**Reconstructing Theology: What it Means to Live in a Living Universe**

**Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde**

On Rosh Hashanah, we get a little cosmic. We leave the confines of Jewish history and our particular experience as a people and look at the big picture. We will sing tomorrow: *Hayom ha’rat olam*--today the world, the universe is born, is born anew. And indeed, tomorrow, the Zichronot section of the service, invokes the vastness of the Divine as the great Rememberer. Our machzor says: “You remember all that You have made within your world, consider every creature fashioned since Creation. Before you every secret is uncovered, the whole multitude of mysteries since the world began.” (Kol Haneshamah Machzor, p.  635)

Rosh Hashanah invites us to stop and consider our place in all this vastness, to tap into that sense of mystery.

Tonight, I want to explore an idea that I think is essential to considering our place in this vastness, the idea that we live in a “living universe,” as opposed to a “dead universe.” Then I want to tease out some of the implications of this “living universe view” for Jewish theology and practice.

I offer this as a contribution to the “Religion and Science” question, as well as an attempt to put forth a believable contemporary Reconstructionist theology.

My primary guide in this endeavor is the visionary author, Duane Elgin, who is perhaps best known for his book *Voluntary Simplicity*. I am drawing here on a different book of his called *The Living Universe*.

To give a sense of the “dead universe view,” the perspective of much of science for the past 300 years runs something like this: the “universe is non-living at its foundations…[it] is a collection of mostly dead matter and empty space...At the foundations, the universe is a cold, barren, unfeeling and spiritless place. The cosmos has no apparent purpose so any meaning must come from what we construct for ourselves as social beings... Consciousness is a product of biochemistry and is located in the brain. Consciousness is absent in the universe except in higher animals. Creation ended with the big bang nearly 14 billion years ago. Since then, all that has happened is the progressive evolution of ancient matter into more complex forms.” (Living Universe, p. 30)

Now I want to make the case for a different view, a view that the universe is alive at the foundations. I am of course, not a scientist. I got a C- in high school physics and just barely passed chemistry with tutoring help from my uncle’s girlfriend. I am deeply mathematically challenged.  I did a little better in biology, because there’s not much math in it. Still, I’ve been interested in the science and spirituality connection for some years, and what I’m sharing with you is an expression of that.

Elgin marshals several key scientific arguments for a living universe. I will explain three here:

1) “Empty” space is not empty. As scientists have tried to account for the continued expansion of our universe, they have discovered that “phenomenal amounts of energy are present throughout the universe and are pushing it apart.” (38) Physicist David Bohm calculated that a single cubic inch of “empty” space contains far more than the energy equivalent of millions of atom bombs! Empty space is a dynamically constructed transparency requiring immense amounts of energy to create and sustain. (38-39)

2) We live in a continuously regenerated universe. “The ‘dead-universe’ theory assumed creation occurred only once--billions of years ago...The living-universe theory views creation not as a one-time event but as an ongoing process. The entire universe is maintained moment-by-moment by an unbroken flow-through of energy.” (40)

How does this flow-through work? One primary way is that “beneath the solid surface of material objects, an extraordinary flow of activity is occurring.” As quantum mechanics has shown us for around 100 years, the seemingly solid world as it appears to our senses is completely deceptive.  The heart of an atom is almost entirely empty space, and “the electrons that circle the nucleus of the atom are moving so fast--several trillion times a second--that they manifest as a blurred cloud of motion...Upon close inspection, matter dissolves into knots of energy and space-time whose dynamic stability gives the appearance of enduring solidity. It is amazing that this hurricane of flowing motion comes together to present itself as the ordinary world around us.” (41)

It’s important to note here that ancient Judaism sees creation as a continuous process, even if a straight reading of the Genesis story makes it seem like a one-time event. As I often like to lift up in our morning prayers, right after barchu we say, “*Uv’tuvo m’chadesh tamid ma’aseh bereishit”*”--”in God’s goodness the ongoing work of creation is continually renewed.” Or we say in *Baruch sh’amar* in the morning prayers, “*Baruch oseh v’reishit*,” literally “blessed is the One who does creation,” i.e. in the present tense. The rabbis, especially those schooled in Kabbalah, seem to have intuited that creation is still unfolding moment to moment, sustained by the continual flow of Divine energy.

3) Sentience is present at every level of the universe.  Now, this is where things start to get even more far out. We find consciousness at the foundations of the universe--not self-reflective human consciousness, but what could be called basic sentience. The physicist Freeman Dyson wrote: “Matter in quantum mechanics is not an inert substance but an active agent, constantly making choices between alternative possibilities...It appears that mind, as manifested by the capacity to make choices, is to some extent inherent in every electron.” (43)

Beyond electrons, “scientists studying bacteria [and] amoebas... have discovered that they are intensely social creatures possessing unique forms of language. These *single-cell* creatures are not loners; instead, they are connected as a community and use chemicals to communicate with one another.” (44)  *Plants* can communicate with each other using subtle odor molecules and warn other plants of danger. Many of us are also familiar with the deep levels of sentience we are continually discovering among animals--including grief, complex language and compassion.

