

In a Good Hour: Exits and Entrances, Mazel Tov & B'Shaah Tovah ✓

As soon as you know you're pregnant you get a due date. So Laura and I have known that this, September 25th, is our due date since last winter – four seasons now.

September 25th – “the due date”. It could be that day, could be three weeks earlier or a week later... no way to tell. What do you do? You write it in pencil. A soft date on the calendar.

So what do people say when they hear you're pregnant? Mainly they say “mazel tov!” good luck! But mazel tov doesn't exactly mean good luck in the way we use it in English. Originally, mazzāl, meant "constellation" or "destiny."¹ This is from the astrological idea that being born under a particular sign or star guides our fate. So “mazel tov!” really means something like “there has been good fortune for you!” It is for something that is solid in the present or past like “Congratulations.” Mazel tov is great for moments like breaking the glass at a wedding or at a Bat Mitzvah. So what's the alternative for something in the future? – when someone gets engaged? When someone is pregnant?

With pregnancy in particular there are Jewish traditions to not announce the name of the baby for eight days and not to prepare the baby's room or even bring any of the baby's clothes, toys or furniture into the house. So mazel tov feels like jumping the gun. Living with the expectation of great joy also means that tragedy lurks. To keep oneself in the present, where the joy has not fully arrived but is in imminent potential, there's another expression: B'sha'ah tovah. Literally “In a good hour” meaning: “May it be good!” Recognizing that *it* has not yet happened. Pregnancy, engagement, job offer – b'sa'ah tovah! So we wait and hope for that good hour.

This sensitivity to the uncertainty of the future is very appropriate in these Awesome Days. In these ten days we remind ourselves over and over of the uncertainty of existence. In *Unetanneh Tokef* which is chanted in Musaf on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we have a detailed list of the possibilities for the coming year: “who will pass on and who will be created? Who will live and who will die? Who will be at peace and who will be tormented?” Possibilities. All of these soft dates on the calendar of the upcoming year. All these things that might happen that we either pray will happen or that we desperately fear. Who will be truly alive and who will be deadened to their vitality?

Here Carl and I are wearing these charming smocks – kittles -- which are worn by the groom at a wedding, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (for some at the Passover seder) and then serve as the death shroud. I hope it gets a lot of use before that, but every time I put it on I am aware that someday, when I am no longer able, someone will be putting it on me one final time. The final exit.

Psalm 121 says God will protect our “going out and our coming in.” Shakespeare writes “All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and entrances and one man in his time plays many parts.” I'm not sure why these two sources put exits before entrances. In our lives we have many transitions; many moments of passing from one thing to

¹ The Mishnaic word derives from Biblical Hebrew mazalot (2 Kings 23:5)

another, activities, relationships, cities, apartments: Beginnings and endings. And birth is the great entrance and death the great exit that brackets them all. This is the Day of Atonement – the day of acknowledging all those possibilities all those soft dates.

In Mishnah Pirkei Avot, 2:10, R. Eliezer gives the advice: ‘Repent one day before your death.’ That Talmud (Shabbat 153a) elaborates with the predictable response of his disciples: ‘Does a person know on which day they will die?’ Says Rabbi Eliezer to them: ‘So that being the case, you should repent today, for perhaps tomorrow you will not be able to; hence, all our days should be passed in a state of repentance.’ And while the practice of teshuvah is certainly best done year round, repentance of the kind we do on Yom Kippur, the reciting of the *vidui*, the confession is only for this day and for the moment before death.

We have this day that is the moment of passage from one year to the next, when all the possibilities of the coming year are laid before us and we try to do *teshuvah* - to make repair and return to our best selves. We do it together bringing our whole selves and the whole Jewish community. Hard as it may be, it’s easier this way. Easier with community with friends and family, easier than letting the idea catch up to you alone in the middle of the night.

We come together to declare our sins and our commitment to enter into the New Year renewed. For the last forty days, since Rosh Hodesh Elul in the tradition, we have been looking back at our behavior in the past year, and forward to what might await us. We are making the passage from this year to the next, and we imagine our last exit. We put on this death shroud and we abstain from food, drink, sexual relations, bathing and anointing, leather shoes – a mark of distinction, and luxury. As the sun goes down, a mere 23 hours from now, we will pray the Neilah service. This means “closing” or “locking” the gates are closing, now is the moment.

