

Rosh Hashanah Morning

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Rosh Hashanah. The New Year. The Birthday of the World- *Hayom Harat Olam.*

The opening verses of the Torah describe the moment we celebrate today:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was *tohu v’vohu.*”

You may have notice I didn’t translate *tohu v’vohu*. It’s really hard to translate. Often translated as “chaos”, it’s more than that. It’s

Chaos-void-desolate-emptiness-messiness

It’s much easier not to translate!

Returning to the narrative—from here, God fashions our world; creating sky and water and animals and land and, finally, us—

From *tohu v’vohu* -- order.

It would seem that *tohu v’vohu* are gone—right?

Huh.

Well... but... I'm looking around——our world doesn't seem so orderly, does it?

I'm thinking about my colleagues who are preparing to lead Rosh Hashanah services in a few hours, not only online because of a pandemic, but while choking in almost unbreathable air due to forest fires.

I'm thinking about those who have been shot for no reason save their skin color.

I'm thinking of first responders who are struggling.

I'm thinking of government and elected officials who are spreading animosity and distrust, pulling apart public institutions rather than build them up.

I'm thinking about almost 200,000 deaths due to COVID-19—so many of which were likely preventable.

I'm thinking of the extraordinary complexity, loss and confusion of living through a global pandemic for last six months—with no end in sight.

No, not so orderly, organized...

When something isn't orderly, our usual way is to find a new way to organize it. We make new rules or policies. We clean our pantries, we file our papers, we sort our belongings, we declutter.

But what happens when none of our usual ways work?

In the movie *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the characters Ultron and Vision are advanced artificial intelligence beings. Ultron, the adversary, is determined to conquer the world and rid it of human beings, believing us to be the world's biggest threat. Vision, of course, is determined to save the planet and human beings alike. During their final battle, Vision says to Ultron: "Humans are odd. They think order and chaos are somehow opposites ..."

Leave it to the Marvel Cinematic Universe to get to the heart of the matter! Order and chaos are not opposites. Rather they are two realities which coexist in our lives, one sometimes more predominant than the other.

In order to cope with the chaos—we must accept this reality of it.

The book of Job is a literary masterpiece and a theological obstacle course. Job's life is in agony—he's become the target of a debate between God and an "adversary". His children are killed, he becomes ill with horrible diseases that rot his skin, and he's broke.

His friends visit him one by one. They offer platitudes of comfort and simple theology; suggestions that he is suffering because he has in some way sinned and angered God.

Job rejects their attempts—he is not being punished; he is steadfast in faith and blameless in his actions. Through all his pain and loss, he laments his reality, but does not doubt himself.

He is sad. He is grief-stricken. He is in physical pain. Yet, he managed to accept his reality, and remain true to himself: “Despite all this, Job did not sin, neither did he ascribe unseemliness to God.” He did not lash out—but neither was he a martyr. He complained. He called out to God. He cried.

This poignant verse from chapter 16: “My face became shriveled from crying, and upon my eyelids is the shadow of death.” (16) Job remained authentic to himself and did not push away his anguish. He found the strength within him to help him through the chaos.

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, who as a psychoanalyst, had a particular interest in human psyche and spirit. In his famous work, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he wrote, “The one thing you can’t take away from me is the way I

choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance.”

We are experiencing (overused term) an unprecedented reality. So much has happened in the world, in our country, and in our personal lives since last High Holy Days—and now, since March, when we've really been dealing with COVID-19. The future is daunting: we are without consistent guidance or leadership as the pandemic continues. Democracy and the vision of our founding fathers is quite literally in peril as the Presidential election draws closer. Our country is partially burning- and partially flooded. And we all know I could continue... And while there may be some things we can control, there is much about our current situation that remains beyond our control. What Viktor Frankel reminds us is essential—and primary for the High Holy Days: we can strive to control who we are and how we behave.

I truly wish I could appear on your screen and provide a methodology to create—to organize and order our world. What I know instead is that we are here, for a while, in the tohu v'vohu.

May we be able to accept the chaos. May we learn from Job, recognizing our own strength of character. When we call out in pain and frustration and

sadness, let us be reminded that this, too, is important. May we also remember the truth of Viktor Frankel's words and experience. The one thing we can control in the chaos is our reaction. When we are overwhelmed and it seems futile: our choices matter and will make a difference.

NOTES

Rabbi Isaac told the following allegory: a man was traveling from place to place when he saw a castle in flames.

He wondered: is it possible that this burning castle has no owner?

At that moment the owner of the castle came to the window and yelled: I am the owner of the castle!

In the same way, our patriarch Abraham wondered about the world. What would happen should it if the world was without an owner? At that moment. The He Holy one peered out at Abraham and said: "I am the world's owner!"

Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, often known as the Kotzker Rebbe, interprets this story beautifully. When he told this parable to his students, he described Abraham as a lost wanderer who is at first overcome with joy at the sight of the castle, then terrified when he sees it in flames. Assuming it has no owner, Abraham then hears a voice coming from inside, crying, "Help me, help me, I am the owner of this castle!"

The Kotzker Rebbe taught that Abraham recognized this as an experience of a God who is immanently present in the midst of fire. What was important was what God was not doing: God was not putting out the fire.

God was, however: “in the fire”: Like the burning bush, God was present; we need to be willing to wait long enough in the *tohu v’vohu*. In short, this ancient and well-known midrash tells us that when the world is “on fire”—we are not alone. God didn’t create this; but God is in it with us.

Like Job, we learn to live *in tohu v’vohu*. With God, we remember that we are not alone.

Job dealt with so much—and, we too, have been managing a lot since last High Holy Days—and even more since March, when our recognition began in earnest. And we’ve got no idea what’ll happen next week, let alone in a month, or two months, or by this time next year. Whether we want to be or not, we’re pretty much in “it”—in the *tohu v’vohu*—and Job is a source of support and wisdom.