

God in Process, Yom Kippur 5772

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Ronald Reagan told a story about a young farmer who buys a plot of land that is undeveloped, filled with rocks, in terrible shape. He spends a great deal of time clearing the field, removing the rocks, cultivating the soil. Finally, he is able to plant vegetables and create quite a viable farm. In church on Sunday, he invites his minister to come and visit; he is so proud of what he has achieved. The minister drops by later in the afternoon, and is quite impressed. “These are the biggest tomatoes I have ever seen!” he says. “Praise the Lord! And these carrots! The Lord is great! And this corn! The Lord has worked wonders!”

The farmer looks at his minister and remarks: “Reverend, I wish you had seen this field when the Lord was doing it by Himself!”

In our own lives, it is hard not to notice the rocks, the imperfections, the evil all around us. On Yom Kippur, when we spend a significant portion of the day contemplating our own mortality, we recognize the challenges of poverty, war, disease, economic uncertainty, personal and family tragedies. How can so many bad things be happening to us, when we are trying so hard to lead good lives?

The various faith traditions have developed explanations and responses to good and evil. Christianity developed the concept of Original Sin, the Fall from the Garden of Eden into an unredeemed world; for this doctrine, redemption comes through the acceptance of a Personal Savior.

Judaism does not have a single authorized theology, or a single simple answer, but we are familiar with some of the ideas that are prominent in our liturgy. Basically, God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. True repentance provides the opportunity to experience a life of goodness and blessing. And, as my teacher Rabbi Neil Gillman points out, both the fundamentalists and the secularists base their theology on this approach. The fundamentalists search for sins in order to explain every misfortune, while the secularists use the total disconnect between the doctrine of reward and punishment and what we actually see in the world around us as grounds to reject belief in God altogether.

This morning I want to offer a different understanding. It is no less “Jewish,” but it is not quite as popular as the well-known doctrine that God is all-powerful, moral, and in control of every event. Put simply, our world is not – and never was – the orderly place that the liturgy and parts of the Bible imagine it to be. Notions of perfection are metaphor. The liturgy has its purpose, but in reality the world is an imperfect place. And we are what the Rabbis call שותפים להקב"ה, Partners with the Holy One in an ongoing process of Creating and perfecting it. Often, this is referred to as Process Theology. The question is not why God creates or allows for forces of evil to exist in the world, but rather how can we help God in an ongoing process of eradicating them?

The Hassidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunam asks why the Torah begins with the story of Creation. If the primary purpose of Torah is to present the commandments and responsibilities of the Jewish people, why should it begin with something so universal? Why not start with Abraham, or the Exodus, or the Revelation at Mount Sinai? His answer is that the Torah had to begin with *breishit* in order to remind us of our most sacred responsibility as human beings, not just as Jews.

The account of Creation does not describe how the world is, but rather how the world should be. The World As It Is, in Rabbi Simcha's words, is עדיין בבחינת בראשית, it still maintains some of the chaotic characteristics of the very beginning, before God began the creation process of putting the world in order. Unlike an ordinary vessel made by a human being, which is abandoned by its Maker after the manufacturing process is complete, the world is in constant need of creation and re-creation. And we are God's partners in the process.

The truth is that the Creation story of Genesis, which describes how God spoke and the world came into being in an orderly fashion, is not the Bible's only account of Creation. Other texts imagine more of a battle between God and the forces of Chaos:

- We read in Psalm 74: "It was You (God) who drove back the sea with Your might, who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters; it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan."

Listen to the verbs. God is not simply speaking; God is *driving back*; God is *fighting, smashing, crushing* the forces of chaos, which are formidable foes.

- Similarly, the prophet Isaiah says: "It was You (God) that hacked Rahab in pieces, That pierced the Dragon. It was you that dried up the Sea, The waters of the great deep."

These texts and others like them describe Creation as a difficult process, with God struggling against the forces of chaos and evil. And as Professor Jon Levensohn at Harvard suggests, perhaps it is a process that is not yet complete. God pushed back formidable forces in order to make room for an orderly world; but sometimes these forces seep back in. We have to assist God in eradicating the forces of evil once and for all, and there is a lot of work to be done.

At the conclusion of the Torah's description of Creation in the beginning of Genesis, we read that God rested: "כי בו שבת מכל מלאכתו אשר ברא אלהים לעשות", On the seventh day God rested from all the work that He created - *la-asot*," literally to do. Some of the commentators question this last word – לעשות to do. It seems superfluous; The Rabbis see in this extra word a hint that at the end of the six days of Creation, there was still a lot of work לעשות, to do. God rested even though He knew that Creation was not complete, even though there was still work לעשות, to do.

