

Of Chaos & Creation

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This time of year my thoughts always reel backwards, remembering where I was 17 years ago—the anniversary of 9/11 looms large. On September 15, 2001, from my tiny studio apartment on the Upper East Side, I jotted down these words: “There’s before and there’s after. This is after. The world is dreadfully broken, broken beyond words. Terrorists have brought the reality of evil home—it lies in the rubble at the southern tip of Manhattan. All those lost lives...The City is a war zone; this is no game. It’s a time for dirges.”

In those first few days after 9/11, it certainly seemed like we New Yorkers teetered on the knife-edge of an abyss. Our reality went beyond the headlines, which shouted the geopolitical implications of the attack for our nation. Debris still flew in the Manhattan air, and we breathed in its foul odor. We moved shell-shocked through the streets, under the smoke that billowed above, past the posters of the missing, ignoring the sirens that wailed constantly. On subway platforms, and in coffee shops, and when passing each other on the street, we treated one another with an extra dose of tenderness to help each other withstand the utter chaos. We shared our survival stories, and mourned our losses, and asked each other, is this the end of the world as we know it?

9/11 happened right before Rosh Hashanah, early in my rabbinate, when I worked at a Jewish non-profit. My friends giving sermons on pulpits throughout the City were put through the ringer trying to find an inspirational message in the devastation. I thought this experience was unique to 9/11 but I was wrong. Upon reflection, I realize I have many, many High Holy Day sermons that express the fear that our world might be falling apart. I am, in many ways, an optimist—so this fear is not borne of pessimism. Rather it’s based on empirical evidence from current events, what with natural disasters and violent divisiveness in our world. Reading sermons from other rabbis, whether they preached about Charlottesville last year, or the war in Vietnam in the ‘60’s, or Europe during World War II—it seems that in every generation we humans wonder whether the world is on the brink of disaster, whether our situation is worse than ever before, whether as a species we are hurtling to our doom.

And yet like clockwork we find ourselves back here, celebrating a new year. Why do we return, when chaos and destruction abound? What draws us back every Rosh Hashanah? What is it about the shofar’s call that awakens in us a need to affirm, as our ancestors did, that today is *hayom harat olam*, today the world is created anew, when all evidence points to the contrary?

Because our ancestors were right. Because they knew what they were talking about. Because today is the Creation of the world—in all its cosmic, mystifying power. The chaos and destruction that we see around us is an inescapable part of creating the world anew.

We learn this concept, that from chaos comes Creation, in the very first verses of Torah. It has been said that not everything that happened is true, nor did everything that's true necessarily happen.¹ Let's for a moment, take the Torah story of Creation to be true, even if it isn't scientifically accurate, even if it's not the way it happened. What truth does this primal tale tell us?

Bereisheet bara Elohim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz

At the beginning of God's creating the heavens and earth

Do you hear that? Genesis zeroes us in to the middle of things. The usual translation "In the beginning..." is inaccurate because it implies a starting point. The Hebrew suggests that the Bible begins when God was already in existence. There's a "before" in this reading of Genesis. According to Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, before Creation there was nothing but God's purest essence an endless, infinite, silent energy. Some called God, *Ayin*, literally Nothing, the Divine was no-thing, just pure being, a oneness that encompassed everything, so powerful that nothing could coexist with it. Before Creation, all that was, was God.

v'ha'aretz hayta tohu v'vohu

and the earth was chaos and unformed

v'hoshech al p'nai t'hom

and darkness was on the face of the deep

At this stage, the universe was a watery, chaotic, undifferentiated darkness, formless and shapeless, "welter and waste" as one commentator described.² When suddenly:

v'ruach elohim m'rachefet al p'nai hamayim

a wind of the Holy One hovers over the face of the waters.

Vayomer Elohim y'hi or, va'y'hi or

The Holy One said, There will be light, and there was light.³

¹ Attributed to Elie Wiesel.

² Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary*, location 1033.

³ Genesis 1:1-3

The universe was formed from “a howling empty chaos—and the medium of creation was *ruach elohim*, the breath, wind and air.”⁴ The Kabbalists teach that in order to bring Creation into existence, God contracted, making space from which, in one flow of creative energy, came an endless, invisible Divine breath channeled into words. Instantaneously, those words radiated light and sound into the dark and silent chaos. Out of the infinite, the finite universe came into being.

Oy, okay...that was pretty metaphysical for this time of day. Here’s my point: These first verses of Torah which describe the creation of the world out of *tohu va-vohu*, chaos and darkness, contain a deep insight into the human potential to be creative. Our capacity to bring something into existence—to dream and to form—perhaps more than anything else, reveals that we are truly *b’tzelem Elohim*, made in the divine image. Our Creation story is true, even if it never happened, because it teaches us that chaos and destruction can become the material to create something original, something beautiful.

Artists remind us that their work often reflects this process of Creation that we see in Torah. Artists speak of getting silent, making space, getting out of their own way and getting into the flow—all of which reflects how the Holy One brought the universe into being. And I would argue that this creative process is the same whether we’re painting a picture, writing a legal brief, rewiring a computer, or making soup for a sick friend.

