

“Today is the Pregnancy of the World”

Rosh Hashana 5782

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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!