

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 2020/5781 - “The ‘3 Heys’ of History

Over the summer, I came across a short story of a mere 3 pages that captivated me with its richness and depth. This wonderful piece of sudden fiction is called “*A History of Everything, Including You.*”¹ At its core, it is a love story, a life story between a woman and a man who meet, fall in love, marry, struggle, grow apart, grow together and share their days with one another until the husband dies. What makes the story unique is how the narrator places her story of a life with her husband in the context of cosmic time. She begins with the beginning, covering 14 billion years of the Universe’s existence over the triad of pages. Their story is part of the cosmos, too. Let me give you a little taste of it.

It begins:

“First, there was God, or gods, or nothing, then synthesis, space, the expanse, explosions, implosions, particles, objects, combustion and fusion. Out of the chaos came order. Stars were born and shone and died...Life evolved or was created. Cells trembled and divided and gasped and found dry land. Soon they grew legs and fins and hands...creeping, soaring, swimming, crawling...Eyes opened and closed; we called it blinking. Above us shone a star we called the sun and we called the ground earth. So we named everything, including ourselves....We fell in love. We talked about God. We banged stones together, made sparks and called them fire. We got warmer and the food got better....We invented lipstick, vaccines, Pilates, solar panels, table manners, firearms, status symbols, chemotherapy, convenience food and computers....You were born. You learned to walk and went to school. I met you through friends. I did not like you, at first. The feeling was mutual, but we got used to each other...You held my face in your hands and said that I was beautiful, and you were too, tall with the streetlight behind you.”

Three pages, 14 billion years, two lives. If you think about it, isn’t that how history plays out, on parallel tracks. Our own stories unfolding within the pages of the world’s story; our lives a brief moment of personal significance and meaning on the canvass of eternity.

Rosh Hashanah speaks to both of these stories. We celebrate the creation of the world, the vastness of the universe where God is manifest. And we also join the Holy One in pondering our Book of Life, the history that we made in the past year, what we added to our stories that bring us pride, and those chapters we look back on with shame striving to revise.

As summer days lengthened, I wondered, what message could I offer you as the gut-punch year of 5780 comes to a close and we embark on the unknown of 5781. The message begins with an acknowledgement and validation of what I think many of us are feeling. We live in an overwhelming historical moment. And like those who have come before us in auspicious moments of human history, it is hard to have the perspective to know how to respond. How can we do the personal, spiritual work we must do and make sense of our personal triumphs and tragedies against the back drop of a disorienting world that defies comprehension?

One hundred years since the 1918 flu gripped the world, we find ourselves living a new history of pandemic. Political norms that seemed to anchor us in the past have become

¹ “A History of Everything Including You,” by Jenny Hollowell published in *New Sudden Fiction: Short Stories from American and Beyond*. Edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas. W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2007.

unmoored. Our national vessel threatens to wash ashore on the rocks of unthinking xenophobia, irrational conspiracy theories, and the distortion of truth and fact. The myth that we have moved beyond racial and ethnic prejudice in a new American century that saw the first Black president shatters when we say the names George Floyd and Bianna Taylor and when we think of places like the Walmart in El Paso Texas, the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and Emanuel AME in South Carolina. Technological and industrial innovations of the past 200 years that have led to untold human advances, now brings us careening toward unsustainable climate devastation.

For the first time in my life, when we reach *Unetaneh Tokef*, the harrowing medieval poem about God measuring the lives of all creatures, I will feel as though I am not reading verses of metaphor. Listen to the words Who will live and who will die? Who by fire and who by water? Who won't live in poverty? Which of the lucky few will live in prosperity? Who by famine and who by drought? Who by plague?... Who by plague? And we already know the answer to that, too many already, and too many more to come.

So what are we to do as we enter 5781? We immerse ourselves, our spirits, our souls in these days of awe. Rosh Hashanah and the High Holiday season offer us a framework to respond both to our personal histories in need of repair and our global historical moment in which we must defy despair. For Judaism, history is the present. It is the meeting of moments past with the potential of what can happen in the future, God willing for the good.

I want to share with you 3 “*Heys*” of Jewish history, three foundations of our holiday liturgy starting with the Hebrew letter “*Hey*” that respond to the historical moment of our own lives and the world. The 3 “*Heys*” are *hineni*, *Ha-yom Harat Olam*, and *hoshiyanu L'chayim*.

