

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld
ASBI Congregation
RH2 5778

The World Was Created for Me

Some of you may know that our brothers and sisters in Israel are suffering through an acute crisis right now. It is a crisis that could have been predicted—indeed it was predicted many years ago—and yet it is still causing panic and confusion as events predicted long ago come to fruition.

Of course, I am referring to the rare occurrence of a so-called “three-day yom tov” as Rosh Hashanah extends across Thursday and Friday and directly into Shabbat. Here in the diaspora, we have “three-day yom tov” fairly frequently—some years very frequently—but Israeli Jews, who only observe two days of Rosh Hashanah and not any other holiday, have atrophied yom tov survival skills. They have been in a state of panic.

Let’s take a step back to review how we got to this state. Before we had a fixed calendar, each month, on the thirtieth day after last month’s Rosh Hodesh, witnesses would appear in front of the Sanhedrin and testify that they saw the moon. The court would then examine the witnesses, verify their reliability, and announce that day as the first day of the new month. Of course, sometimes witnesses did not arrive. And sometimes the court threw-out the testimony of the witnesses for one reason or another. In those instances, the old month would have one more day—it would last for a full thirty days—and the new month would begin the following day.

Once the new month was declared, emissaries would embark to spread the news to every Jewish community in the world. For example, the first of the month of Nissan is fifteen days before Pesach. Everyone had to know whether Adar was a 29- or 30-day month before knowing when Pesach would begin. For this reason, Jewish communities in the diaspora adopted the custom of celebrating Jewish holidays for two days. There just was not enough time for messengers to travel from Jerusalem to Babylonia in time for Pesach.

But Rosh Hashanah presented its own set of challenges. Even in *Eretz Yisrael*, even in Jerusalem itself, even right in the Temple in the presence of the Sanhedrin, there was not always enough time to celebrate Rosh Hashanah after waiting for the appearance of witnesses. The Mishnah records that one year, witnesses came late in the day to testify that they had seen the new moon that inaugurated the new year. There were only a few minutes left before the end of the day and they had just declared it to have been Rosh Hashanah. There was no time to observe all of the Rosh Hashanah rituals and *korbanot*, or even to blow shofar, in the waning minutes of the day.

And so, the decision was made to observe Rosh Hashanah as a two-day holiday, even in Israel. Even in Jerusalem. When the calendar was fixed and no longer based on eyewitness testimony of the new moon, we in the diaspora continued our custom of observing holidays for a second day, and Jews in *Eretz Yisrael*, after some initial vacillation, recommitted to their custom of observing Rosh Hashanah for two days.

While observing the second day of Rosh Hashanah is not a practice that the Torah anticipates, it does allow us, on years such as this one and on days such as today, to reclaim something very original and authentic to Rosh Hashanah.

Do you remember how hard it is to prepare for Shabbat in years when Yom Kippur occurs on Friday? No, you don’t, because Yom Kippur never occurs on Friday! As the Jewish calendar was fixed and set, a rule was incorporated that precludes the first day of Rosh Hashanah from occurring on a Sunday, Wednesday, or Friday. *שלא אדרגא* in Hebrew. This means that only when Rosh Hashanah is celebrated for two days can we

have a day like today in which Rosh Hashanah is celebrated on Friday, which is a particularly resonant day of the week to celebrate Rosh Hashanah.

When we refer to Rosh Hashanah as the “birthday of the world” and when we count the new year from Creation, we are commemorating Rosh Hashanah not as the date on which God created the Heavens and Earth, which took place on day one according to the first chapter of *Sefer Bereishit*. We are commemorating the creation of humanity on Rosh Hashanah, and that took place on a Friday.

And humanity’s creation on Friday, the culmination of a busy week of creation, is itself significant and something we can reflect upon this year. The Talmud presents four explanations for humanity’s Friday origins.

