

# WONDER & RADICAL AMAZEMENT

By Eden Pearlstein & Rabbi Avi Katz Orlow

## PSHAT

*What a Wonderful World* - The song was written and recorded in 1967. This was a time of chaos and upheaval in America. There were race riots across the country, as well as mass protests against the Vietnam War. Because of this, some people felt the song was not reflective of reality, to which Armstrong responded: "Some of you young folks been saying to me: 'Hey, Pops - what do you mean, what a wonderful world? How about all them wars all over the place, you call them wonderful?' But how about listening to old Pops for a minute? Seems to me it ain't the world that's so bad

but what we're doing to it, and all I'm saying is: see what a wonderful world it would be if only we'd give it a chance." *I see trees of green* - Taking a moment to notice the simple details of life and nature can lead to a deeper appreciation for all creation; even those everyday things we usually take for granted can open us up to an expansive sense of wonder. According to Louis Armstrong: "There's so much in 'Wonderful World' that brings me back to my neighborhood where I live in Corona, New York. I saw three generations come up on that block...So when they hand me this 'Wonderful World,' I didn't look no further, that was it." *Bright blessed days* - A deeper appreciation of nature's beauty can lead to a wondrous sense of the Divine or the Beyond. *On the faces of people passing by* - The colors and beauty of nature are reflected in humanity. From this point on, the lyrics shift from a focus on earth and sky, to

appreciating the wonder of love between people. *They'll learn much more* - There is always hope that the next generation will be able to solve problems that we couldn't. Additionally, thinking about what kinds of amazing things will be invented in the future, and what kinds of ways humans will be expressing their ingenuity is truly mind-boggling.

The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder." *I see skies of blue* - The cognitive leap from appreciating the beauty of the blue sky of nature to contemplating the presence of the holy, blessed, or sacred within nature is often accomplished through a cultivated sense of wonder or radical amazement. This perspectival process is echoed in a poetic teaching from the Talmud about the blue thread of tzitzit that hangs from the corners of a tallit which is similar to the sea, which is similar to the sky, which is similar to the sapphire Throne of Glory. (Menahot 43b). *The colors of a rainbow* - The rainbow is God's sign to Noah that God would not destroy the world again. *They're really saying* - Most times we only see what is on the surface. A sense of wonder allows us to see what is not shown, to hear what is not said. *I hear babies cry* - On the surface, this is a touching image of the vulnerability of new life, but it may also refer to the protestations of the youth during the tumultuous time in which the song was written. From Louis Armstrong's perspective, as an elder during the 60s, the complaints and critiques of the youth may have sounded like the pleading cries of an innocent child. The lyrics to this song, which at first appear as naive, may then be recontextualized as a mature and active outlook on the multi-faceted nature of reality, which is both conflicted and in need of repair, as well as cohesive and worthy of our wonder and awe. *Than I'll ever know* - This humbling last line acknowledges the limits of one's own understanding and denotes radical amazement. According to Rabbi Heschel: "Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man <sic> does with his higher incomprehension."

## DRASH

*What a Wonderful World* - is a deceptively simple, and even naive sounding song that invites us to sensitize or refine our perception of the world. By walking us through a poetically associative thought process, the song gently urges us to consciously notice the goodness in the world and to appreciate it by cultivating a sense of wonder and awe. The simple but profound lyrics to this song challenge the idea that the world is only full of negativity and hate. In this way, the song poses a question to each of us: Where is your sense of wonder? What are ways we might regain our sense of

wonder? *I see trees of green* - Every verse begins with seeing or hearing some detail out in the world; that initial sensory stimulus then results in a deeper appreciation for the wonder of the whole. First, the poetic 'I' looks out at the earth, then up to the heavens, and finally listens deep within the human heart, even contemplating the great unknown of the future. *What a wonderful world* - This alliterated refrain is the core essence of the song. It is the inner "aha!" moment to which the lyricist continually returns. This sensibility is expressed powerfully by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, particularly his concept of radical amazement: "Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act of man. While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see

and are amazed at their ability to see." Rabbi Heschel saw this ability to be in awe of life as "the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature," and lamented the fact that it was, according to him, turning into a lost art of perception: "As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation.

## WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD

By Bob Thiele, George Weiss, Louis Armstrong

I see trees of green, red roses too  
I see them bloom, for me and you  
And I think to myself  
What a wonderful world  
I see skies of blue, clouds of white  
Bright blessed days, dark sacred nights  
And I think to myself  
What a wonderful world  
The colors of a rainbow  
So pretty in the sky  
Are also on the faces  
Of people passing by  
I see friends shaking hands,  
saying "How do you do?"  
They're really saying, "I love you"  
I hear babies cry, I watch them grow  
They'll learn much more  
Than I'll ever know  
And I think to myself  
What a wonderful world  
Yes, I think to myself  
What a wonderful world  
Oh, Yeah