

## HaYom Harat Olam

Many of you know that back in the day, I was the lead singer for a world-music Women's band, named Pele Juju. Some of you may actually remember those days. Our congregation was in the little building on Bay and California, so after helping Rabbi Rick lead Friday night services from the bimah, more than a few times after services I would drive the short distance from the Westside to the Catalyst, change my clothes in the bathroom and get up on stage to perform with the band. I kept singing at TBE for Shabbat evening services **and** with the band well into my third trimester of pregnancy.

One of the last times I sang with Pele Juju, was a Saturday night at another downtown venue. I was very close to my due date, but I took a nap in the afternoon and was excited about getting on stage with my band mates. Don't worry, I didn't give birth on stage, and Aryeh was with me. But I do think what happened later that night had something to do with Pele Juju. According to Hawaiian tradition, Pele is the goddess of volcanoes and fire. A perfect image for the rest of my story.

When we got home, I sprawled out on the couch, and within just about half an hour, I felt my first contraction, my first eruption. They started coming

pretty close together, so I called my friend who was in training to become a nurse midwife. We had made plans for a home birth. My friend said that we should call our nurse midwife as soon as my water broke.

We kept monitoring my contractions, just as we had learned to do in our birthing class. Aryeh helped me remember to breathe and another friend who had assisted at home births and was an acupuncturist came over. It wasn't too long before my water broke, and we called Kate Bowland. Kate was one of the first and most experienced nurse midwives in our county. She arrived at our door shortly, and then everything stopped. No more contractions...

We tried everything. I'll spare you the details, but let's just say that Daniel was born the following day at Dominican Hospital.

Why am I telling you this very personal birth story on RH?

Ha Yom Harat Olam. The way we usually translate his phrase in English is "Today the world is born." On Rosh HaShanah we celebrate the birthday of the world!

In the midst of a pandemic, an upcoming election, a reckoning with systemic racism, a rise in anti-Semitism, intense polarization in our country and climate crisis, we say in our Rosh HaShanah prayers, today the world is born.

But the actual translation of this phrase: ha-yom harat olam, is a little more complicated, and I find it both a more poetic and meaningful description of Rosh HaShanah. What the phrase really says is that Rosh HaShanah is called a “day of gestation.” This day is considered, in a certain way, as the day in which things are happening, like in pregnancy: there is a child there; it is not born yet, no one knows how it will be, but we all know that there is a child in there. Labor is about to begin; the child is in the process of leaving the womb. It’s particularly interesting that the rabbis (who let’s be honest, were men, and didn’t have the ability to physically birth a child) chose this image. This intentional choice speaks to the universal nature of our metaphor. It can have meaning for all of us. Those who have physically birthed babies and those who haven’t.

Hayom Harat Olam. Today the world is in gestation. What were the rabbis trying to teach us?

Maybe we're asked to experience Rosh Hashanah as a day with an internal, hidden form, a day filled with potential for what may happen in this new year. For the time being while in the gestational period, much is unknown, and we are waiting – full of expectations and also of worries and fears – to see what will happen.

What does that mean, especially **this** year? What is the world we might reimagine during this New Year, this pregnant moment, filled with potential?

Sikh Author, activist and attorney, Valerie Kaur speaks about the metaphors of birth and death in her book, "See No Stranger". She invites us to imagine where we are in this difficult time in our country and our world. She asks if what we are seeing, and feeling is the darkness of the tomb or the darkness of the womb. I know that using darkness as a pejorative term is fraught with potential racist implications but bear with me because Kaur paints a vivid picture.

She invites us to imagine what we might find in the darkness of the womb. How can we experience this womb-like darkness?

She writes that “the womb draws up notions of warmth, safety, love, and potential. As we know, the womb is where we, as beings, begin to grow, develop, and equip ourselves with the tools we need to enter into the unknown world. What if every experience of darkness in our lives offered this same opportunity: to re-enter a safe and nurturing space for the sole purpose of dedicating time to our evolution...”

Hayom Harat Olam-Today, our world is in gestation, on the verge of being born.

How will we midwife this moment?

When will we push? How will we remember to breathe? What will labor require of us?

How will we connect with our ability to be partners in re-creating our world?

One of the great ironies of life is how in the process of giving life to a newborn baby the mother may be risking her own life. The birthing of the new is not an easy task. We call it labor.

And so this day, this day we say, today the world is being born. Different from any we’ve ever experienced. Some have wondered if we are living through biblical time...so many plagues, devastating fires, painful

contractions that require breathing and pushing...And as with the birth of a new human, there's no going back. Once the contractions begin, the only choice is to birth the child.

