

According to ancient tradition, this holy day we are entering marks not only the start of a new year, but the actual anniversary of the world's creation. Exactly 5780 years ago, by the careful calculation of the great sages, God said:

"Let there be light; and there was light." No sun, moon, or stars yet in that first light; no earth, no sunrise or sunset — those were to come later. Just light, suffusing the universe, as it is written in Psalm 97:

"Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart."

Now, Jews have always engaged in this kind of calculating in a playful rather than a literal way; we have no need to worry

tonight about Biblical fundamentalism or the actual age of dinosaur fossils. But “playful” does not mean “frivolous.” Jews have consistently engaged in *serious* play with the words of Torah, with the goal of uncovering truths that could not be reached otherwise. So those Sages who have played with the Biblical world, those who have toyed with the exact timing of the creation of the universe, among the questions they have asked have been these: *How much* light did God create in that first act of creation? Where did it go? Where is it now? In other words, pretty much the same questions that modern, scientifically-minded people are still asking today.

Maybe that is why I stopped to read an article in the New York *Times* on December 3, 2018 with the title: "All the Light There is to see? 4×10^{84} Photons." A group of cosmologists from Clemson

University were able — never mind how — to make that estimate of all of the visible light that has ever been emitted by all the stars that have ever been: that is 4 trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion photons. That is a lot of light, to be sure.

However, the article went on to explain, if all of those photons were distributed evenly throughout the known universe, which is estimated to have a radius of 14 billion light years, all of that light would provide about as much illumination as a 60-watt light bulb seen from a distance of two-and-a-half miles. Or, in other words, not very much light at all.

Now all ye scientists out there, reach not for your calculators.

Criticize not the methodology of this study. Make not your own back-of-the-envelope estimates. This is poetry we are working with here; we are seeking moral truth, not reproducible results.

There is a great deal of light in the universe — 4×10^{84} photons.

There is not very much light in the universe — a 60-watt light bulb's worth. Which one of these assertions is true is a matter of great moral urgency. For we know that light is sown for the righteous — but is it only the light that was originally sown in that first instant of creation? Just the output of a 60-watt bulb? Or is it the project of righteous human beings to create light just as God created light, until the universe glows with the brightness of 4×10^{1000} photons?

Some of you may know that the traditional answer to this question is the former — that all the light there is was created in that first instant of Creation, 5780 years ago. In this view, our project as human beings is simply to collect and concentrate this light from where it has been scattered. This is at the heart of the

doctrine we know of as *tikkun olam*, repair of the world. This doctrine was formulated by the rabbis of the Land of Israel in the early 16th century, in the wake of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and from all of western Europe. The idea was to give positive meaning to our dispersal to the four corners of the world. Wherever Jews found themselves, in Gainesville, Florida or the most distant reaches of Siberia, we could participate in the repair of the world by fulfilling God's *mitzvot*, which served to gather and concentrate bits of that primordial light.

This is a truly lovely idea, and it served Jews and Judaism well for a very long time. But I fear it is not enough anymore, not enough to ward off despair, not enough to energize our communities, not enough to endow our everyday struggles with meaning. 4×10^{84} photons is just not enough to illumine the refugee camps in

southern Europe or the detention centers in Texas. 4×10^{84} photons is just not enough to provide hope for the Ebola victims in the Republic of Congo, or those sickened by radiation at Fukushima. 4×10^{84} photons is just not enough to liberate the Rohingya in Myanmar or to save the South Sudanese from civil war. In this universe, the scale of which we can still barely comprehend, 4×10^{84} photons is not even enough to properly educate the students we try to help at the Pineridge Afterschool program; not even enough to shelter the homeless and feed the hungry of Alachua County. 4×10^{84} photons is just not enough to illumine the inner recesses of our hearts.

The universe is just too big and the human capacity to swallow and extinguish light is just too great for us to be satisfied with 4×10^{84} photons. We need to light some fires of our own.

Now, you all know me pretty well by now. I am a cautious person, conflict-averse; some might even say timid. This is a frightening conclusion for me to reach, to tell my congregation that we need to go out and light fires. But let me qualify my advice a bit — lighting some fires is not necessarily the equivalent of burning down the house, even if I might admire the courage of those who choose to do just that. Lighting some fires as I intend to do it this year is probably more akin to Chanukah, when we increase holiness night by night by lighting additional candles — those little flames are fires, too, after all. Or perhaps my meaning is better explained by an analogy with Passover, if we imagine an inverse version of the song “Dayenu” — it would have been enough. In the classic song, we assert that if God had merely done “X” for us, instead of going even further to do “Y” for us — dayenu, it would have been enough. But let’s turn that on its

head. If it would have been enough in previous years to support efforts to repair the world by proxy, say, by supporting a synagogue with a strong social action program — well that is just not enough anymore, in this dark world in a dark universe. We need to light a fire by becoming personally involved, not by proxy but with our own hands and feet. And if it used to be enough for us to write letters to our elected officials, it is just not enough anymore. We need to light some fires by insisting on personal meetings, even joining with like-minded others to journey to Tallahassee or Washington, DC and demanding to be heard. And if it used to be enough for us to give money to a distant national organization, it is just not enough anymore. We need to light some fires by giving more money, by giving locally, and by going out to work personally on behalf of the people we are trying to help. And if it used to be enough for us to vote own

conscience in the privacy of the voting booth, it is just not enough anymore. We need to light some fires by being boldly partisan, by calling and canvassing and cajoling others to join us, and by registering them to vote and driving them to the polls on Election Day. And if it used to be enough to gather by the hundreds to protest at our city and county courthouses, well that is just not enough anymore. We need to light some fire by gathering by the hundreds of thousands at our statehouses and by the millions in Washington. And if we are already doing all these things, then maybe we need to light a fire in that park across the street from the White House, where a raging fire of indignation and resistance might do our country an awful lot of good.

An irreducible component of *tikkun olam* is also the spiritual component of our lives, especially when we are driven into darkness by the darkness of the world around us. If it used to be enough for us to observe Shabbat occasionally with our minds bent mostly toward the Oneg Shabbat after the service, well that is just not enough anymore. We need to light some fire by engaging more actively with the prayers that have issued from noble hearts for 3,000 years. And if it used to be enough to observe Shabbat occasionally with intense concentration on the prayers but without making the effort of fellowship, we need to light some fire over cakes and cookies by engaging more actively with our community.

The universe in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the 5781st year since Creation is a pretty dark place, even as it glows

with the light of 4×10^{84} photons. So it is not enough anymore to simply gather and concentrate those photons, as we have been doing for years, for millennia — the darkness is just too thick for that. We need to light some fires, little ones and big ones. We need to take matters into our own hands, illumine our own dark world with the light of our own righteous acts:

“Light is sown not *for* the righteous but by the righteous; and gladness not *for* the upright in heart but by the upright in heart.”

Amen.