

Breathing, Birthing and Pushing a New World

Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

Rosh Hashanah First Day 5781

מן-המִצָּר, קָרָאתִי יְהָ, עֲנָנִי בַּמֶּרְחָב יְהָ

“Min Ha-meitzar karati Yah, Anani b’merchav Yah”¹

“From a narrow place I called you God, respond to me with expansiveness”.

This verse, that we chant in joyous celebrations as part of the Hallel, is a call to God to save us and bring us out from a narrow place. The word *Metzgar*, means narrow and the word *merchav*, means expansiveness.

We spend much of our lives yearning to break free from the narrow place, we yearn for places of expansiveness, of freedom. This yearning to be free from the narrow place, is especially present as we have spent so much time in our homes, and behind masks, and quite literally in “lock-down.” This yearning is perhaps the basic yearning we have for this year when we pray to be inscribed in the book of life. We hope and pray that we can move from this narrow year, a year of darkness, pain, injustice, death and suffering, to a year that brings light, blessing, new moral leadership, new opportunities, sweetness, and especially health.

Giving birth, also holds this kind of passage - a newborn is pushed forward - from narrow darkness to the openness of the world and life. The same process is true when we conceive and birth new ideas, new concepts, art, music, writing -- we bring forth something new that was hidden, perhaps in a place of darkness, to a place of light. Creation, giving birth, holds joy and grief, excitement and fear.

“There is a moment on the birthing table that feels like dying”

¹ Psalm 118:5

Says Valerie Kaur, an American Sikh activist, documentary filmmaker, lawyer, educator and faith leader describing what it was like to give birth to her child.

She explains:

“The body in labor stretches to form an impossible circle.
The contractions are less than a minute apart.
Wave after wave, there is barely time to breathe.
The medical term: “transition,”

because “feels like dying” is not scientific enough”²

Life and fear come together.

היום הָרַת עַולְם
Hayom Harat Olam-
Today is the birthday of the world.

That is one of the ways rabbinic tradition understands Rosh Hashanah.

Now, the translation is not exact, the word *harat* means more specifically, conceived, from the word *herayon* - pregnancy.

It is also in the present tense, so it seems that the best way to translate is

“Today the world **IS** conceived.”

Most of our liturgy during the High Holidays focuses on God as a father or king, *Avinu, Malkeinu* and with imageries that speak to a masculine, powerful, all knowing God. But Our liturgy also calls out God’s attributes using feminine imagery.

² Valerie Kaur, TED talk: [“Three Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage”](#)

We say, “*Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v’hanun*,” relating to God as the source of *rachamim*—compassion—and *rachamim*, which comes from the word *rechem*, womb, speaks to motherly compassion from the womb.

I would offer that our God is all of these things -- father, mother, all-powerful, empathic and embracing -- just as we all have multiple attributes and ways of being in the world, regardless of our gender identity.

The present tense stretches the idea that today is not the birthday of the world, celebrating 5781 years old (give or take a few billion) but that today IS the birth - day or today IS the conception day, if we want to be more accurate.

Rosh HaShanah marks an ongoing creation that is happening right now. Rabbi Adina Allen from the Jewish Studio Project writes:

“Today is the day the world is conceived, the day when the forces of the universe unite and the possibility of something new is formed”³

I really want to hold onto that. I want to hold onto the belief that today we, each of us as individuals, and as a collective, our country and the world have an opportunity to form something new.

Professor Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes: “Labor is a powerful experience. It is a time in which humans are joined by the divine, are partners to the divine, partake of divine nature, and create the divine image. It is a moment in which we confront God- a moment in which we can realize that being human involves the responsibility to be part of God’s activity, to be a part of God. Labor is a time when human social activity is integrated with the forces of nature. An event that makes us conscious that human life is intertwined with and part of a cosmic ongoing scheme”⁴

³ <http://neharshalom.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Hayom-Harat-Olam-RH-5774.pdf>

⁴ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Motherprayer: The pregnant Woman’s Spiritual Companion”, page 179.

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Based on one interpretation, today is the anniversary of the 6th day of creation rather than the first. According to this idea, what we celebrate today is not the creation of the world, but the creation of the first human being, the creation of humankind⁵.

