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## JEWISH COMMENTARY

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# Alone in the Cosmos

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

*Who knows what kind of loneliness is more agonizing: the one which befalls man when he casts his glance at the mute cosmos, at its dark spaces and monotonous drama, or the one that besets man exchanging glances with his fellow man in silence? Who knows whether the first astronaut who will land on the moon, confronted with a strange, weird, and grisly panorama, will feel a greater loneliness than Mr. X, moving along jubilantly with the crowd and exchanging greetings on New Year's Eve at a public square?*

—Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, 1965

**T**HIS IS A MOMENT OF astronomical milestones. In December, we commemorated the 50th anniversary of Apollo 8, when three American astronauts took the first picture of “earthrise” while reading aloud from the story of creation in Genesis. This was a triumphant moment for America, a theological rejoinder to the Khrushchev chortle in 1961 that “Gagarin flew into space but didn’t see any god there.” In 2019, we will mark half a century since Neil Armstrong took “one small step for man.” And as we prepare to commemorate the first man on the moon, we would do well to ponder the last (as yet).

In 1972, Gene Cernan prepared to leave the lunar surface and clamber back aboard Apollo 17. No further moon landing was planned. Suddenly, before boarding, Cernan paused, bent over, and etched the letters

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MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

“TDC” in the moon dust at his feet. These are the initials of his daughter, Tracy Dawn Cernan. Because there is no weather on the moon, Tracy’s initials will be on the lunar surface for millions of years, or, as Cernan put it, the letters will be there “forever, however long forever is.”

It is a striking story. An astronaut, engaged in a human triumph achieved by few others in his time, and by no one else in the entire course of human history, pauses at the last moment not to celebrate himself, but to emphasize his eternal connectedness to another. Interestingly, Cernan himself was later at a loss to explain what had impelled him to engage in this singular paternal gesture. “I had no plans to do that,” he reflected in an interview. “It just seemed like the thing to do at the time....I just did it, and I can’t tell you why.”

Cernan’s loving gesture in his last moment on the moon reflects something profound about human nature. In the years that American astronauts sought supremacy over the Soviet Union, Rabbi Joseph

Soloveitchik (my great-uncle) wrote and published some of the century's most significant essays in Jewish thought. "The Lonely Man of Faith" was composed soon after Sputnik; his "Majesty of Humility" was finished soon after Cernan returned to Earth. It is clear that the space race was very much on his mind, and his insights are even more striking half a century later.

Utilizing verses in Genesis, Soloveitchik describes two competing drives within human beings, a divinely willed dialectic at the core of our nature. One aspect of ourselves seeks a "dignified existence"—the conquest of nature, technological mastery, and exploration of the unknown. The 20th-century quest to "slip the surly bonds of earth" was not, for Soloveitchik, a Promethean intrusion into the heavens; on the contrary, the conquest of space is the greatest manifestation of man being made in the Almighty's image: "Man reaching for the distant stars is acting in harmony with his nature which was created, willed, and directed by his Maker."

Yet for all the biblical grandeur made manifest in the astronaut's achievement, that reflects only half of our selves. A life of technological achievement, and of awe-inspiring exploration, does not create a life of meaning: "An atheist cosmonaut circling the earth, advising his superiors who placed him in orbit that he did not encounter any angels, might lay claim to dignity because he courageously mastered space; he is, however, very far from experiencing a redeemed existence."

Soloveitchik foresaw a danger facing the West. America's celebration of its technological achievements during the space race might ultimately efface the other equally important aspect of human nature, a desire for communion with others: "There, not only hands are joined, but experiences as well; there, one hears not only the rhythmic sound of the production line, but also the rhythmic beat of hearts starved for existential companionship and all-embracing sympathy." A fierce anti-Communist, Soloveitchik no doubt rejoiced in the planting of the American flag on the moon; at the same time, he worried that the West's focus on its technological achievements alone could lead


to the amputation of the other aspect of its identity.

Indeed, we face today, as many have noted, an epidemic of loneliness. We live in an age of stunning technological transformation that has seemingly increased connectedness but helped decrease community. We can cross the entire earth in less than a day; our correspondence can cross the earth in an instant; and yet we have not found the fellowship that we need. "The same technology that has liberated us from so much inconvenience and drudgery,"

Ben Sasse recently reflected, "has also unmoored us from the things that anchor our identities. The revolution that has given tens of millions of Americans the opportunity to live like historic royalty has also outpaced our ability to figure out what community, friendships, and relationships should look like in the modern world." Gene Cernan remembering his daughter while looking at Earth from the moon is more than a familial gesture; it is a reminder that even the most extraordinary cosmic achievement cannot compensate for the other side of ourselves, which demands fellowship with others beyond ourselves.

It is hard to fathom that so many years have gone by in which we have not returned to the moon. "Look up from your BlackBerry one night," Charles Krauthammer wrote 10 years ago, on the 40th anniversary of Armstrong's landing. "That is the moon.

On it are exactly 12 sets of human footprints—untouched, unchanged, abandoned. For the first time in history, the moon is not just a mystery and a muse, but a nightly rebuke." Technology has progressed in leaps and bounds since Krauthammer wrote those words in 2009, and yet no 13th set of footprints has joined the first 12. We seem to have lost our will to explore.

But that is not all that much of the Western world has lost. As we mark the 50th anniversary of the greatest technological achievement in human history, we would do well to remember that footprints are not the only remnant of man's visit to the moon, and that the three letters lovingly and eternally etched into the lunar surface may tell us more about our humanity than any other event during those halcyon years when we sought to explore the heavens. 

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