

Even Now: Creativity, Possibility and the Renewal of the World
Congregation Netivot Shalom, Rosh Hashanah Day 1
Rabbi Adina Allen -- October 3, 2024 // 1 Tishre, 5785

“Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the creation of the world,” wrote the Eish Kodesh, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto. Writing at a time of unimaginable suffering, even against the backdrop of impossible circumstances, he knew this moment, the day in which we inhabit right now, to be one of creativity, possibility and renewal.

This theme of creativity and Rosh Hashanah is perhaps expressed nowhere more poignantly than in the phrase *Hayom Harat Olam*. One of the many names by which Rosh Hashanah is known, these words come from one of the holiday’s most ancient piyyutim, recited in the sacred center of our service, the haunting, evocative Musaf Amidah. To conclude each of the three special sections for Rosh Hashanah: *Malchuyot* (Sovereignty), *Zichronot* (Remembrances), and *Shofarot* (marking the appearances and meanings of shofar across Torah), the shofar is sounded in the proscribed pattern -- wholeness, breakage, shattering, wholeness, followed by *Hayom Harat Olam*.

Though in our liturgical practice we commonly rush ahead, today I want to invite us to linger here. These three simple words contain many possible translations, each opening up a different aspect of creativity in this new year. I am grateful to Rabbi Gordon Tucker for his rich exploration of this phrase¹ and will be drawing on and building from his scholarship as today we ask: in this moment in which so much feels stuck, hardened, harsh, filled with horror, heartbreak and grief, what kind of portal to creativity and possibility might these words open for us and within us?

Judgment Day

On the simplest read, the word *harat* is connected to pregnancy and birth. *Herayon* means pregnancy in modern Hebrew, and *horeh* is the word for a parent. Yet, despite the obvious connection to creating new life, there were those who sought to distance the phrase from any connection to pregnancy or birth. Too anthropomorphic, perhaps too feminine, too bodily, too connected to pagan practices. Instead, our sages sought to supplant this reading with something they deemed more appropriate to the majesty and seriousness of the day.

The 11th-12th century text *Sefer HaPardes*, often ascribed to Rashi, asks, “Why do we say ‘Today the World is Born’? when in fact, the word *harat* connotes not birth, but judgment.” As support, the author brings the Targum (the translation of Torah into Aramaic), proving its claim by pointing to the Targum’s use of the word *harata* for disputes and controversies. Therefore, the text concludes, when we say “*Hayom Harat Olam*” we are saying “Today is Judgment Day.” Today is the day, in other words, not when something new is created, but when all that has been created is judged. In this reading the shofar blasts that precede *Hayom Harat Olam* announce the great arbiter about to enter the room. Tekiah -- all rise for the Judge.

¹ Gordon Tucker, “Hayom Harat Olam: One Small Liturgical Text, One Giant Trove of Interpretation,” Shalom Hartman Institute, 2020.

It is fascinating to see a phrase so obviously connected to creativity immediately become about judgment. The relationship between creation, or creativity, and judgment is a tricky one. In our society, any creative pursuit - from dance to art to poetry to music - is almost always taught with judgment at the core: critique, feedback, comparison. Did we do it "right"? Is it "good"? Are we talented enough to keep going? The centrality of judgment in the creative process is so ingrained that most of us don't even need someone else there to offer critique, because that voice of judgment is so strong within us. For many of us, as soon as we begin to create something -- from a piece of art to a new idea -- we tend to collapse into telling ourselves that it's "bad," not worthy, meaningless or trite. With the creation of something new, judgment comes in and with it a sense of shame crouching at the door.

I hear in this interpretation the resonance of all the ways our sages -- and we -- so easily subvert a softer, perhaps more compassionate reading for one that is more severe. Noticing the way the sages move so quickly from *Hayom Harat Olam* as a day of creative renewal to a day of judgment, invites us to notice the ways this sort of tendency shows up in our own lives: in what ways have we fashioned a society in which we are more comfortable being judged, and judging one another, than we are with the process of creation?

Today is the anniversary of the creation of the world Eish Kodesh teaches. Perhaps, rather than the shofar announcing the entrance of the Great Judge, we might instead imagine these blasts as a cleansing sound, meant to clear our head of so much judgment and critique and open us to the ways creation flows through us; to the ways the world is so desperately in need of renewal.

