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Ice on Mars: Good for the Jews?

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I have always been only slightly embarrassed by my avidity for reports of UFOs, ETs, new planetary systems, semantic transmissions across the galaxies and every other kind of disruptive wow.

My embarrassment stems not from a reflexive belief in reports of bright lights flying low and fast over Stephenville, Texas or Chilliwack, British Columbia; I am as skeptical of tabloid headlines, and as cautious about the madness of crowds, as any other child of Voltaire or Mad Magazine.

No, what makes me sheepish about this stuff isn't my intellectual credulousness; it's my yearning for some indisputable event that will bust up our paradigms, some unruly discovery that will force us to remake from scratch our stories about who we are, where we come from and where we're headed.

Now that the Phoenix Lander has confirmed the existence of ice on Mars, it's likely to be only days before we learn whether the red planet's soil and water contain the chemicals necessary for creating the kind of life we have on Earth. I'm rooting for carbon. Hell, I'm rooting for amino acids. I want it to be conceivable that Mars is a mere billion years behind Earth on the path to evolution, or maybe, sadly, a couple of billion years ahead of us on the road to extinction. And if not carbon, if they don't find organic molecules, I'm rooting for some strange silicon-based information-rich strings in that Martian soup.

I want what's found in that ice to make us say, Whoa! I want us to experience the kind of radical amazement that will require sending conventional cosmology to the repair shop. I want data that upend our accepted accounts of origins and evolution. I want scientific cover for the most boldly creative re-imaginings of the nature of life and of our own place in the

great chain of being. I want to see the concepts of meaning and purpose up for grabs. I want new discoveries about stardust to make both ancient texts and current textbooks wholly inadequate for understanding the mysterium tremendum of the physical universe.

I want the discovery of extraterrestrial life — or “life” — to change everything. I don’t mean an eruption of “War of the Worlds”-style paranoia or of “Close Encounters”-style romanticism. I’m thinking instead of that 4-million-year-old black monolith that astronauts find deliberately buried on the moon in the 1968 movie “2001: A Space Odyssey,” an object identical to one in the movie’s opening “Dawn of Man” sequence. Forget the middle part of the movie, the voyage to Jupiter to examine a third monolith circling that planet, a trip sabotaged by the mutinous supercomputer HAL; think instead about how the movie ends.

There is an amazing light show, followed by actor Keir Dullea’s accelerated aging in a weird Louis XVI-furnished room, followed abruptly by Dullea’s transformation into the Star Child, a fetus in a glowing orb looking down from space on the Earth. If you’re of boomerish vintage, you know that plenty of stoned debates about the meaning of the movie’s strange conclusion followed its initial release (I know, I know: you didn’t inhale). The interpretation that worked best for me was that, basically, we humans don’t know nothing.

Is evolution the merely pointless, meaningless consequence of having world enough and time, or is our current state of consciousness just too embryonic to grasp the telos of the universe? If cosmologists are right about the Big Bang, what’s the difference between the essential preposterousness of that account of ontology, and the tsimtsum of the kabbalah? If a starry night or a baby’s finger can make you marvel at the sheer existence of anything at all, why should God be a less plausible account of materiality than quantum physics’ favorite theory: superstrings vibrating in 11 ineffable dimensions of space-time? If scientists believe, as they do, that invisible dark matter and unobservable dark energy make up the vast majority of the universe, then why should mystical accounts of an unseeable cosmos be any more inconceivable?

Jews, of course, don’t need monoliths, or Martian ice water, to set them off in these speculative directions. Jacob was renamed Israel because he wrestled with God, and his descendants still spend their days wrestling with the idea of God, no matter what the news might be from the Large Hadron Collider, the SETI Arecibo Observatory or the Phoenix Lander on Mars.

Nor do I underestimate the capacity of midrashic reasoning to assimilate even the most alien of singularities that scientists may turn up. Should microscopes examining a soil sample from the third planet’s northern arctic plane next week reveal a Martian version of Horton’s

Whoville, there will no doubt be talmudic exegetes aplenty who will calmly conform such a disorderly discovery to the literal narrative of Genesis.

But for those who despair about the postmodern dead end that the history of consciousness has led to (and I include myself among them); for those too undisciplined to reliably integrate yoga, meditation, beginner's mind or other spiritual technologies into their daily lives (yes, my hand is up); for those who can sleepwalk past a rose, forget to say the Modeh Ani or succumb to anti-mindful pathologies like boredom or killing time (guilty, guilty and guilty) — for us garden-variety broken vessels, a thrilling we-interrupt-this-program bulletin from the scientific magisterium is arguably not too childish to ache for.

Marty Kaplan is the Norman Lear Professor of Entertainment, Media and Society at the USC Annenberg School for Communication.