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Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781
Hayom Harat Olam: Today, the World is Born Anew

Today is the birthday of the world. One of the traditional names for Rosh Hashanah is *Hayom Harat Olam* - today is the birthday of the world. According to Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah marks both the day on which the world was created, AND the notion that *each year* Creation is renewed in its entirety. *Hayom Harat Olam* - today the world is born anew. But this year, more than most, it feels difficult to muster up the strength and enthusiasm to really celebrate.

To say that this past year has been hard is a gross understatement. It is a daunting task to try to find words to give voice to the pain, the loss, the struggle, the tragedy, and the trauma in our world over these past six months. In so many ways, there are no words.

Some of us have lost loved ones, some have battled with illness, some have had to watch from a distance as our loved ones fought for their lives. Some have lost jobs, or struggled to keep jobs, or felt overwhelmed by the new burdens that came with working or learning from home. Many of us are horrified as well by the man-made increases in violence, insensitivity, malice, and misunderstanding. But today, today is the anniversary of Creation, that first project of making Order out of Chaos. Tonight, as Jews, we are called to mark the arrival of a new year, to reflect on the year that's been, and to move forward, one small, trepidatious step at a time. *Hayom Harat Olam* - today, the world is born anew.

Jews are no strangers to chaos and difficulty. We are one of the world's oldest "others." As a people, our history is riddled with exiles, expulsions, and pogroms; anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism, violence, and oppression. Some of this darkness certainly still remains in our world -- we are in the midst of a concerning uptick in anti-Semitism. But throughout our history, rather than retreat inward or withdraw from the world around us, as a people and a religion, Jews and Judaism have chosen empathy over xenophobia, engagement with the world around us, over isolation.

We know from our history that we will get through this moment in time. Certainly not without difficulty, and potentially not without pain, but we will move through this dark time. It's been said that during the 1918 Spanish Influenza, everyone knew someone who had lost someone or been affected by it, and as COVID-19 rages on, I know that this is also the case for many of us as we gather tonight. In his book *More Beautiful Than Before*, Rabbi Steve Leder explores the ways in which suffering and pain can transform us. He writes,

"Every one of us sooner or later walks through hell.... The point is to not come out empty-handed. The point is to make your life worthy of your suffering.¹ ...If you take pain's lessons to heart and use the tools bequeathed to you, the blessings of your freedom, your wealth, your time, your heart and soul, to fix something that is broken, then you will not have walked through hell and come out empty-handed. You will have

¹ Steve Leder, *More Beautiful Than Before*, p. ix.

traversed the Valley of Shadows to be bathed in the light of wisdom and live a more beautiful life. Use your pain to fix something. And don't wait.²"

In the midst of the incredible pain of this pandemic, how have our lives and our world changed? What have we learned?

We have found new ways to work, new ways to connect, new hobbies to pursue, and a new sense of how deeply interdependent and interconnected we are as human beings. We've also had to find new ways to seek balance, celebrate important moments, and, perhaps most difficult, not lose sight of the holiness in our lives.

This really is Judaism's essence: moderation, celebration, and sanctification comprise its core. Psychologist Wendy Mogel, in her book on parenting through a Jewish lens, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, explains,

"The principle of moderation teaches us to do two seemingly incompatible things at once: to passionately embrace the material world that God has created...while exercising self-discipline. Judaism clarifies our proper perspective on engagement with the world. We are not to emulate animals, who act on instinct... the angels, who don't struggle with longing; or the ascetics, who shun earthly pleasures. God created us with intense desire and free will on purpose, and it is up to us to use this endowment for good or ill."

We've learned (or are trying to learn) how to balance caring for children or aging parents with the demands of our professional lives, often feeling like we're being pulled in too many directions at once. This is as true for me as I know it is for so many of you -- it has been a struggle trying to juggle my responsibilities as a father, a rabbi, and a husband, especially with all three worlds colliding in my home. But despite the new stresses and challenges that exist, I've come to appreciate the incredible gift of time I'm getting -- time to eat with my kids and Amy at lunch and dinner, getting to hear about their day; time to read stories, tuck them into bed and give them goodnight kisses, almost every night. These are small, simple gifts that aren't normally a given in a rabbi's life, but I'll certainly carry these moments with me. Our tradition teaches us the importance of trying to find balance in our lives, even if the scale is sometimes tipped too far towards work or too far towards disengagement. The goal is to strive to be better, not perfect.