Eternal Pregnancy - Birth never realized

The phrase *harat olam* itself is found in Jeremiah, in a section in which the beleaguered and depressed prophet fantasizes about escaping his assigned mission - escaping life itself. In a gut-wrenching monologue, he expresses the wish that his mother had remained eternally pregnant, *harat olam*, so that he would never have been born "so that my mother might be my grave, and her womb pregnant to all eternity." In a bold move, the paytan lifts this phrase from its context, radically changing the meaning. In the piyut, *harat* is translated as birth rather than pregnancy and *olam* as in its post-biblical meaning "world" rather than "eternity." This creative reframe completely flips the meaning of Jeremiah's words on their head.

Holding onto the origins of this phrase and the intensity of their original meaning in Jeremiah, we might hear the shofar sounds and then the silence that follows, mournful, echoing in the emptiness, no one rising to answer the call. The recitation of *Hayom Harat Olam* following these blasts not as a call to rebirth, but, instead, a plea for death.

Jeremiah's words give voice to our deepest despair. How can we, in good conscience, declare that the world "created anew" today as the climate crisis escalates and violence rages; as missiles launch, as animosity and political polarization grow and hatred seeps and seathes; as hostages are held and bombs fall and blood spills and villages are leveled and security is shattered and the stiff bodies of the shrouded dead pile up without end; as the trauma -

immediate and vicarious - is so much that our hearts simply shut down because we cannot hold that much grief?

And yet, amidst the backdrop of this text and the reality of our world, the creativity of the paytan invites our own. How do we turn a verse of remorse into one of renewal; a time of unending pain into one of possibility? Our tradition is one that is multivocal and multivalent, in which every sentence, phrase, word, even letter, can have multiple interpretations -- each of them real, each of them true. Rather than collapse into one or another reading, we are taught to hold all possible understandings side by side, and we are invited to add our own. There is Jeremiah's despair and the paytan's hope. There is hope gifted back across the generations to Jeremiah with the paytan's creativity, just as there is hope gifted forward from the Warsaw Ghetto to all of us here today.

Through this constructed conversation between text and liturgy, between two people navigating the impossibility of their times, the paytan and Jeremiah call us to the complex task of this moment: to acknowledge and honor our despair, but to not let it get stuck there, a hardened and ossified feeling that will take up all the space in our soul if we let it. When we bring our creativity to our grief and hopelessness, honoring and making space for all of what we feel, it becomes softer and more supple, able to shift and change. Throughout the generations, the Source of life has always been there, moving through the world, coursing through each one of us. When the world was first created we read in Genesis "a river flows from Eden to water the garden." That river is God, the Zohar teaches, the ever-present stream of transformation and possibility, and no matter how much debris has collected, or how many stones are stacked in its path, even amidst the deepest grief and despair, it will always find a way to flow down, through, across, around our blockages, shifting, smoothing, softening all that has accumulated so the river may flow once again.

Presence in this Moment

Rather than an "eternal pregnancy", the third interpretation of our verse comes from yet another creative reinterpretation: A day pregnant with eternity. In explaining the usage of *olam* in this case, Tucker brings the opening line of a blessing found in the Talmud (Berachot 17a) "עוֹלָמָךְ רַבִּי וְתִרְאֶה בְּחַיֶּיךָ." Most often read as "may you see the *world* in your lifetime," the Rabbis of Andalusia translated this using another meaning of *olam*, "may you see *eternity* in your lifetime." Eternity, for these rabbis, was not about some far off state accessed only when one dies, but rather a "state of spiritual bliss and blessedness" which "can be reached even in the present world," in any moment. *Olam ne'elam ba'olam*, teaches my friend, contemporary artist and poet Eden Pearlstein, "eternity is hidden, yet ever-present, in the world."

The Hungarian American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi gave us a word for this sort of "state of spiritual bliss and blessedness": "flow." In his groundbreaking 1990 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, he explored the state of flow experienced by people in the midst of creative engagement. In a flow state, creativity pours through us like that river whose current moves along unimpeded. Flow, for Csikszentmihalyi, is a "state in which people are so

involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it ... for the sheer sake of doing it.” The opposite of eternal pregnancy, an *olam* that will never be, possibilities that will always remain on the brink of becoming, here the world is constantly birthed anew every moment we become present to whatever is the task at hand.

