

# SHOULD I DO THINGS THAT SCARE ME?

## PREP FOR THE SESSION

### *Overview*

By exploring the value of awe, especially how awe might inspire fear yet also feelings of joy and love, learners will have an opportunity to identify how to increase the awe they feel in their lives.

### *At-a-Glance:*

The word “awesome” is used to describe everything from shoes to new technology. But do we ever use it to describe something that evokes actual awe? And what is awe anyway? This resource explores awe through an interactive scavenger hunt following a text study by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel about the connection between awe and fear. In a world that can feel monotonous and routine, exploring awe can provide us with an opportunity to think and feel beyond ourselves.



#### **Time Estimate:**

- 60 minutes



#### **Best Uses:**

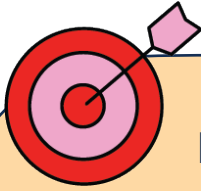
- A quiet space to meet and talk, as well as access to nature and a public space for the scavenger hunt - like a school, cafeteria, quad, or hotel lobby - where learners can interview and interact with people outside of the group. You may want to pre-arrange a group of volunteers to be interviewed.



#### **Materials Needed:**

- Pencils or tech device for scavenger hunt notes
- [Scavenger Hunt page](#)
- [Text Study Page](#)

## LET'S GET STARTED



### FRAME THE ISSUE

We have all heard the word, “awesome” used in casual conversation. Maybe you use it all the time or you are sick of hearing other people use it. Whatever your thoughts on the word, have you ever stopped to think about what it actually means?

#### **Facilitator prompts group:**

- What words are synonymous with awesome? What things or experiences do you describe as awesome?

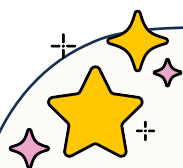
Awesome contains the root, awe. But when do we ever use it to describe actual awe? Dr. Dacher Keltner is a scientist at University of California Berkeley and a pioneer of the study of awe. He has identified that seeking awe in your everyday life is an antidote to unhappiness. Keltner defines awe as, “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world.” (from *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*)

- What stands out to you in this definition?
- When have you experienced awe as Keltner describes it?

10 min



40 min



## EXPLORE THE VALUE: WONDER AND AWE

### JEWISH WISDOM

In Hebrew the word for Awe, *yirah* יִרָא, also means fear. In Hebrew when two words have a shared meaning or a root, it is often worth paying attention!

- What does knowing that *yirah* means fear and awe add to your understanding? What, if anything, does fear have to do with awe?

Abraham Joshua Heschel is one of the major modern thought leader rabbis about awe. He wanted people to live with radical amazement, seeing every moment as the awe-inspiring gift it is. We are going to look at quote from his book, *God in Search of Man*.

**Facilitator prompts group to study the following text in groups of 3 for about 8 minutes:**

*"Fear is the anticipation and expectation of evil or pain, as contrasted with hope which is the anticipation of good. Awe, on the other hand, is the sense of wonder and humility inspired by the sublime or felt in the presence of mystery...Awe, unlike fear, does not make us shrink from the awe-inspiring object, but on the contrary, draws us near to it. This is why awe is compatible with both love and joy. In a sense, awe is the antithesis of fear."* – Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, page 77

- What is Heschel saying about the differences between awe and fear? What is your reaction to this distinction?
- When have you been drawn towards something that caused you fear? When have you shrunk from or avoided something that caused you fear? What was the result?
- When, if ever, have you avoided something that caused you fear only to regret it later?

There is such an awesome buzz of conversation in this room. Will you choose one person to share a highlight from your conversation?



## ACTIVITY

In the research on awe, Dr. Keltner says to pay attention to moments of Whoas, Chills and Tears as some biological signs that one is experiencing awe.

He lays out 8 categories of finding awe which we are going to explore together over the next 30 minutes through a scavenger hunt! You will be working with your small group to explore as many Dr. Keltner's categories of awe as you have time for. Let your feelings guide you as to when it is time to move onto the next. Quality is more important than quantity in this experience.

**Note to facilitator:** Before you start the activity, decide on a time and place the groups should reconvene.

1. **MORAL BEAUTY:** How the kindness, courage, and resilience of others inspires awe
  - Interview someone about a time they were the recipient of kindness, a time they had to act with courage, and/or a time they had to overcome something really difficult.
  - As you listen, consider what stands out to you and what inspires you?
2. **COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE:** How moving in Unison Stirs the Awe of Ritual, Sport, Dance, Religion, and Public Life
  - Organize a group of at least 3 people to do something together in unison (e.g. dancing, singing, reciting a poem, skipping or something else.) Try to find people for whom this is outside of their comfort zone. Assign someone to take a video of this happening.
  - Afterwards, interview everyone involved about what it felt to do that? What was fun or inspiring about it? What was scary about it?
3. **WILD AWE:** How nature becomes spiritual and heals body and mind
  - Take a picture of your group in the most natural awe inspiring place you see. Try and venture a little further than your comfort zone while staying safe (e.g. find a very high vista, stand at the edge of a waterfall, go slightly off the beaten path). Stand utterly still there for 1 minute and take in the scenery.



4. **MUSICAL AWE:** How musical awe embraces us in community

Either

- Record yourselves collectively singing a song that inspires awe for your group.
- Record a person in your group playing an instrument.
- Find a video of music that inspires awe for your group and listen to it together.

5. **SACRED GEOMETRIES:** How our awe for visual design helps us understand the wonders and horrors of life

- Take a picture of art or geometric patterns that wow you.
- Share a piece of art that inspires you.
- Find something in the natural world that has a repeating pattern - like a plant, an insect, a seashell. How does it make you feel to closely observe that pattern?

6. **THE FUNDAMENTAL "IT":** How spiritual life grows out of awe

- Find a person who will share a story of how their spirituality grew after they had an experience of awe.

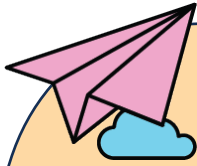
7. **LIFE AND DEATH:** How connecting to our mortality makes us feel alive

- Find a person to share a story of a life or death moment in which they felt awe.
- As you listen, consider how it feels to hear this story.

8. **EPIPHANY:** We are part of systems larger than ourselves

- Find a person to share how they believe they are part of a larger than self system and what awe moment helped them come to that belief.

10 min



## REFLECT AND PROMPT ACTION

Welcome back! I would love to hear at least one highlight from each group about what they experienced.

### ***Facilitator prompts group:***

- Which of these types of awe made you afraid? What made you feel inspired or joyful?
- What experiences drew you in? Which pushed you away?
- What gets in the way of experiencing awe for you? Based on what you just explored, what type or types of awe do you want to open yourself up to more?
- Why do you think awe is described as an antidote to unhappiness or fear?

Wow. I am inspired. Thank you. May we all have a week ahead that is filled with a little more awe, inspiration, joy, and connection.