mechilta* on Exodus 15:11.

¹⁴ Says Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani: "The earning of bread is an even greater wonder than redemption, for redemption is done through an angel, and the earning of bread is made possible through the Holy One, blessed be He. In regard to the first we read, 'The angel who has redeemed me from all evil' (Genesis 48:16), while in regard to the second we read, 'Thou openest Thy hand, thou satisfiest every living thing' (Psalms 145:16)." Rabbi Joshua ben Levi says: "The earning of bread is a greater wonder than the division of the Red Sea." *Genesis Rabba*, ch. 20, 22. See *Pesachim* 118a.

¹⁵ *Seder Eliyahu Rabba*, ch. 2, ed. Friedmann, p. 8 (in Nahum N. Glatzer, *In Time and Eternity*, p. 22f.): "Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrought many miracles in order to redeem Israel from Egypt, so He does concerning a piece of bread which a man puts in his mouth." *Pesikta Rabbati*, ed. M. Friedmann, ch. 33, p. 152a. "Greater is the miracle that occurs when a sick person escapes from perilous disease than that which happened when Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah escaped from the fiery furnace. For Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah escaped a fire kindled by man, which all men can extinguish, whilst a sick person escapes a heavenly fire, and who can extinguish that?" *Nedarim*, 41a.

¹⁶ *Midrash Tebillim* 136, 4. "Miracles happen at all times. However, since they come to us not because we deserve to be saved but because of His great mercy and grace, they remain unnoticed. Only a generation that serves Him wholeheartedly is worthy of knowing the miracles that happen to it." Rabbi Eliezer of Tarnegrod, *Amaroth Tehorot*, Warsaw, 1838, on Psalms 136:4.

¹⁷ Nahmanides, *Commentary* on Exodus 13:16.

¹⁸ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Abbott, London, 1889, p. 260.