Hineini means “Here I am”. *Hineini* is the basis of the *hin'ni* prayer that Batya so beautifully chanted earlier in our service. Its words declare, “Here I am, so poor in deeds, I tremble in fear, overwhelmed and apprehensive before the Source of All Life. *Hineini* is Abraham's response to God and to his son Isaac in tomorrow's Torah portion, the Akedah, as he faces the untenable imperative to sacrifice his son. *Hineini*, “here I am” is our presence and our surrender to the realities we face. *Hineini* reminds us that the first response to moments that seem too great for us is to merely be and dwell in the brokenness and pain. *Hineni* gives us permission to not have the answers, to not have a response, but to be present and to witness where we are and where the world is. Only when we stop and become present in our own personal history and the history of our world can we respond.

Hayom Harat Olam, today the world is born. We proclaim these words when we hear the shofar shake us from our slumber. *Hayom Harat Olam*, on this day the world is born is not just about Rosh Hashanah. It is everyday. *Hayom Harat Olam* reminds us of our ability to change the course of history. From a Jewish perspective nothing is pre-ordained. Our work on the holidays begins by acknowledging that the way we have come need not be the way we go in the future. We have the power to shape our lives, to return to righteousness. Changing the current of history, re-creating our world starts with a personal choice in each moment. Time and again, people who resisted in dark moments of history from those who hid Jews 75 years ago in Europe to those who rode through the South registering voters, integrating lunch counters and walking through the front doors of a school all had one thing in common. When asked, they did not do it

to be heroes. They acted because it was the right thing to do. And as dire as the world might seem, we have the power to take to the streets in the name of compassion and of our fellow human beings, to vote and affirm sacred democratic traditions, to make changes in our personal consumption that have consequences for a global future. Today is the moment when we do not need to be a collaborator or bystander in society's injustice. We need not be complicit with our worst instincts and short comings. We can change and we can bring change. Because today, this moment, we can create the world anew.

And yet, our tradition says that we cannot overcome the inertia of personal habit or systemic injustice alone. Our third "*hey*" is *hoshiyeinu l'chayim*- redeem us, save for life. We say *Hoshiyeinu L'chayim* in a prayer that asks God to remember us; to take note of us. To make sure that our lives and endeavors are not just a cameo in cosmic time. We look to God for inspiration and goodness, for the strength to overcome what we might not be able to do on our own. In Judaism, we meet God in history. When we went forth from Egypt after hundreds of years of slavery, we met God in history as a source of justice. God remembered the covenant. That memory, our memory of a reality other than slavery led us out. When we survive the travails of our lives, our illnesses and insecurities, our inhibitions and poor intentions we do so with a higher power and we are redeemed. We also seek to remember who we are and who we can be as individuals and as a society. God's higher power comes in the form of other people who remember the goodness of our essence and remind us who we ought to be. They are our loved ones who hold a mirror up to us inspiring personal growth and true leaders who ask us to contribute to something greater than ourselves. *Hoshiyeinu L'chayim* means that we and our world is worth saving.

When we follow the 3 "*heys*" of history - *Hineini*, here I am present in the pain, *Hayom Harat Olam*, each moment we participate in the world's creation, and *Hoshieynu L'chayim* save us, O God through a memory of our essence – we find the most important message for this time, hope. For Jews, hope is not a naïve wish. Hope, *Tikvah*, contains within it a sense of yearning, of awaiting a better day, of gathering together deeds that make for real change so that the story might turn out for the good. On the High Holidays, especially in 5781 we cling to hope.

"Can you believe it?" Her husband asks as his life comes to an end in "A History of Everything, Including You." Can you believe this life, that is the question. As her husband's world ends in his death she concludes telling their history. "Now, your question is my project and our house is full of clues," she says. "I'm reading old letters and turning over rocks... I bury my face in your sweaters. I study a photograph, taken at the beach, the sun in our eyes and the water behind us...It is a victory to remember...I will tell you this. Standing on the hill this morning, I looked at the land we chose for ourselves....A storm was moving in. I did not think of heaven, but I saw the clouds were beautiful and I watched them over the sun."

In truth, our stories do not end after three pages. Our stories goes on and the world's story will go on, too. May 5781 bring our stories to places of peace and wholeness and health. May 5781 bring our world renewal and a history of hope and humanity.