

People Plan and God Laughs

Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5782

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Man tracht un Got lacht... Are you familiar with that Yiddish expression? Man plans and God laughs. You think you know what you're doing tomorrow, next week, next month, next year...but it's just that, you only think you know. God, or the universe, may have some other plans in store for you. Who would have ever thought last Rosh Hashanah that a whole year later we would again be masked, and taking extreme precautions against a variant of the virus we thought we knew how to control? If this year has taught me anything, it is the fleeting nature of plans, dates, engagements, schedules, expectations...

I have officiated this past year at rescheduled and revamped weddings and b'nai mitzvah, Zoom brides and paired down funerals. Plans for travel have been adjusted, postponed, even cancelled. A border closing even forced the burial of a loved one to be in a different country than what was originally intended! *Man tracht un Got lacht...* People plan, and God laughs.

Today, this sacred day is believed to be the birthday of the world: *hayom harat olam*, we say in the mahzor...today the world came into existence. I was taught that Jews believe that God brought the world into existence out of nothing. The great miracle of creation is *yesh me'ayin* that something was brought about from absolutely nothing. This has been the view of Jewish philosophers since the middle ages, like Philo of Alexandria and Sa'adia Gaon, who were probably trying to distance Judaism from pagan creation myths about gods and goddesses giving birth to the world, or how ancient peoples worshipped the elements of nature as actual deities. But the Midrash is not at all confined by that agenda or theology. In the very first chapter of Bereishit Rabbah, the midrashic treatment of the Book of Genesis, the rabbis argue that God created the world not out of nothingness, not in a vacuum, but *mitoch tohu va'vohu*...out of chaos, using the raw materials of the wild and unformed deep over which God's presence hovered, as the building blocks of the universe.¹

¹ Grateful to Rabbi Ari Hart for introducing me to this insight.

I think that is not only a radical reading, but also a liberating one. It is radical because it flies in the face of what most Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike are often doctrinally taught about creation being *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. It is liberating because it proposes that chaos has always been a part of the plan. That as intricate and complex as the universe truly is, there is always a chaotic element; always something untamed and uncertain.

Long before Henri Poincare proposed Chaos Theory; centuries before Max Plank, Neils Bohr, and Albert Einstein debated the fine points of Quantum Mechanics; generations earlier that Werner Heisenberg introduced the Uncertainty Principle, our sages of blessed memory acknowledged that *tohu va'vohu*, the words Genesis employs to describe that dark, soupy substance that filled the void before creation, is integral to how the world operates even today. Some of that chaos still exists. But even out of that cosmic anarchy, that total disarray at the beginning of time, God still created a world of absolutely magnificent beauty. Even though there is disappointment, loss, suffering right now, the world is still such a remarkable place, and life is such an incredible blessing.

The truth is at those weddings I've officiated this past year, I have seen such deep commitment, such profound love in the eyes of these couples. They may not have been able to have hundreds of people dancing all night together, but they sure were determined to get married anyway, because the intensity of their love wouldn't stand for any more delays. I've seen families celebrate b'nai mitzvah without the big parties, the give aways, the multiple wardrobe changes...but instead focused on what really counts: a child being called to the Torah, to chant the ancient words of our tradition, and lead the community in prayer. I have seen people figure out new ways to celebrate and to mourn, to convene loved ones and refocus key moments in their lives in miraculous ways; ways that have proven to me that even when our plans are altered by forces beyond our control; even when we are faced with disappointments and struggles, even when that primordial chaos pokes its way into our lives in the most inopportune times, we can still transform those moments into meaning and elevate those experiences above the challenges.

The great Rabbi Harold Kushner composed what he titled *A Love Letter to a World that May or May Not Deserve It*.² He wrote:

² Kushner, Harold. "Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life," p. 171.

Dear World,

We've been through a lot together...you and I—marriages, births, deaths, fulfillment and disappointment, war and peace, good times and hard times. There were days when you were more generous to me than I could possibly have deserved. And there were days when you cheated me out of things I felt I was entitled to. There were days when you looked so achingly beautiful that I could hardly believe you were mine, and days when you broke my heart and reduced me to tears.

But with it all, I choose to love you. I love you whether you deserve it or not...I love you in part because you are the only world I have. I love you because I like who I am better when I do. But mostly I love you because loving you makes it easier for me to be grateful for today and hopeful about tomorrow. Love does that.

Dearest friends, I hope that we can all love the world a little bit more in 5782. With all its disappointments, its flaws, its chaos...we still have so much to be grateful for. This world is far from perfect, and it needs a whole lot of fixing. May our love for this world and the gift of this life lead us to do that holy work together, giving us so many reasons to be grateful for today and hopeful about tomorrow.