

**Ma'asei V'reisheet – Acts of Creation:
What Are You Waiting For?¹ – The Urgency of Now**

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In one of the laboratories I worked in when I was younger, we had an office assistant in charge of ordering, equipment, and general logistics. I won't lie – she was tough and kept our team of scatter-brained scientists in check. When one of us would dramatically fly into her office for one thing or another, she would look at us sternly, crook her head just so, and tap a sign on her desk. Maybe some of you have seen it, or used it, in your own lives. The sign read, "Your emergency is not my urgency."

Seeing this sign was a good reminder for us of what is truly urgent and what is not. Now, the sign wasn't meant to make us give up on aspiration and see everything as blasé. Instead, its purpose was to teach, that when something is truly urgent and important, we must act ourselves. For millennia, Jewish tradition has taught the need for action based on what we believe.² But, as we know, teaching action and taking action are very different things. Often times, we have the idea, but we are just missing that resolve, that determination, that fortitude, that urgency.

To that, I refer to the great modern sage Lin-Manuel Miranda. To adapt a few lines from his ground-breaking musical "Hamilton," "What are you waiting for? What do you stall for? ... Take a stand with pride, [don't] stand to the side."³ Another Broadway legend, Jonathan Larson, reminded us in his musical hit, "Rent," there is "no day but today."⁴ So, we can wonder, where is our urgency; what are we waiting for?

Moving from Broadway back to the Bible, our patriarch Abram truly had this sense of urgency. God called to Abram, "Lecha l'cha – go to the place that I will show you."⁵ Later, in the ultimate model of hospitality, Abraham urgently runs to greets his three angelic guests without a moment to spare.⁶ There was no waiting, no weighing these situations back and forth. There was only determination and strength. There was action. To this, the 17th century Italian scholar Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known as the Ramchal, wrote, "It is to be observed that all of the deeds of the righteous are performed with urgency."⁷ What are we waiting for? Our ancestors had this urgency, an inspiration for us.

¹ This question, serving as the crux of this sermon, was inspired by a conversation with Josh Feldman, Associate Vice President of Leadership Development and Springboard at Hillel International

² Pirke Avot 1:17, "Study alone is not enough; our tradition demands action."

³ Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Non-Stop," Hamilton: An American Musical, 2015

⁴ Jonathan Larson, "Finale B," Rent, 1996

⁵ Genesis 12:1

⁶ Genesis 18:6-7

⁷ Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Mesilat Yesharim 7:16-18

I wonder, with such great precedent before us, what are we waiting for? What is holding us back? Is it fear of failure? Worry about not being perfect? Uncertainty of how to take the first step? Sometimes we get spurts of ambition – to invent, to build, to connect, to create. We think about it and ponder over it. Yet it doesn't happen, and then we put it aside; no action is taken. Maybe we need higher permission to act; maybe we need to look inward; maybe we need to look all the way back to gain this righteous urgency.

Let's return to the very beginning, to the Days of Creation themselves. On each day, God adds to the universe – the sun, moon, stars, water, dry land, vegetation, animal life, and eventually humanity. Then on the Seventh Day, God rested. But Rashi, the great Medieval Sage, teaches that even while God paused, the work of Creation was not yet complete, and would not be complete for quite some time.⁸ The Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hassidic Judaism, continues this idea explaining that the words God uttered to create the universe are everlasting, but more than that, are constantly re-creating the universe.⁹ This can perhaps be illustrated by using an electric lamp as an example. When one flips the switch of a lamp, one creates a circuit, causing electrons to flow back and forth through the circuit, and the light to go on. But merely flipping the switch is only half the story. In order for the light to stay lit, there must be a constant renewal of energy, for the moment the energy runs out, out goes the light.”¹⁰ “The same is true of Creation. In order for the world to continue to exist, God's [work] of Creation needs to constantly fuel its existence.”¹¹