It's been difficult to breathe, due to the smoke filled air, the virus, police with a knee on George Floyd's neck...

When we can't find our breath, we need others to remind us to breathe. And we also need the encouragement to push.

When we listen and we're listened to, we take a breath.

When we have uncomfortable conversations that lead to growth and understanding, we push. When we keep our hearts open to the painful birthing contractions, we don't really know what this new world will look like when it's born. We're not going back to the way it was.

We are coming to a time of reckoning. The rabbis teach that with the coming of the messianic age there are difficult birth pangs. The transformation involves awareness and attention.

Valerie Kaur writes,

"Every social justice movement in America has been infused with faith leaders who ignite our moral imagination and connect us with our ability to re-create the world around us."

We are gestating a new world. And yes, it does take a village, or a congregation, or many villages and congregations.

Let's keep pushing and breathing for the sake of new life, the very new potential about to be born because our labor for peace and justice is an act of love.

## Who is King?

Perhaps more than any other specific prayer, I've heard people say that Avinu Malkeynu invokes the image of God as a long-bearded king sitting in judgment upon his throne. And that image is often the reason some say they don't believe in God. God as a man, God as the Supreme Judge, God as far away, controlling the universe, just isn't always a Divine image that feels relevant to many these days.

One way I've tried to work with the Avinu Malkeynu is to focus on the Avinu part of the phrase. I call upon God as a caring parent who is there for me when I'm needing support and strength. A presence that is close, within my reach. But there are pieces that are missing from the whole picture in this prayer...our Father our King. When I invoke God as a parent, I still haven't dealt with the gender issue, God as a father, not a mother, and I'm leaving behind half of the image, the transcendent, sovereign concept of Malkeynu-God as King. As liberal Jews, we make informed choices as to how we practice our Judaism, and we look for modern interpretations of our prayers, but there's still a part of me that has felt uncomfortable singing and leading this prayer while I'm struggling to "work around" the Malkeynu the King that I'm pleading with for mercy and salvation.



I've been thinking about it a lot this year. What is a King? What are the attributes of a just and compassionate ruler or leader?

In our current crisis of leadership, as I have been preparing for the HH's I've been wondering, is there a way to reclaim the notion of kingship, or royalty? Is there some important message I can embrace in this portrayal of God? Cantor Alisa moved me when she shared her ideas about our inner sovereignty before she chanted "HaMelech" the King, on Rosh HaShanah.

How is God depicted as a King in Jewish texts?

According to the scholar Dr Mark Tzvi Brettler, in the Biblical imagination, "Kingship was especially well suited to describe the many roles that God was expected to play." Brettler draws Divine/ Royalty attributes from various places in the Bible. Here are just a few:

Like human kings, God is portrayed as being wise and strong. And like kings, God is an exemplary judge. Similar to ancient kings who took on building projects, God created the world. Like human kings, God sits on a throne. According to Brettler, "God as king" appears often in prayers and psalms...and this metaphor continues in the Rabbinic period and later—modified, of course, to accord with changing notions of royalty in different times and places."

So, royalty, a king, should possess wisdom, fairness, strength, ability to create and majesty.

Then I started to wonder:

Who are the people we see who exhibit dignity, wisdom, humility, the characteristics we look for in a leader?

Since my RH sermon focused on the image of gestation and birth, maybe this Yom Kippur sermon is a way for me to lift up the ideal of a male archetype-what it truly means to be a king.

As I've been watching and reading about systemic racism in our country, I noticed that I've been paying close attention to the Black men who have stepped up to claim their rightful place as leaders in our country. This is not to ignore the fact that Black women have traditionally been overlooked as amazing, strong and inspiring leaders. Since I've been trying to work with the concept of kingship, Malkeynu I am focusing on the leadership qualities of Black men.

Black men, who are five times more likely to be stopped and questioned by the police without just cause than a white man. Take that in. Whose behavior is constantly scrutinized by law enforcement...incarcerated over five times more than white men.

Almost a month ago to this evening I watched the March on Washington to demand racial justice. Over 50,000 demonstrators gathered for the Commitment March: also called-"Get Your Knee Off Our Neck". Fifty seven years before, at the same site where Dr Martin Luther King shared his "I Have Dream" address, and John Lewis spoke from his heart...this time the families of Black Americans shot and for the most part, killed by police officers shared their stories and the urgent messages of **their** hearts. The families of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner and Jacob Blake spoke about their losses and called for justice and peace.

The message is loud and clear. There is no justice in our system. None of the three officers involved in Breonna Taylor's death were charged with her killing. How can we talk about justice?

