

“Today is the Pregnancy of the World”

Rosh Hashana 5782

Rabbi Nissan Antine

When the Pandemic began 18 months ago, many predicted that we would have a “Baby Boom”! After all, with all the lockdowns and shutdowns, young couples would be stuck at home and what else would they do besides make babies!

But it turns out that the predictions were way off and if anything there was a “Baby Bust.” About 300,000 fewer babies will be born in 2021 in the US than in previous years. This amounts to an almost 10 percent reduction of births during a year when everyone was predicting a Baby Boom!

The truth of the matter is that this reduction of births is actually part of a larger trend which is often called “anti-natalism.” Apparently there is a growing group of young people who do not want to bring children into this world. I want to point out that they are not motivated by selfishness or laziness. On the contrary, many of the young people who don’t want to have children are those who spend the most hours volunteering and engaged in social action and *chesed*. Their motivation seems to be that they don’t want to bring children into this problematic world of ours with Pandemics and Natural and Human made disasters.

I have especially been thinking about this anti-natalist trend in light of 3 words that appear in the Rosh Hashana davening at least 12 times (after every order of shofar blasts). The phrase is *Hayom Haras Olam*. This is usually translated as “Today is the birthday of the World.” But this is really an incorrect translation. The word “*Haras*” comes from the word “*HeRayon*” which means pregnancy or conception. So the phrase literally means “Today is the Pregnancy of the World.”

Why would the rabbis (borrowing a term originally found in Jeremiah 20:17) refer to Rosh Hashana in that way and not as “*Hayom Leidat Haolam*” (Today is the birthday of the world)? What is it about Pregnancy and the process of childbirth that felt like the proper metaphor for Rosh Hashana?

I think that we can begin to answer this question by looking at every single line of shofar blasts. We begin with a *Tekia* which represents strength, optimism and hope. The *Tekia* blast represents all the wonderful moments of blessing/victory/strength in our lives. The next blast is either *Shevarim* which represents the anxieties, stress, or heaviness of life. Sometimes the middle one is a *Teruah* which represents the uncontrollable sobbing when we cannot even catch our breath (we all have experienced at least some of that). Finally, we conclude with another *Tekia* of strength and hope and at the end of an order of blasts we have the *Tekia Gedolah*! Now what is fascinating is that the Torah only speaks of Rosh Hashana as *Yom Teruah* - a day of *Terua* blasts but the rabbis (Rosh Hashana 34a) insist that every *Terua/Shevarim* (whether its a groan or a can’t catch your breath sob) needs to have a פשוטה לפנייה ולאחריה (a strong *tekia* of hope before and after!).

When we review our lives, we see that life is really just a string of ups (*Tekias*) and downs (*shevarim* and *Teruas*). But the only thing we can control is how to tell the story of our lives. One possible way to tell the story of our lives would be “*Shevarim, Tekia, Shevarim*” - that there is bad, and then maybe a little good, but we know that there will be bad again. But the rabbis insist that we tell the story as “*Tekia, shevarim, Tekia*.” Our lives begin with a hopeful *Tekia*! And it’s true we will face some hardships but we have faith and hope that there will be another *Tekia*. It’s *Tekia Shevarim Tekia*. And even though we logically know that after the final *Tekia*,

there will be another *shevarim*, we insist another *Tekia* will come after that and even a *Tekiah Gedolah*! There is no logical reason to read life as *Tekia, Shevarim, Tekia* over reading it as *Shevarim, Tekia, Shevarim*. It is an act of faith and Hope.

I want to go back to the anti-natalist tendency and the 300,000 fewer US births this year. I want to be clear that we should not be dismissive of that approach to life. It can find expression in *Kohelet, Jeremiah, Job*, the Yom Kippur davening and perhaps most clearly articulated (and acted upon) by *Amram* the father of Moshe. After *Pharoah* decreed that all Jewish boys be cast in the Nile, Amram and his wife Yocheved separated from each other and refused to have more children. And since they were leaders, they started an anti-natalist trend based on the philosophy that children should not be brought into such a horrific world. Ultimately, his daughter Miriam's view wins out. She argued that Pharoah has only decreed against the boys while Amram has decreed against all Jews. But our tradition clearly recognizes the pain of Amram and Yocheved. It recognizes that we have many periods of *shevarim* and even the sobbing "can't catch your breath" *Truas* which really push people to think that we cannot even bring kids into the world. But ultimately, as people of Faith we are asked to tell the hopeful story of having a *Tekia* at the end and even a *Tekiah Gedolah*! But we have to remember that in Judaism, Faith is not passive. We actively help ourselves and others. We have to be there with them while they are going through *shevarim* and *terua* to give them the strength (together with G-d's help!) to have another *Tekia*!

This also takes us back to the phrase - *Hayom Haras Olam*. Today is the Pregnancy of the World. The period of pregnancy is a time of, on the one hand, great hope, excitement and optimism. But on the other hand, it is a time when a mother is most vulnerable, scared and oftentimes in a lot of pain. We also know that so many have struggled with fertility and this is perhaps one of the greatest pains that people live with. The Rabbis don't call Rosh Hashana the birthday of the world because that would be overly dismissive of the *shevarim* and *teruas* that people face. The "everything is always great" approach to life isn't real. And when we have that approach, we can sometimes be dismissive of both our own and other people's very real *Shevarims* and *Teruas*. But, as religious people, we also have to work towards (and have faith in) the *Tekia* at the other end. Sometimes it is the act of really listening to someone else's *shevarim* that allows them to have another *Tekia* and even a *Tekiah Gedolah*.