This idea is echoed in the second line of our Learning Theme, “In Your goodness, You daily renew Creation – *Uv'tuvo m'chadeish b'chol yom tamid ma'asei v'reisheet,*” a verse from *Avahat Olam*, recited before *Sh'ma* in our morning prayers. This prayer speaks to continual re-creation of the world. When I utter these words, I envision God and this world in a constant state of re-creation. Each day is its own re-creation of the original Creation. Each time the sun rises above the horizon, we are reminded that new possibilities abound; new chances exist. Its vibrant colors, bursting from the darkness, are a source of inspiration to us all, calling out Creation did not end; Creation continues with each new idea, each new relationship, each new act of justice, each new moment in time. God gifts us this daily reminder that we are crucial elements, true partners, in this sacred act of ever-unfolding Creation.”¹²

We are called upon to be active players in this urgent work.¹³ In *Pirke Avot*, the Ethics of our Sages, “Rabbi Tarfon said, “The day is short, the work is much, the workers are unmotivated, and the reward is great... It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but

⁸ Rashi commentary on Genesis 1:31

⁹ Tanya, Shaar Hayichud Veba'emunah, chapter. 1 and Midrash Shocher Tov on Psalms 119:89

¹⁰ Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, A Commentary on the Tanya, Shaar Hayichud Ve'emunah chapter 1

¹¹ Rabbi Yehuda Shurpin, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1209510/jewish/The-Baal-Shem-Tov-on-Perpetual-Creation.htm

¹² Inspired by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, <http://velveteenrabbi.blogspot.com/blog/2015/12/who-continually-renews.html>

¹³ Inspired by Rabbi Dr. Jacob Neusner, “*Pirke Avot: Torah from Our Sages*,” Rossel Books, p. 84

neither are you free to desist from it.”¹⁴ Inspired by this charge, the Ramchal teaches that when we have that need to partner with God in the continual Creation around us, our souls are on fire, burning with intensity and focus. We do not rest until we have made our mark, striving urgently towards Creation’s sacred completion.¹⁵ “The deeds of the righteous are performed with urgency.”¹⁶

We talk; we debate; we sometimes argue, as we think about the things that are really important to us and our community. We aim to be righteous like our ancestor Abraham. We want to do our part in the daily re-creation of the world. We want to uphold our responsibility to better this world. We want to find that fire in our souls. Therefore, let us consider the need for urgency in three arenas – personally, Jewishly, and socially.

On a personal level, what are each of us waiting for? God molded each human being with remarkable potential and aspiration.¹⁷ There is a reason God marveled at our creation more than all of the other creatures. We are partners with God renewing Creation daily in goodness. We can accomplish so much, if only we didn’t get in our own way sometimes. Why have our intentions strayed from jumping in? Whether it is starting a new business, learning a new hobby, repairing a broken relationship, overcoming a fear, battling an inner demon, what are we waiting for?

The most frequent concern is the limitation of time, which is the most precious resource we have. Yet, time is what we make of it. According to the Zohar, “We can live even a thousand years and still feel like it’s been only a single day.”¹⁸ To channel the great Yogi Berra, “when you come to a fork in the road, take it.” Urgency, on a personal level, is the resolve to rise from thought to action, the determination to leap. I know you are already considering something that has been sitting in the back of your mind or on your to-do list. Now, in this New Year, this is the time when we re-create ourselves. The beauty of Yom Kippur is that the gates of Heaven are still open, calling upon us to commit with urgency today of all days. Wait no more. Uncover the urgency. Alight the fire of our souls, and create anew.

On a Jewish level, I am continually amazed with the depth and complexity of the Jewish people. It is so powerful that for a people who are 4,000 years old, we do not cease our work of creation. To harken back to the Baal Shem Tov, the reason our Jewish tradition has ever-present vibrancy, is that we provide the energy that continues to light the lamp. We continue to expand our communities and our lives. We reinterpret old texts, yet re-engage with texts recently discovered.

One of the great blessings of our Jewish tradition is that we can connect through a myriad of experiences – prayer, music, social justice, learning, cooking, Israel, politics,

¹⁴ Pirke Avot 2:15-16

¹⁵ Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Mesilat Yesharim 7:19

¹⁶ Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Mesilat Yesharim 7:16

¹⁷ Based on Talmud Sanhedrin 38a

¹⁸ Zohar, volume 1, page 223b

Yiddish, poetry, and many more. Over the course of our Jewish journeys, be they ample in years or still just unfolding, we are naturally attracted to some aspects of the Jewish community. Similarly, we can stray from those that give us pause or don't offer us the same meaning.