When I began hearing about the life and death of the actor Chadwick Boseman who starred in the movie, Black Panther, I was reminded of the ways he helped craft a world of justice in his portrayal of King T'Challa of Wakanda...many of us didn't know that while playing the King, he was in treatment for colon cancer. And did he brave his cancer diagnosis and treatment like a true king, with courage, grace and determination. I watched a video of Mr. Boseman talking with Black children who were battling their own cancer diagnosis. Some of them told Boseman that they

just wanted to stay alive long enough...until Black Panther was released so that they could watch it themselves. Boseman broke down in tears when he shared this story...and I cried watching him cry... like a brave and beautiful King. Yes, real kings cry...

In Black Panther we heard him, the King with his arms across his chest, shouting the affirmation, "Wakanda Forever". And in no time, it became a revolutionary cry, an affirmation-more than an aspiration. Because the word forever, was not only a condemnation of history, it was a rich narrative, describing vividly, the story of a sophisticated African kingdom, free of the brutalization of slavery. A story that described all African men and women as descendants of kings and queens. There is one point in the movie where King T'chalah boldly condemns his father for abandoning his people and Boseman powerfully expresses angry disappointment amidst the movie's uplifting message. In this moment we understand that we can mourn the past, and that we are more than the actions of our ancestors...they might have been kings and queens, and we can be even better.

Chadwick Boseman was the best. He played many figures who struggled for justice, real and fictional. I re-watched his portrayal of James Brown in “Get On Up” and realized I had completely forgotten a scene in the movie that hit me differently this time around. I think you’ll understand why.

The scene takes place right after Dr Martin Luther King is assassinated. James Brown was scheduled to play a large concert at the Boston Garden and the Mayor had decided to cancel the show due to fears of rioting. Boseman plays James Brown on a call with the Mayor. We watch him talking with the Mayor and in just a few minutes into the phone call, he convinces the Mayor to change his mind and allow the large concert to happen in the Garden. The pivotal moment in the conversation comes when James Brown says to the Mayor, “Tomorrow night you’ll either get 10,000 angry folk in The Garden or 10,000 angry folk on your front lawn.” Brown asserts his power, his dominion, and the Mayor backs down. This is real leadership. Having lost Dr Martin Luther King, James Brown, referred to as the Godfather or the King of soul, takes up the royal mantle.

In the Kabbalistic tradition, the attribute of “Malkhut,” divine Kingship, is associated with the Shekinah, the indwelling presence of God, the part of

God that lives within each and every one of us. That's the king I'm talking about. The accessible king, within us. Where are these kings now?

Did you see the The Oakland A's and Houston Astros players walk off the field at Minute Maid Park, right before the teams' scheduled game was set to start? The players were all wearing number 42 jerseys in honor of Jackie Robinson Day. And by the way, Chadwick Boseman played him as well. It was Jackie Robinson day and a game was scheduled to be played between these two teams. This was right after the shooting of Jacob Blake. The players took the field. Some of the opposing team members put their arms around each other as they observed 42 seconds of silence and memory, then they exited, they just walked right off the baseball diamond, leaving a "Black Lives Matter" t-shirt placed on home plate between two Jackie Robinson jerseys, one from each team. This was a few days after NBA players refused to play in their scheduled games. These sports figures said, enough. They drew a line in the sand. They acted like royalty. Dignity, humility, strength, solidarity, compassion. Kings...

Scholars teach that the Avinu Malkeynu prayer is said to have arisen during a communal crisis, a drought. The rabbis of the time called for a public fast as a way of pleading with the all-powerful, King and compassionate Father

to bring rain. Rabbi Akiva is said to have begged “Our father, our king, we have no king other than You. Our father, our king, have mercy upon us!”  
Our lives depend on it.

It’s time for all of us to step up, to step in and find our inner royalty. Please look for details about our upcoming Diversity, Equity and Inclusion work. Wilma Gold, Susan Freeman and board member Olivia Stangnaro are working with the Audacious Hospitality program sponsored through the Reform Movement, to help us educate ourselves and act upon these values.

The last image I want to share with you are from pictures of Black children, with their little Black Panther action figures, surrounding them in a circle on the floor. These little kids are sitting with their arms across their chests, holding funerals for the king, saying “Wakanda forever.” Some of them are crying because for them, Chadwick Boseman really was a king.

Chadwick Boseman found his inner kingship. Because let’s face it, black men and women have to be kings and queens, just to survive in this country...and we’d better figure out how we’re going to be partners in creating a country with a new vision of what justice really means.