This year as we listen to the shofar, let us hear all the *Tekias, shevarims* and *Teruas* in our lives and in other people's lives. Let us ask ourselves if we are doing everything we can to help bring about the next *tekia* (and sometimes the most important thing to do is really listen to the *shevarim* and *teruah*!).

May Hashem bless all of us with a Shana Tova Umetukah!

*Living with Anticipation*

Rosh Hashanah 5782

Rabbi Eitan Cooper

The most important thing in my life is my family.

The second most important thing in my life is this Beth Sholom community and everything it stands for.

And, for the last four months, the third most important thing in my life were the sunflowers growing on my deck.

I started growing sunflowers in our backyard the day that Dita went into labor with our third son, Lior. Don't worry, I planted them a few hours before we went to the hospital!

Now let me be clear: I do not have a green thumb. In fact, most things I have ever tried to grow have died pretty quickly. And this is exactly what happened at first with my sunflowers after a few weeks. Some got eaten and some never sprouted. But after many weeks of effort, of planting and replanting and watering and building nets to protect them from animals, I finally succeeded.

This was an enlightening experience for me. Besides learning more about gardening, it taught me an important lesson. More than anything - the thing I did most often in growing the sunflowers - was wait. I spent a lot of time waiting. Each day, coming back to check on them to see if they had made progress. Anticipating when they might bloom. This took a lot of patience!

But also - I really had no idea if they were going to grow. I was waiting, without knowing what was going to happen.

It goes without saying that it is hard to wait for something that we want. In fact, the Hebrew word for patience "סבלנות" (savlanut) was intentionally related to the word "לסבל" - to suffer - when Eliezer Ben Yehuda revived the Hebrew language. Not knowing what the future holds for us can be paralyzing.

I'm sure we can all think about experiences in the last year when we have had to wait for something, and felt uncertain about the future. From the mundane - when a package will come, will the Yankees win, when will the traffic stop, what will the weather be. To the more holy - Friends and loved ones have been in their last days, as we waited for them to pass on from this world. We have waited for simchas to happen - not certain when babies would be born or if bnei mitzvah would happen as planned.

And of course, this is what our pandemic lives have been like the last 18 months. If we have learned any lesson, it is that we cannot predict the future. When will the vaccine come? When will everyone get vaccinated? When will we reach herd immunity? Not knowing what will happen to us - to our families, our community and the whole world - is so difficult.

This is one of the central themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur davening - not knowing what this year will bring. We capture this feeling so powerfully in Unetane Tokef. Mi Yichyeh Umi Yamut - "Who will live and who will die?" We do not know.

How do we handle this? How do we go through life without knowing what might happen to us and when it will happen? I want to offer two approaches, both seen in moments in the Torah reading on both days of Rosh hashanah.

The first comes when Hagar has been sent away by Avraham. Sarah asks for Avraham to send her away, and Hashem tells him to listen to her, and eventually, Hagar finds herself in desperate straits. Yishmael, the son she had with Avraham, is about to die as they have run out of water. She feels incredibly vulnerable, So she raises her voice and begins to weep - “ ותשא את קלה ותבך.”

Hagar has no idea what is going to happen to her - she does not have any assurance from G-d that things will be ok. She feels vulnerable. And in this moment, she embraces her vulnerability. She submits - as she realizes that she can no longer determine her own fate. Her moment of vulnerability becomes a deep moment of spirituality, according to the Be'er Mayim Chayim (a Chassidic commentator), who says that this really was a moment of teshuvah for Hagar. She had nowhere else to turn, so she turned - better yet, returned - to Hashem.

The message of Hagar's story is that in moments where we do not know what is going to happen, we should look up to Hashem - not for answers, but rather to submit - to say I do not know how the universe works, I never will know. I want to know - but I realize I cannot.

The second moment comes when Avraham is about to offer up Yitzchak as a sacrifice to G-d. As he is about to slaughter his son, he hears a voice and he looks up. The Torah uses the same word - וישא – to describe what Avraham does in the moment as it does to describe Hagar's looking up as she wept.

But this moment is different. The Radak notes that in this moment, Avraham was looking up not out of desperation or vulnerability, but rather with purpose. He was looking up specifically to find an animal. And indeed, he finds an Ayil - a Ram. Nothing else mattered to Avraham in this moment. It was one of total presence.

In this way, Avraham's response to uncertainty is completely different than Hagar's. He attempted to be present, to live in the moment. And this in some ways is the message of the shofar, in general - as we listen to the shofar - the same animal that Avraham found in that moment of presence - we too can try and be totally present.

How do we respond to moments when we do not know what will happen to us? How do we live our lives with so much uncertainty? We can be like Hagar - embracing our vulnerability and transforming these moments into ones of spiritual submission. Or we can be like Avraham, attempting to be totally present - not thinking about the past or the future.

What will happen this year? What will it bring for us? I do not know and I have learned that we can no longer make any predictions. But still, nonetheless, I bless us to embrace Hagar and Avraham's approaches. May we all be blessed with a Shana Tovah, a year filled with goodness, of turning to Hashem in moments of uncertainty, a year of living in the here and now.

Shana Tova!