Julie Burstein, who wrote a book about the arts, has identified qualities that make fertile ground for creativity. First, she says is simply paying attention “...which is very hard to do when you have a lighted rectangle in your pocket that takes all your focus.” A piece of the creative process is being fully present, listening and seeing and feeling with a stillness at the center of our soul. She also speaks of how personal challenges, limitations internally or externally imposed, can push us out of our comfort zone and into the realm of invention and imagination.

Most importantly, for our creativity to unfold we have to encounter loss and destruction, which Burstein says is “the hardest and most constant of human experiences. In order to create, we have to stand in that space between what we see in the world and what we hope for, looking squarely at rejection, at heartbreak, at war, at death. That’s a tough space to stand in. The educator Parker Palmer calls it “the tragic gap,” tragic not because it’s sad but because it’s inevitable.”⁵ We Jews have been standing in this tragic gap for millennia. We know from hardship and pain. Judaism urges us to experience the darkness of this world and lift up the sparks of light, what we call holiness, within it.

⁴ Alan Lew, *This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared*, p. 118

⁵ https://www.ted.com/talks/julie_burstein_4_lessons_in_creativity/transcript#t-1020727

Like every New Yorker, Joel Meyerowitz, a downtown photographer, was standing in that tragic gap in those days following 9/11. He tells how he rushed to get an eyewitness record of Ground Zero; but because it was a crime site, no photography was allowed. He tenaciously called in favors, not stopping until he gained permission to photograph the site, which he did almost every day for nine months. The photographs are ugly and beautiful, terrifying and uplifting. When asked how he made art from such chaos, he said: "Like many other ruins...[it took] on a new meaning... There were afternoons I was down there, and the light goes pink and there's a mist in the air and you're standing in the rubble, recognizing both the inherent beauty of nature and the fact that nature, as time, is erasing this wound. Time is unstoppable, and it transforms the event."⁶

On 9/11, Meyerowitz was an artist dealing with a monstrous, historic tragedy. And we in this sanctuary are all kinds of people—some artists, yes, but also teachers, financial managers, trades people, computer programmers, caregivers, what have you—and we're just living our everyday lives. We may not be artists, but the creative impulse that Meyerowitz felt on 9/11 is the same impulse that's hard-wired into all of us, regardless of who we are or what we do. No matter how turbulent the time, no matter where we are on the planet, we too can create something transformative and healing out of chaos. And we don't need to be an artist to do so. The only material we need is ourselves.

When we confront irrevocable loss or moments of painful upheaval, when we stand in that tragic gap and somehow find the resilience to do something, anything, to connect with others, when that happens, when we hold the beauty and the brokenness at once, and help others to do the same, then the world is reborn. In our morning prayers, we say *u'tuvo michadeish bchol yom tamid Ma'asei V'reisheet*: In Your goodness you daily and continually renew acts of creation. This prayer is speaking to God, but this prayer is also speaking about human beings. Through our innate goodness—through our capacity to love and empathize and act—we, too, daily and continually renew creation.

Back then, when New Yorkers bestowed an extra dose of tenderness upon one another after 9/11, they were creating the world anew. Now, when we Seattleites ensure that compassion, patience, and respect remain a part of our everyday culture, we create the world anew. Every day, when you and I, through our very being, make connections, heal hurts, say kind words, reveal the joy and beauty and dignity of others, then we create the world anew. In those moments the spark of the divine is awakened within us. We become *b'tzelem Elohim*.

⁶ *ibid*

If you saw *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, the documentary about Mr. Rogers, then you know that Fred Rogers conveyed this same message for decades on his children's television show. "The only thing that ever really changes the world," Mr. Rogers asserted, "is love." Then, to drive home the point that this message is achievable, that we ourselves have been the beneficiaries of love, he would say to audiences, with his slowpaced gentle cadence, "From the time you were very little, you've had people who have smiled you into smiling, talked you into talking, sung you into singing, loved you into loving. [Some may be from your family of origin, some may not.] Some may be right here, some may be far away, some may even have died. No matter where they are deep down you know they've always wanted what was best for you. They've always cared for you beyond measure and have encouraged you to be true to the best within you." Then he would say, "Let's take some time now to think of these extra-special people,"⁷ Then, he took out his phone and set the timer, and there would be silence.

Why don't we also sit for several seconds of silence now, to think about someone special in our lives who shared their goodness with us?

[30 seconds of silence]

A few weeks after the 9/11 attack, Mr. Rogers came on TV and, using a classic Jewish concept, offered these words of comfort: "No matter what our particular job especially in our world today, we are all called to be *tikkun olam*, repairers of Creation. Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are, to bring joy and light and hope and faith and pardon and love to your neighbor and to yourself."⁸

What was true 17 years ago, was true at the beginning of time, and remains true today. Each of us has the resilience to hold the world's brokenness and beauty at once; we have the power to transform chaos into something new. May 5779 be a year when we engage in acts of goodness, acts of love, acts of creation.

⁷ From the film *Won't You Be My Neighbor*

⁸ Ibid