As an expansion of this idea of sentience, the living universe view holds that consciousness not confined to the brain, but is present fundamentally throughout the universe itself, like a vast, pervasive field. It’s quite subtle, but we can connect with this field of consciousness beyond our own physical bodies, through capacities we sometimes refer to as psychic, but many of which are available to anyone. One of these capacities that has received extensive scientific study is called “remote viewing,” which is the ability to gather meaningful information about a remote person or location by intuitive or non-physical means. In studies of this, a person is put in a sensory-deprivation box, and asked to describe something in a remote location. In remote viewing, the receiver is not expected to acquire exact information, but intuitive impressions. It sounds far out, but remote viewing was a secret project of the CIA, has been studied at Stanford, and has been used to uncover archeological sites, such as Mark Antony’s place in Alexandria.

In summary, “a living universe is a unified and completely interdependent system that is continuously regenerated by the flow-through of phenomenal amounts of life energy whose essential nature includes consciousness or a self-reflective capacity that enables systems at every scale of existence to exercise some freedom of choice.” (55)

There is so much more to say about all the fascinating science connected to the living universe, but for the sake of time, let’s turn to the implications of all this.

The primary implication is this: If we are living in a living universe, with consciousness present throughout, then communion with that living energy is possible for all of us, not just those who are “spiritual types” and lovers of woo-woo.  That is the good news. If the universe is alive with sentience and consciousness throughout, our task is to discover how to commune with that aliveness, or perhaps it is to remove the barriers to communion with that aliveness. For those of us who are more skeptical about prayer, hopefully this science-informed view that the universe is conscious, can help us set our skepticism aside a little.

Prayer, then, at its most basic level is sincerely speaking to that alive and conscious universe. In contrast to what our egoic minds would have us believe, we are not separate from that universe. In fact, this is one of the primary, paradoxical miracles of existence--that we are each non-separate expressions of God, of the totality of the Universe, yet we at the same time have our own distinctiveness.

In the words of the great medieval Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, “Each of us emerges from Ein Sof (Infinite Divinity) and is included in it. We live through its dissemination. It is the perpetuation of existence. The fact that we sustain ourselves on vegetation and animal life does not mean that we are nourished on something outside of It...Though life branches out further and further, everything is joined to Ein Sof, included and abiding in It. (*Shiur Komah,* cited in Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, p. 27)

Prayer is playing with that sense of separateness to address the Totality as “You,” the “Eternal Thou.” And because that universe is alive with tremendous flow-throughs of energy and information, prayer is also listening deeply and attentively for a response. I experience it as a kind of dance--at times active, at times receptive, a mix of my own spontaneous words with the fixed words of the siddur.

There are many ways we might be able to feel a sense of communion with that aliveness. This fall, I will we be teaching a short class session on two of my favorite ways. The class is called Life of All the Worlds: Aliveness, Being and Jewish Spirituality.” We will use the practices of Jewish meditation and the simple, mindful movement of qigong to tap into the feeling of everpresent aliveness and Being as a powerful tool for deepening our Jewish spiritual practice. We’ll also consider relevant texts on this topic from Kabbalah.

Our theology has not caught up with the scientific reality, partly because we are a conservative tradition. When we open a chumash or a siddur, we confront Jewish theology from hundreds, if not thousands of years ago. While the Bible is a mosaic of different theologies, it’s fair to say our biblical ancestors generally believed in a tribal God, one who had superhuman qualities, dwelt above in Heaven and acted as an all-powerful male authority figure. The early rabbis saw God as a more compassionate figure, but still largely separate from this world.

So much of the science/religion tension is due to the necessary clash between these traditional God ideas and contemporary science. When we bring the scientific approach of something like the living universe view into dialogue with theologies that see God as a Presence of Aliveness that courses through existence, much of the science/religion tension relaxes.

To be clear, I do not believe in the idea of God as a separate being from us, and I don’t think that view of God as a separate, all-powerful being can be made congruent with the scientific living universe view I am articulating, though it may remain helpful to some as metaphor. I have found the most helpful and evocative Jewish conceptions of God through the Jewish mystical tradition, such as the teaching from the Chernobler rebbe I began with or the Cordovero quote I mentioned a moment ago.

A final important point about tapping into the Presence of Aliveness that courses through existence is that it’s a direct experience. It’s not an idea or a belief or a good theological concept. It’s a direct, palpable experience, rather than a “belief.” Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi used to say that theology is the afterthought of experience. Too often, we are attracted to an idea first, but this way we can start with something direct and non-conceptual.

If your sense of God and spirituality already includes communion and connection with a sense of Aliveness permeating and flowing through Creation, then great! Now you have a little more scientific language to give to your subjective experience. If your sense of God and spirituality doesn’t include communion with this fundamental Aliveness, maybe now you can set your skeptical mind aside a little, and experiment with tapping into the Alive Flow.

We are all swimming in the same vast ocean of subtle aliveness, an aliveness that is living and breathing through us. It is an extraordinary thing to step back and contemplate, even more extraordinary to consciously participate in it.

May the sense of our participation in the Divine LIving Universe deepen our sense of awe and wonder on these Yamim Noraim/Days of Awe.