Moderation, [Mogel continues,] leads to the second principle, celebration. We are obliged to embrace God's gifts moderately but enthusiastically; in other words, we are obliged to give thanks and to party. Celebration can take hundreds of forms, from the year-round Jewish cycle of celebrating major and minor holidays to saying blessings over food, rainbows, new clothes, a narrow escape, or doing something for the very first time.

² Leder, p. 182.

We've found many new ways of celebrating: Zoom seders, Zoom birthday parties, and Zoom b'nei mitzvah. We've recorded and watched VidHugs, we've FaceTimed, and mastered the art of wearing shorts with suits and ties. My uncle, who lives outside of Atlanta, was able to join our family's seder for the first time in years - he even got to "meet" my kids for the first time. We've also found new ways to come together in mourning, with virtual funerals and shiva minyanim. These experiences have certainly been powerful - I've seen Zoom b'nei mitzvah and shiva minyanim in which family and friends participated from across the globe; those who perhaps wouldn't have been able to attend in person were able to be there, virtually.

[Finally, says Mogel,] sanctification, the third principle, is the process of acknowledging the holiness in everyday actions and events, especially in our homes. One traditional Jewish expression for the word home is the same as the word for a house of worship: *mikdash me'at* or "little holy place." Our dining table is an altar, and, surrounded by family, has the potential to be the holiest spot on the planet."³

So many of our Zoom b'nei mitzvah have been centered in our families' homes -- creating a truly sacred space. Consider this very moment we're all experiencing together. Who could have imagined the High Holy Days happening in our homes? Yet here we all are, creating sacred space, and a sacred moment in our living rooms. We have discovered that we can make these otherwise ordinary, everyday spaces holy. So much holiness can be found in the opportunities this virtual world has created. After one dear friend who I hadn't talked to in many years popped up in a VidHug for my own milestone birthday this summer, we were able to reconnect, pull in another long-lost friend, and pick up our friendship again, the years of time apart melting away.

Back in March, in the first weeks of sheltering-in-place, here at Beth Am, we arranged to have volunteers call some of the older and more isolated members of the congregation - to check in, make sure everyone had what they needed, and to help arrange for the delivery of any essentials. It was also an opportunity for our congregants to connect with each other in a new and sometimes profound way. One volunteer caller shared with me that during one of her first phone calls, she connected with the gentleman she was calling over their shared love of music. It turned out that her son played piano, and offered to play for this congregant over the phone. After the piece, she commented that she felt sorry he was alone and he said, "Well, I'm not alone right now." They still talk every Sunday, and her son even wrote a special piece for his birthday. In turn, this older congregant also sends videos of different composers that he likes. There is certainly holiness in the way in which these congregants - who perhaps may have never connected before - came together, in a way that would have seemed unlikely just a few months earlier. There are so many stories like this one that have emerged from the midst of this pandemic. Stories of human connection, of our ability to open our eyes to see the humanity of those who may not look or think like us. The pain of this pandemic has opened our eyes; helped us to see the pain that has always been present and the suffering that too many in our community, our country, and our world, have endured for far too long.

³ Wendy Mogel, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, also <https://reformjudaism.org/present-parent>

“Every one of us sooner or later walks through hell.... The point is to not come out empty-handed.” On this day on which the world is said to be born anew, as we stand on the threshold of a New Year, what will we take with us from the hell of this past year? Will we come out empty handed and try to go back to life as it was? Or, will we carry the lessons we’ve learned with us and build back better?

I’ve got another Zoom call with my friends Mikey and Jessica on Monday night, and I have a hunch my uncle will be able to participate in future seders virtually from here on out, as we continue to use these new tools of technology, even once we are able to physically gather again. I suspect that a laptop with Zoom will become a regular presence at Shabbat services, celebrations, and family gatherings. In this new year, we also need to continue to use our tools of empathy, compassion, and care for those who may not look or live like us to bring healing and wholeness to the brokenness in our world.

Hayom Harat Olam - today, the world is born anew. This is our calling and our challenge: Rosh Hashanah calls us, despite the difficulties in our own lives and the brokenness in the world, to reflect on the year that’s been, and challenges us to find and embrace the possibilities of newness. How will we renew our relationships with family and friends? How will we renew our commitment to taking care of our bodies? How will we renew our faith in ourselves and our world?

Hayom Harat Olam. Today, the world is born anew. Today, we recommit ourselves to furthering the work of Creation: of bringing order and empathy into this world full of chaos and pain.

L’Shanah Tovah, L’Shanah metukah, u’L’shanah briaah - Wishing you a good, sweet, and healthy New Year.