ת"ר אדם נברא בערב שבת ומפני מה שלא יהו המינים אומרים שותף היה לו להקדוש ברוך הוא במעשה בראשית דבר אחר שאם תזוח דעתו עליו אומר לו יתוש קדמך במעשה בראשית דבר אחר כדי שיכנס למצוה מיד

The Sages taught in a baraita (Tosefta 8:7): Adam the first man was created on Friday afternoon at the close of the six days of Creation. And for what reason was this so? So that the heretics will not be able to say that the Holy Blessed One, had a partner in the acts of Creation.

Alternatively, he was created on Friday afternoon so that if a person becomes haughty, God can say to him: The mosquito preceded you in the acts of Creation, as you were created last.

Alternatively, he was created on Friday afternoon in order that he enter into the mitzva of observing Shabbat immediately.

דבר אחר כדי שיכנס לסעודה מיד משל למלך בשר ודם שבנה פלטרין ושיכללן והתקין סעודה ואחר כך הכניס אורחין

Alternatively, he was created on Friday afternoon after all of the other creations, in order that he enter into a feast immediately, as the whole world was prepared for him. This is comparable to a king of flesh and blood, who first built palaces and improved them, then prepared a feast and afterward brought in his guests.

Let’s quickly review these four explanations with an awareness that, according to this ancient Talmudic tradition, commemorating God’s creation on a Friday like today was a conscious decision that was intended to teach us something that could only be taught in this way.

The creation of humanity at the end of God’s six days of creation, confirms the distinction between Creator and creature. It is not possible for any person to mistakenly claim that any human being has been a partner with God in the task of creation.

Furthermore, lest we become haughty and arrogant and abrogate to ourselves undue privilege in the order of the universe, we can recall that every living thing existed on earth prior to any human being. I remember as a child that the existence of mosquitos was a significant theological challenge: How could a loving God create a creature that provides such torment to so many. The Talmud doubles-down on that theological challenge. Mosquitos have a more secure place in God’s great plan than you do!

Alternatively, we were created on Friday afternoon in order to give us a head-start. We were given a mitzvah opportunity and every possible advantage to do things right as soon as we came upon the scene. The Talmud even goes so far as to say that it took until Friday to get the rest of creation ready for human beings. We were welcomed into the world as one might welcome guests into a fully furnished palace.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Persischa is said to have recommended having two slips of paper in two of our pockets at all times. On one it says, “I am just dust and ashes,” a quote from Avraham in *Sefer Bereishit*. The

other slip of paper says, “The world was created for me”—*Bishvili HaOlam Nivra*. We look at one slip of paper when our arrogance threatens to dominate our personality. And we look at the other when we are at risk of despair at our ability to accomplish our goals.

As it turns out, “the world was created for me” is also discussed in the same Talmudic passage that analyzes humanity’s origins on a Friday. The Mishnah in Sanhedrin teaches:

לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי ללמדך שכל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד עולם מלא וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא
ומפני שלום הבריות שלא יאמר אדם לחבירו אבא גדול מאביך ושלא יהו המינים אומרים הרבה רשויות בשמים ולהגיד גדולתו של הקב"ה שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד כולן דומין זה לזה ומלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון ואין אחד מהן דומה לחבירו לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר בשבילי נברא העולם

Humanity comes from one common ancestor to teach that by destroying one life, one is considered as though one has destroyed an entire world, and one who saves a life is as though an entire world has been saved.

The Mishnah continues, humanity coming from one common ancestor promotes peace since no human being can tell another that he has an ancestor who is greater in any way. We all have the same common ancestor.

The Mishnah continues and says that our creation from one common ancestor demonstrates the greatness and uniqueness of Divine creation, since a human who stamps a coin will stamp identical coins from one stamp whereas each human being is different despite our common ancestor.

And since our diversity and uniqueness as human beings is the product of the way in which we were created, the Mishnah continues and says, “therefore each individual is obligated to say, ‘the world was created for me.’”

לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר בשבילי נברא העולם

Rosh Hashanah on a Friday is a return to the anniversary of the birth of humanity as the products of Divine creation. Seeing ourselves in this way ought to transform how we perceive our place in the universe. We were created as the honored guests invited into a fully furnished palace, and we were afterthoughts who came to the scene after mosquitos. This day, and our prayers and *avodah* and the spiritual work before us today, lies at the intersection of the dialectic between the grandeur and the humility of the human condition. Rosh Hashanah is a day when both of Rav Simcha Bunim’s pockets are empty because we are holding and reading both slips of paper at the same time.