So, instead of thinking about it as the birth- day of the world, this teaching would say today is the birth- day or, as we said before, the conception day of humankind. And our tradition holds strongly the idea that when we were created, we were created to be partners to God in this world. That is our responsibility.

We are intertwined with God, and God's creation and we are intertwined with each other and all creatures.

TBZ member, Rabbi Natan Margalit writes: "Our tradition has taught us from Genesis onward that we are invited to be creators, to audaciously dare to change the world—but only as co-creators, as parts of the awesome and miraculous creation of which we are one part. This year we are being offered the opportunity to birth a new world"⁶

The gift of Rosh Hashanah is perhaps that every year we have an opportunity to take the responsibility to be part of God and be part of the ongoing work of creation.

And this is true, today, this year, more than ever, when we are walking in a narrow dark tunnel and it is hard to see the light on the other side.

⁵ Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 23:1

⁶ <https://kolaleph.org/2020/09/16/rosh-hashana-the-beginning-of-change/>

Valerie Kaur, begs us to consider birthing as a metaphor for the creation of something new for this country and invite all of us to be a “midwife” for the world at this moment,

She says: “So the mother in me asks what if?
What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?
What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born?
What if the story of America is one long labor?
What if all of our grandfathers and grandmothers are standing behind us now, those who survived occupation and genocide, slavery and Jim Crow, detentions and political assault?
What if they are whispering in our ears “You are brave”?
What if this is our nation’s greatest transition?
What does the midwife tell us to do?
Breathe.
And then?
Push.
Because if we don’t push we will die.
If we don’t push our nation will die”
Tonight we will breathe - says Kaur-
Tomorrow we will labor in love through love and your revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children”⁷

The times are dark now, and at times we hurt and we feel like we are dying, but what if,
what if we see in this pain and the darkness as the opening to life and birth?
We breathe and we push and we labor in love to conceive what’s next?

⁷ Watch night service at the Metropolitan AME Church on Dec. 31, 2016, in Washington
<https://valariekaur.com/2017/01/watch-night-speech-breathe-push/>

I know I am asking myself, and I invite each of us to ask, what world do we want to conceive today? What is the world that is being born from this darkness, from the injustices we witness, from this pandemic, from this time of isolation, from this time of reckoning?

What world is the one that can emerge from it?

How can we, each of us make choices for the future as we transition, we hope soon, from this darkness to life.

These questions are not theoretical, these are questions that each of us can ask of ourselves.

Many of us have strengthened connections with loved ones that if it wasn't for the pandemic and zoom, we wouldn't have. Can these relationships be a priority?

Many of us have, for the first time in a long time, picked up the phone to call people in our community to check in with them, even if we didn't know them before. Is this something we could continue to do more often?

Many of us have spent more quality time with our children. Or our elderly parents (even if needing to be physically distanced). How are we planning to spend our time after the pandemic?

Many of us have realized that some of the priorities we had before the pandemic need to be shifted. Can we do that? Can we commit?

Many of us have learned things about ourselves and about our relationships that we didn't know before. What are you planning to do with what you have learned?

Many of us have recommitted to work for healing and justice for all human beings, with more fervor and urgency. How do we make sure that this is a commitment that we can sustain? A commitment that outlasts the urgent moment?

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In a sweet poem for children that imagines a father in the future telling his children about how a virus in the year 2020 change the world for good the dad says:

Old habits became extinct
and they made way for the new.
And every simple act of kindness
was now given its due.

But why did it take a virus
to bring the people back together? [asks the child?] Well, sometimes you've got to get sick,
my boy, before you start feeling better⁸

Rosh Hashanah invites us to see the darkness of this moment as the darkness of the womb rather than the darkness of the tomb, perhaps this moment is our time of great transition.

We have no other option than to push, push for a new life and a new birth.
Hayom Harat Olam,

Today we conceive the new world that awaits us, a world of life and health, a world of justice and joy. We embrace it, we breathe and we push through the darkness of this moment for a new life to come this 5781. I invite you to come together and labor for the sake of all our lives, for the new world we need and deserve.

Shana Tovah.

⁸ [The Great Realization](#)+ By [Tomos Roberts](#)