Shana tova

We made it. We’re here.

If you’re like me, you’ve been anticipating this holiday for a while, making sure you have everything ready-- perhaps new clothes, maybe a haircut, taking days off of work, if you have young children you may have had to organize their schedules for this patchwork of holidays. No matter what you did to prepare—with our without a round challah earlier this evening-- to get here this evening took effort.

And perhaps you had to negotiate with family members or friends to get here. We’ve arrived.

Around the world Jews are gathering on this new moon to celebrate. Not that we are late to the party, but here on the West Coast, we are near the end of the ripple of candle lighting and davening to welcome the holiday across the planet.

So here we are. Erev Rosh Hashanah. Head of the year. What does that mean?

Did you know that RH is not named in the Torah? I found references to the Prophet Ezekiel, who lived during the Babylonian exile, who called the 1st of Tishrei a day of judgement. But the name “Rosh Hashana” doesn’t appear in text until the mishneh of the 2nd century!

So tell me, what are other names for this holiday?

Yom haDin (judgement day; all our deeds are weighed in the Holy scales; our year is meted out accordingly)

Yom Truah (Bamidbar, 29:1, The original biblical name for this day… when 100 blasts of the shofar awaken us to do teshuvah; “Teruah” is a broken sound, designed to turn us to repentence)

HaYom Harat HaOlam – on this day the world is conceived.

The day humanity was created.

Yom HaZikaron, a day of remembering. We pray for God to remember our good deeds and remember us for life; and our prayers remind us to return, to remember God and our commitments.

Think about this: if you lived about two millennia ago and you were trying to codify what Torah readings should take place on this day, on Rosh Hashanah, the head of the year, what texts might you choose to standardize for all the people of this to hear out loud and to contemplate?

You might be thinking “Bereshit.” That’s a good one. Or maybe the day after Noah’s flood. That would be a good one too.

But tell me, do you know what the Torah reading is standard for tomorrow morning?
Hagar and Sarah. Yes, Hagar and Sarah. What happens in the story?

Yes-- Sarah a barren woman, finally at age 90 conceives and births a son. Soon we learn that she sees the son handmaid, Hagar, (who is about 13 years older than Isaac) “mitzaheck ito,” doing something with him that causes Sarah great rage. She tells Abraham to “cast out that slave woman and her son!” (who is Abraham’s firstborn son, Ishmael.) Abraham is distressed about this, but God confirms that he should do as Sarah says.
Does anyone want to say anything yet? [pause]

What is the haftarah we will read tomorrow morning?
It comes from the book of Samuel, Channa pleading for a child. Whe is pouring out her heart’s prayers, vowing that if she is granted a son, she will give him up to the priesthood.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we have another great family text. Anyone?

The Akeda. The binding of Isaac. This is not necessarily modeling good parenting. After this scene, Abraham and Isaac never talk to each other again. (In the Torah that is.)

Any fathers wrestling with any sons tonight? Any sons wrestling with their fathers?

Our haftarah on the second day comes from Jeremiah, who imagines Rachel crying up in heaven for her children, refusing to be comforted.

These are the holy texts. Not the stories of creation, but of relationship. Messy. Imperfect relationships. Jealousy. Exile. Near death. Are there any therapists in the house?

What do these text come to teach us? We are entering a new year. These people, this ancient family of ours, they were far from having it all together. They were far from what we might call perfect role models. These texts show us relationships of struggle. They are disagreement. You are welcome to draw your own conclusions. You know the stories. And if you don’t, you know the story of your own family. So tonight begins a season of t’Shuvah. Return. It’s a time for healing relationships.

And perhaps this holiday is inviting us to welcome difficulty in our relationships. In our relationships with our partner, in our relationships with our family members, in our prayers and struggles even with God. It’s as if we are being told that these struggles are holy. Maybe holiness isn’t clean; perhaps it’s being in the struggle. Embracing it. Recording it. Telling our uncomfortable stories, the stories of our wrestlings.

Hilchot Teshuva(7:4), of the Mishneh Torah, Rambam teaches “The level of Baalei Teshuvah transcends the level of those who never sinned at all, for they overcome their [evil] inclination more.”

[Yoma 86a:16](https://www.sefaria.org/Yoma%2086a%3A16) R. Levi said: Great is Teshuva in that it reaches to the Throne of Glory, as it says: "Return oh Israel to Hashem your God.

[I have come to the conclusion that if we didn’t have struggles, there would be no teshuvah, no need for return.]

We say to each other “Shana Tovah.” What does this mean? [pause]
What is Tovah?
Good? Well, let’s unpack it. Where does this word show up? First, in the story of creation. This is a word that gets repeated and repeated in the creation of the heavens and earth and everything in it. Light and dark are separated (v’yehi tov), it was evening and it was morning and it was one day. It was “Tov”
Water above and water below are separated and it was “tov.” Was it good? I’m going to suggest that separating light and dark was not a value proposition; it wasn’t good or bad it was it was everything it was light and it was darkness it was all there was-- water above and water below. It wasn’t good or bad. It was full; it was complete.

It was separate and it was distinct. And the third day with land which would give rise to new life forms, there was some kind of completion. Sun, moon and stars, fish, birds, animal- tov. All kinds of beasts. And people. Tov me’od. It was complete. It was…full… tov.

[pause]
We do not wish each other a happy year. In Hebrew we say “Lshana tova”. Not happy. Not even, I’d suggest, “good.” Most humans know that life is full. Some days are good, and some days some days are really hard. Some days we get up on the wrong side of the bed. Or we mistreat someone we really love. Some days we feel wronged, some days we hold grudges.

Sometimes we are generous and calm, and sometimes we act unkindly, or even blow up at other people.

Showing up here tonight means something. We strive towards the balance of good, we strive towards having the ability to discern between light and darkness, between what is solid ground and what may cause us to lose balance, to harm other humans or ourselves.

As we enter 5779, I wish for each of us the ability to embrace the tov, the fullness of life-- to know that our struggles, like the struggles of our tradition, are Holy. May we face them and ourselves, embrace them, make the world a better place for the struggles.

On this Yom Terua, may the blast of the shofar break us open, help us to embrace our own—and each others’ brokenness. And in so doing, make us tov, make us complete.

L’shana tova.

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