When we rest on Shabbat, we, too, imagine the perfection of the World as It Should Be even, as we know well that we are not there yet. In a cosmic sense, this is the purpose of Shabbat. The Rabbis considered Shabbat to be מעין עולם הבא, a foretaste of the World to Come. For six days we live in the World As It Is, but on Shabbat we inhabit the World As It Should Be.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously called Shabbat "a palace in time." The other ancient Creation stories (from Mesopotamia and Babylonia) end with the lesser gods building a palace for the head god. But the Bible's story doesn't end that way. After the work of the six days of Creation, God rests and creates a palace in time. When we observe Shabbat, we affirm our belief in the possibility that the imperfections of the world will yet disappear. And we demonstrate our responsibility to the process – as the ones who help create that palace.

There are other hints in our literature about the ongoing process of Creation. When Solomon completes the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Book of Kings records, "ותשלם כל המלאכה", All the work that King Solomon did for the Lord's house was completed." The Rabbis of the Midrash read these words very carefully and ask: why does it say ותשלם כל המלאכה, *all* the work was completed? Why doesn't it just say ותשלם המלאכה, the work was completed? They answer that the extra word כל/all refers

back to Creation. Creation was still unfinished when God completed His work; it needed the human touch. The name Solomon/Shlomo comes from the root *shalem*, which means complete. Our worship in the Temple and now in the synagogue points to our role in completing the unfinished process of Creation.

Once we recognize this, the ritual of Yom Kippur in the Temple – sprinkling blood on the altar to purify the sanctuary – gains new meaning. It isn't just magic or superstition. Purifying the sanctuary becomes a metaphor for purifying and bettering the world. We are God's partners and, as Isaiah reminded us in this morning's Haftarah, the ritual and fasting is supposed to direct us towards the responsibilities of that role:

This is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of lawlessness; To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke; to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin.

If Shabbat represents the possibility of living in the World As It Should Be, then Yom Kippur – Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths – affirms in a most dramatic way our sacred responsibility in helping to bring that world about.

Think about that when you participate in Mitzvah Day in November or any time you do social action. You aren't just volunteering; you aren't just doing community service or being a good citizen. You are helping God. You are doing divine work because God needs you to help rid the world of the evils of poverty and malnutrition. God needs you to fight disease and heal the sick – whether you are a researcher or a doctor or a nurse or a visitor who helps set a patient at ease so the other professionals can do their work. God needs you to help create an egalitarian and just society in which every person can see his basic needs met and have a fair chance at making it big. That's what Tikkun Olam means; you are God's agent in repairing the world.

The human role in continuing Creation continues long beyond Solomon and long beyond the Bible, and it can be quite empowering. There is a rather depressing passage in the Talmud at the end of the tractate Sotah, in which the Rabbis lament all that is lost when great scholars pass away. It is a doctrine called *yeridat hadorot*, the lessening of the generations:

When Rabbi Eliezer died, the Torah Scroll was hidden away in tribute to the great learning that was lost. When Rabbi Joshua died, counsel and thought ceased. When Rabbi Akiva died, the arms of Torah ceased and the fountains of wisdom were stopped up. When Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa died, men of deed ceased. When Abba Yose ben Ketanta died, pious men ceased. When Rabbi Judah the Prince died, humility and fear of sin ceased.

It is all pretty depressing. As individuals, we have probably experienced ourselves that feeling when a loved one passes and we sense the tremendous burden of loss – some things can never be replaced.

But the way the Talmud records it, Rabbi Joseph was sitting in the Academy about 100 years after these scholars had lived and he stopped the teacher who was reciting this litany. "It's not true," he said. "לא תיתני עונה. Do not teach that humility has departed from this world, דאיכא אני, for I am still here." Forget the irony that it's not exactly humble to proclaim "I am the epitome of humility!" The point is that that value didn't have to disappear even if Rabbi Judah the Prince had been lost. Rav

Nahman then called out as well: “לא תיתני יראת חטא דאיכא אני”, Don’t teach that fear of sin has passed on, because I am still here.”

This is what it means to be a partner with God in the process of Creation that continues on, generation after generation. “I am still here.” And this is one of the great legacies of the Jewish people. Each time we come face to face with the imperfections of the world, when it seems that all has been lost, another leader in another generation stands up and proclaims “איכא אני, I am here” and prepared to carry on the legacy of those who came before me.