This is the same dynamic at play when we perceive our place in the universe and our place among humankind. All human beings are sisters and brothers, children of the same parents. Not one of us has any justification to say **אבא גדול מאביך** that our parents were greater than someone else’s parents.

Yet, the Haftarah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah (remember the only Haftarah that can ever be read when Rosh Hashanah is celebrated on a Friday is the Haftarah for the *second* day of Rosh Hashanah) is from the thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah. The prophet speaks, in poignant and moving language, about the special loving relationship that exists between the Jewish people and God and God’s commitment to lovingly and joyfully bring the Jewish people back to *Eretz Yisrael* from our exile:

הבן יקר לי אפרים אם ילד שעשעים פימדי דברי בו זכר אפרנו עוד על־פן הקו מעי לו רתם ארתמנו נאם־יהוה:
“Is not Ephraim my favorite son”

Can we speak of ourselves as God's favorite son while also acknowledging that no person can say אבא גדול מאביך that my parents were greater than yours? Yes, and we do that in the same way that we can see the whole world existing for us, and seeing that we are but dust and ashes.

We need both slips of paper and we need to know when to look at each one. Connection to a community can also help us to balance between these two oscillations. When we are successful, we risk arrogance. But that success and arrogance can work together to create isolation from others. "It's lonely at the top" and we are not meant to be lonely. When we are at risk of arrogance and isolation, we need a lesson in humility, and we need to be reconnected to other people and community.

And when we are despondent, and our self-confidence has abandoned us, we feel detached from the world. All around I see people with friends and a place where they fit in—but not me. We need to be reminded that the world exists for us, too, and we need a community to reattach us to the world.

And everything that is true for us as individuals and as families is also true for the Jewish people as a collective. We are vigilant in defense of our community's safety and we invest lavishly in the institutions that nurture Judaism, promote Judaism, and help convey it from generation to generation. But our life of Torah and Mitzvot cannot be entirely self-referential. We cherish our relationship with God, exemplified by the words of today's haftarah—הַבְּרִי יִקָּר לִי אֶפְרַיִם—but we also recall that each human being has a common ancestor.

The calibration between a devotion to Torah and mitzvot which is entirely self-referential on one extreme, and a love for humanity that absorbs all of our focus and energy and leaves nothing left for particular Jewish concerns on the other extreme, is a significant agenda for the Jewish people to work through in the coming year.

Several weeks ago, I announced that our shul's tzedakah fund was going to help replace chumashim destroyed by Hurricane Harvey at United Orthodox Synagogues of Houston. I shared with you that while the needs facing Houston were—and remain—vast, nobody other than the Jewish community would step in and replace chumashim. The Red Cross won't do that and neither will FEMA. We always need to step in and help in ways and in places where nobody else will. Similarly, if we believe that Torah and Mitzvot have something unique to contribute to the world, and if we believe that Jewish civilization is a cultural heritage that should exist and thrive in the world, then we need to invest time and effort and a great deal of money to strengthen those institutions that perpetuate and promote Judaism.

But we make that investment in Jewish life and Jewish education because we believe that Torah and Mitzvot are of service to the broader world. We raise the next generation as Jews because we believe the world will be a better place if we raise our community's children to be knowledgeable and faithful Jews. A life of Torah and Mitzvot must always be a lifestyle that makes us better neighbors and lovers of humanity.

Equilibrium between arrogance and crippling lack of self-confidence can come from knowing our place in the universe as a creature but not creator—but can also come from knowing we serve a unique and special purpose of creation itself. The Jewish people need to take responsibility for our covenant with God and for the Torah itself. But we do so for the ultimate benefit of all human beings, every one of whom can point, on this Friday of Rosh Hashanah, to a common ancestor, no better—and no worse—than any other.