

Break. Breathe. Push: Birthing the New Year 5781

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Rosh Hashanah 5781
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For millennia - we Jews have celebrated the arrival of the new year with 3 words:

“Hayom Harat Olam.”

“Today is the world’s birthday!”

But this year doesn’t feel like a typical birthday celebration.

For one - It’s not much of a party without you all here.

But that’s not the only reason. As we approached this milestone - with a virus still very much out of control with deep economic distress and social unrest, and just when you think it couldn’t get any worse, RBG dies - the mood this Rosh Hashanah feels more like a birthday you’d rather avoid facing.

This Rosh Hashanah, when we read the opening line of the Unetanetokef prayer: “This day is awesome and full of dread,” I think we all feel a lot less awesome, and a lot more dread.

Yet we will still announce: Hayom Harat Olam - “Today is the Birthday of the World!”

But in truth, that’s a cheerfully pediatric translation of the phrase.

The literal translation announces: “Today is the conception of the world.”

Harah in Hebrew, means conception or pregnancy, and not coincidentally, we find that word in both the Torah and haftarah readings this morning: “Vatahar vateled Sarah.”

“Sarah conceived and gave birth.”

“Vatahar Hannah vateled ben.”

“Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son.”

In the Jewish tradition, we don’t say *mazel tov* or “Congratulations!” when we learn that someone is pregnant. And there’s a reason for that.

We recognize that there is still a lot of uncertainty and potential for loss between pregnancy and birth. Instead, we say “b’sha’ah tovah”: “In good time.”

“Hayom Harat Olam.”

“Today the world is pregnant, Now that feels like a truer translation for this Rosh Hashanah, 5781.

We’re not yet feeling the joy and celebration of a “birth day” but rather, perhaps, the cautious optimism that this new year is



Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, Central Synagogue, NYC. Photo: Lorin Klairs

pregnant with possibilities for new life and blessing.

But I will be honest, there have been times over this last year when I could not even muster “cautious optimism.”

I read the news, I look at our half-emptied city, I see the west coast in flames and I feel despondent. Furious. And scared.

But these same feelings of despair and helplessness surround the origin of harat Olam in our sacred text.

This strange phrase, harat Olam, is first uttered by Jeremiah when he saw his prophecies falling on deaf ears.

In desperation, he curses the day he was born. He laments that God did not allow his mother’s womb to be his tomb, and he wishes that his mother had remained harat olam - eternally pregnant.

My first thought was deep compassion for Jeremiah that he was in such crisis over the state of the world that he would wish he were never born.

But then my mind went to his mother - Can you imagine what it would be like to be eternally pregnant?!

Now that would be a crisis.

What if took the original context as our guide and we said this Rosh Hashanah:

“Today is a day of Eternal Pregnancy,” announcing that we would be stuck here in the womb of this quarantine - forever?

We would all despair.

It would be a crisis of epic proportions.

But you may have heard the Jewish proverb: “Never let a good crisis go to waste.”

Ok, it’s actually Winston Churchill who is usually credited with saying that, but our tradition anticipated his sentiment by over 3000 years.

Because if you know our history, you know that we Jews were built for crisis.

And if there is one thing I have come to appreciate recently - it’s that our texts and liturgy, most which were written during some famine, exile, Crusade, or pogrom, feel like they are speaking to me more than ever in this moment.

Because, actually, this isn’t unprecedented.

We’ve been here before.

In a Hartman study session I participated in this summer with the remarkable Melila Hellner

Eshed, she pointed out that mashber, the Hebrew word for “crisis”, has a root that appears 3 different ways in the Hebrew Bible.

Together - these 3 examples offer a roadmap for how we can emerge from the darkness of this crisis and help birth a new year.

The first time we see the Hebrew root of mashber comes in Exodus.

Moses has been on top of Mt. Sinai for 40 days, while God inscribed a Covenant with the Israelites.

But the Jewish people are impatient and fearful -- they lose faith.

When Moses comes down and sees the Israelites dancing in front of a Golden Calf, the Torah tells us:

“Vayashleych M’yadav... v’yishaber otam.”

“He throws down the tablets in a rage and breaks them.”

V’yishaber - the first appearance of this word for crisis is in BREAKING.

But why does Moses shatter the Covenant?

He already knows what the Israelites have done because God has told him, along with God’s plan to destroy them all.

And level-headed Moses has pleaded on their behalf, and convinced God NOT to destroy them.

So why then does he break the Tablets when he descends the mountain?

Perhaps it wasn’t internal rage, but rather an external show: when the Israelites built that golden calf, they had already broken their covenant - but they weren’t yet ready or willing to acknowledge it.

Only after seeing the broken tablets do the Israelites repent, and rededicate themselves.

God forgives and gives them a new set of Tablets, which human beings help inscribe, on which a stronger, better covenant could be made.

During this Pandemic crisis, after the killing of George Floyd, protests against racial injustice have roiled our cities.

But, if we are honest, we will admit that our country’s covenant with African Americans wasn’t newly violated with George Floyd’s death.

It was broken long ago.

What gives me hope, is that out of