Today at Yizkor and later in the Martyrology service, we remember our loved ones and the great heroes who stood up as God’s partners to preserve the tradition and to protect our people. We will remember ancient rabbis who worked tirelessly to ensure that Torah would not be forgotten in the face of persecution, destruction, and dispersion. And the victims of the Crusades and other persecutions who affirmed their Jewish identity in the face of the most difficult of circumstances. They paid the ultimate price to preserve Torah and the legacy of Jewish identity.

In the modern era we remember other individuals who proclaimed “איכא אני, I am here” to preserve Jewish peoplehood, I am here to serve the interests of a new Jewish polity, I am here to protect Jews in danger.

July would have marked the 90th birthday of Hannah Senesh, the Hungarian born daughter of a well-known playwright and journalist turned Zionist who moved to Palestine at the age of 17 in 1938 in order to fulfill what she saw as her destiny as a Jew. Five years later, as a paratrooper in the British Army, she parachuted into Yugoslavia to try to save the Jews of Hungary who were about to be deported to Auschwitz. She was captured and executed by the Nazis.

On the eve of Rosh Hashanah in 1941, she wrote in her diary about the purpose she felt in helping to rid the world of evil, to make room for the good for which the world was created: “Dear God,” she wrote. “You’ve kindled a fire in my heart. Give me the strength to scourge, to caress, to uplift. Towards what am I aiming? Towards all that which is best in the world and of which there is a spark within me.”

One of her most famous poems underscores her role in continuing the ongoing process of Creation. It began: “אשרי הגפרור שנשרף והצית להבות”, Happy is the match that is consumed even as it kindles a flame.” Hannah Senesh became that match, consumed at the age of 22, but **her** heroism helped to kindle the flame of the Jewish people; **her** legacy inspired those who brought about the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel.

We will also remember Yoni Netanyahu, the late brother of the Prime Minister of Israel. July 4th marked the 35th anniversary of the Israeli army’s heroic raid on the airport in Entebbe to rescue more than 100 Jewish hostages from an Air France flight headed from Athens to Paris. This successful operation made an important statement that Jews would no longer be bystanders to history. With the power of a government and an army came the responsibility to act as agents in history, to protect those who could not protect themselves. Yoni Netanyahu was the commanding officer and hero of Operation Entebbe – and the only Israeli soldier to die in the operation.

He understood the call of “איכא אני, I am here” to fight and protect my people and my homeland. Before reenlisting in the Israeli Army in 1969, he wrote to his parents, “I have been torn between my desire to go on with my present life and my conviction that my duty to my country, to my people, and

above all to myself dictate that I go back to serve.” Yoni Netanyahu felt himself to be an agent of history. He was doing God’s work as a partner in the process of returning the Jewish people to its land and enabling Jews to live in safety and security.

And we will remember loved ones who impacted our individual lives as well. We remember parents, grandparents, siblings, spouses, and children. We remember lessons they taught, values they cherished, and special moments that we shared. We relive the moments of intense loss; we feel the gaping holes in our lives that their absence has created; and in many cases we sense the feeling that life is more than a little unfair.

Even as we want to question God; even as we want to continue to mourn the misfortune that has befallen us and our loved ones, Judaism calls upon us to answer the call. All is not lost, דאיכא אני, because I am here to carry on the values and traditions of those who came before me. God will not remain hidden, דאיכא אני, because I am here to partner with God in the ongoing process of perfecting creation. Our heroes will not be forgotten, דאיכא אני, because I am here to remember them, to teach others about the difference they made in the world and to continue their legacy myself.

There's a reason why we pledge *tzedakkah* in conjunction with Yizkor. Remembering loved ones means accepting our responsibility to finish the divine work that they began. Remembering the past means accepting our role as God's agents in shaping the future.

The Hasidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk taught: “When a poor man comes to you for help do not send him away empty-handed, with the assurance that God will help him. At that very moment you must become a skeptic and doubt that God will help him. You yourself must help him!” We do not wait for God to change the world; we partner with God in an ongoing process. Perhaps President Obama was correct when he proclaimed during the 2008 campaign that “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

On this Yom Kippur, this Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, I pray that we may re-accept our responsibility לעשות, to do God’s work – to partner with God in the ongoing process of completing Creation. Let us learn from the examples of the great heroes who came before us. And as we remember loved ones let us pledge to carry on their legacies to fill the void that was created by their absence. We need not fear the evils of the World As It Is. Let us instead affirm by our actions that there is hope, דאיכא אני, because I am here to help complete the process of redemption.

G’mar Hatimah Tovah, May we each be inscribed in the Book of Life. Amen.