In this reading of *Hayom Harat Olam*, time recedes -- there is nothing other than now, and when we are alive and awake to *now*, this tiny moment we're in becomes a portal to eternity. We learn from tradition *ain mukdam u'meuchar ba'Torah* -- there is no early or late in Torah. Everything that is was or will be is happening at this moment. There is no linearity, no end and no beginning. As my mother, Pat B. Allen writes, this kind of creativity allows us “to transcend linear time, to travel backward and forward into personal and transpersonal history, into possibilities that weren't realized and those that might be.” Not only the way the suffering of the past becomes the trauma of today, but also the ways in which healing the trauma of today, reverberates backwards as well as forwards -- for both our ancestors and our children and their children. In the state of *olam* healing can happen in every direction -- all of time, all wounds, all blessings, all struggles, all wisdom, all grief, all becomes touchable.

The shofar sounds *Hayom Hayom Hayom Hayom* -- this moment, and this one and this one and this one - is all there is, is everything, and in it, everything is possible.

The Day the World is Born

We finally arrive back where we began, the translation of *Hayom Harat Olam* as The Day the World is Born. Like the Eish Kodesh taught, today is the anniversary of the creation of the world. We are catapulted from the denouement of Deuteronomy in our weekly Torah reading back to the gestational generativity of Genesis. The Kitzur Ba'al HaTurim teaches that *Beresheit bara*, “In the beginning, created” has a numerical equivalent of 'On Rosh Hashanah was created' (the world).² Yet distinct from both the Eish Kodesh and Beresheit, here the image for how creation happens is visceral and vivid: that of giving birth.

By invoking birth, all of the Torah and Haftorah readings become threaded together and deftly woven into the liturgy, stitched into the very heart of our Rosh Hashanah prayers. We call to mind Sarah who had long ago given up on the ability to create new life, whose laughter in the face of seeming-impossibility opens something within God and within her, this sign of surprise, flow and pleasure where the body contradicts the mind transforming her life and forever changing the story of our people. And Hannah, who refuses to settle for what anyone, most especially the men she encounters, tell her is impossible and turns to God in humility and with a similar audacity to Sarah's laughter, in fervent prayer born from the deepest recesses of her heart. We feel in these stories the longing and the disbelief; the struggle and the surprise that birth can bring.

² Kitzur Ba'al HaTurim on Genesis 1:1

Here, today is not the day of conception, nor the day of childrearing, it is the day of giving birth: visceral, embodied, cosmic and mundane all at once. Just as we are invited to read ourselves into any character in Torah, so too can each of us see ourselves as one giving birth. We hear these words calling on the creative power of each one of us, expanding the notion of birth beyond the literal to all the myriad ways we bring that which is new and needed into the world: new ideas, new parts of self, new understandings, new paradigms, new beliefs. We are reminded of the ways that birth of any kind requires the powerful combination of total surrender and intense efforting all at once; it can be scary and overwhelming; it takes opening up and letting go, it is exhausting and all-encompassing and taps us into an inner well of strength and fortitude that we may have never known we had.

Today the world is born -- and it is born anew through us. In the midst of grief as deep as Hannah's and disbelief as all-encompassing as Sarah's, Rosh Hashanah comes each year and places the stories of these women in our mouths, echoes of their prayers and laughter, sorrow and power in our hearts. In Jewish tradition, our season of renewal doesn't wait for us to feel ready and capable, or for the time when our struggles are resolved and the world is at peace. It comes when that thin crescent of Tishre moon first appears in the sky. Amidst all our sorrow, heaviness, hurt and tears, hope and fears, tiny silver glow amidst the vast darkness.

In his formative work *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik writes, "In sounding the shofar we express the desire to...extricate [ourselves] from the straits of contraction--the Divine realm of strength--and enter into the wide spaces of expansion--the Divine realm of grace."³ Today, the sounds of the shofar are our own cries as we open to the depths within us and make way for new life, new worlds, new ways of seeing, believing, relating and doing to emerge. Today we will sound the shofar 100 times: shattering, sobbing, bleating, resonating through the air, vibrating and recalibrating the pulse of our heart. Of these blasts, tradition teaches: ninety-nine of death and one of life. Of these 100 blasts, ninety-nine are cries of death and/yet 1 is that newborn cry of life. If we stop listening, tuning out after so many sounds of loss, we miss the miraculous, magnificent, cry of life. Like Sarah, like Hannah, perhaps we are in despair or disbelief, it may be that we long ago gave up, and yet, *Hayom Harat Olam*. Today the world is born anew -- through me and through you. *Tekiyah gedolah*.

Ken yehi ratzon. May it be so.

³ Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).