Our thousands of entrances and exits are bracketed by the great entrance of birth and exit of death. If our lives were laid out in a straight line we would simply move from one to the other. But in our experience of cyclical time, of coming back to this same point and setting out again in our religious and spiritual lives, we know we can also make a passage from death to rebirth. This is a consciousness that is instilled by the traditional words said upon waking every morning: *Modeh ani lifanecha, Melech khi v'kayam...* “I am grateful before you, living and eternal king, who has mercifully returned my soul to me – great is your faithfulness!” But all the more so, this renewal, this rebirth, here together, is our project on Yom Kippur.

This possibility of re-awakening is spelled out in a midrash, and ancient rabbinic explanation, in which Yom Kippur appears unexpectedly. This is a midrash I shared on Shabbat *Devarim*, the last Shabbat in July, which explains how it is that the 15th day of the Month of Av is a day of intense joy and celebration of love “The Jewish Valentine’s Day” when only 6 days earlier, the 9th day of the month of Av is a day of the most intense sorrow and mourning in the calendar.

To give the background for the midrash -- The first and paradigmatic calamity identified by the rabbis as occurring on the 9th of Av was the bad report brought by the twelve spies which disrupted the entire plan for leaving Egypt and entering into the Land of Canaan. Because of the sin of the spies, there was a change of plan and the Israelites stayed in the desert for forty years until the

generation that had known slavery died off. Each year, the midrash imagines, 1/40th of that generation would die on the night of the 9th of Av, the anniversary of the sin.

MIDRASH:

During all the years that Israel was in the wilderness, on the eve of every 9th of Av, Moses sent a herald throughout the camp to proclaim, “Go out and dig graves, go out and dig graves!” and the people went out and dug graves, in which they spent the night. In the morning, the herald went out and announced: “Let those who are alive separate from the dead!” The living then stood up and climbed out of the graves and buried those who had died. In the last of the forty years, they did the same thing and, in the morning, they were *all* still alive. They said: “Perhaps we miscalculated the new moon – maybe this isn’t really the ninth day of the month.” So, to make sure, they did the same thing the night of the tenth - each one spending it in the hole he had dug. In the morning, again, all of them again stood up alive. Then, to make quite sure, they did the same thing the night of the eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth of the month. Until with the full moon there was not the slightest doubt. When they saw that not one of them had died, they said: “It appears that the Holy One has canceled the harsh decree.” They declared that day – the 15th of Av - a festival.

The midrash then concludes unexpectedly with the following line:

Accordingly, the sages taught: Israel had no days more festive than the 15th of Av and the Yom Kippur. (Sefer haAggadah, Midrash Samuel 32, 5, Eicha Rabba 33)

Wait! Yom Kippur?! The midrash explains why the 15th of Av should be a day of great relief and celebration, but why does it add the same for Yom Kippur? The midrash makes much more sense without Yom Kippur. Why is it there?

I believe the midrash recognizes the connection, that on Yom Kippur too, we fully acknowledge our vulnerability and prepare for our final exit. We metaphorically spend the night wondering if we will get up in the morning, and from that place we can rise up renewed by the richness of life.

Personally, this year the themes of rebirth are extremely accessible. Laura and I have been dazzled by the miracle of this now seven-plus pound fully formed baby inside her body that can hear us, and hiccup, and practices all manner of dance moves. It has a whole life in there – as all of us once had a whole life inside the bodies of the woman who gave birth to us. And very soon that is about to change.

God willing, in that good hour, this baby is going to come out wild and screaming into the world. Again, God willing, it will be totally prepared, totally formed as ready as it can possibly be – and yet, about to encounter an incomprehensible world – incredibly bright and unmediated by layers of flesh and water - An entirely new experience.

May we be inspired by this boldness and drama, that long ago, before memory, we all experienced. May we have *courage* in our passage of renewal and rebirth into life this year, wild and screaming if necessary. You don’t need to know what is on the other side – you can’t. All you can do is ready yourself to enter.