Abraham ran to greet the angels, to earnestly welcome them into his tent. He sought to absorb them into his life. In this New Year, let us follow his ancient lead, and light that fire in our Jewish souls. Let us add an avenue in our Jewish paths, trying something new, discovering something in our Jewish identities that may not have been uncovered. May this be the year when we engage that which we have wanted to do for so long, or dare I say, maybe we have avoided engaging with something specific in Jewish tradition as well. Perhaps it is the Hebrew language, engagement with Israel, prayer and spirituality, kashrut, literature, or connecting with new members of our community. Our Jewish identities are deeply personal and powerful, but they could be missing something that we didn't even know existed. The opportunities to expand our Jewish paths are available daily, not only on Shabbat or at Religious School. Let us create new parts of our Jewish selves and rejoice in what we find. It will light our souls, both individually and collectively.

On the social level, there is indeed an incredible urgency facing our community. This is an era of political divisiveness, inhumane actions, alarming levels of public hatred, absent civil discourse, the unbearable lack of equity for race, gender, ability, socio-economics, and more. Unfortunately, these issues face our society in a historic pattern, a regrettable cycle. In 1969, the Jewish civil rights leader Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "There is a pressing urgency to the work of justice and compassion."¹⁹ These words ring true today 50 years later. Heschel partnered with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who first spoke of the "urgency of now" at the 1963 March on Washington.²⁰ Then in 1967 at Riverside Church he preached, "We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late, ... a lost opportunity."²¹

This is why the Religious Action Center, the lobbying arm of the Reform Movement, has a new social justice campaign called the Urgency of Now Initiative,²² developing a network of congregations to work actively on a host of modern issues. Temple Beth Am is signed on as a Brit Olam "covenant of the world" Congregation,²³ committed to, as Heschel said, "the pressing urgency to the work of justice and compassion." Through this initiative, we are active partners with God, daily re-creating the world. We become the manifestation of the Ramchal's teachings, performing deeds of righteousness with urgency. Whether that is protesting, running for office ourselves, starting a campaign, standing up to hatred,

¹⁹ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "On Prayer," 1969, <https://opensiddur.org/prayers/on-prayer-by-abraham-joshua-heschel-1969/>

²⁰ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>

²¹ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/beyond-vietnam>

²² For more information, <https://rac.org/urgency-now-initiative>

²³ For more information, <https://rac.org/brit-olam-covenant-our-world-0>

whatever it may be, there is a painful urgency to this moment and we cannot let it become, as Rev. King warned, “a lost opportunity.”

One of the easiest, yet most urgent actions we can undertake is to vote. Our remarkable BATY Board, in partnership with leaders of our congregation, are working on the RAC’s Urgency of Now voter engagement campaign. We have hundreds of voting pledge cards in our office to make sure that everyone who can will exercise this righteous act. We hope to be a 100% voting congregation.

“The deeds of the righteous are performed with urgency.”²⁴ Our souls will be on fire as we partner with God to daily renew Creation, and “[we] will not rest nor be still.”²⁵ “It is not [our] responsibility to finish the work, but neither are [we] free to desist from it.”²⁶

Today on Yom Kippur, I confess these things. We all become restless or complacent, unmotivated or stuck. I am no different. Personally, Jewishly, socially, let us wait no longer and urgently leap forward, renewing Creation each day, making our world, our community, our lives what they should be. Let us instead ask, what are we going to accomplish today?

In this New Year, may we respond to the urgency within. May we perform righteous deeds. May our souls blaze on fire. May there be “liberty and justice for all.”²⁷ May we partner with God to complete the work of Creation, who gives us an opportunity each new day.

What are we waiting for? Let’s get out and get to work for ourselves and for our community. It is our responsibility after all.

²⁴ Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Mesilat Yesharim 7:16

²⁵ *ibid*, v. 19

²⁶ Pirke Avot 2:15-16

²⁷ Pledge of Allegiance, written by Francis Bellamy in 1892 and adopted by the United States Congress in 1942