

Rosh ha-Shana - 5781 - Laboring for Light, Breath, and Love
Rabbi Jake Singer-Beilin
Bet Mishpachah

When my daughter, Avital, was born, there was darkness and chaos. The helpers - her doctors and nurses - brought her into life and forced breath into her lungs. There was light, and it was good. Our universe began in *tohu va-vohu* and *chosech* - chaos and darkness. And then, God - the Infinite Helper - uttered the words “*Y’hi or* - Let there be light”, and there was light and it was good¹. When I look into Avital’s eyes, I see that light still. I see innocence, and goodness, and love. I see the spark of God that illuminates her being, a spark that most people see in every new life, in every small child.

Now five months old and shimmering with light, Avital made it difficult for me to compose this *drash*, and not only for the reasons you might expect. Of course, she distracted me with cries when she needed a new diaper, and of course I could have used some time to write when instead I was showing her pictures of a very hungry caterpillar. But it

¹ Genesis 1:1-4

goes beyond that. She made it difficult for me to find the right words and to understand the world into which she was born because I know that the spark of God that I see in Avital is one that some stop seeing in others eventually.

When those who were supposed to be the helpers encountered George Floyd, they did not see that spark of Divinity within him. They saw a threat, they saw a criminal, they saw an obstacle. Instead of acknowledging the Godliness within him, they forced breath out of his lungs. They extinguished his light.

I have to believe that the men who killed George Floyd have seen the Divine within the eyes of children of all different colors. They would have seen it in a baby Breonna Taylor, they would have seen it in a baby Jacob Blake, and yes, they would have seen it in a baby George Floyd. But at what point did their ability to see that light of God diminish? At what point did George Floyd lose that *tzelem Elohim* - that image of God - in their eyes? Was it when he reached a certain age or height? Was it when he came to be in the wrong neighborhood, or on the street? How is it possible that they did not see a human being when they knelt on his neck

and he uttered the words “I can’t breathe”, and called out “mama”? At some point, they must have forgotten that he was someone’s child, that he was one of God’s children.

In a 2017 speech, Sikh civil rights activist and lawyer Valarie Kaur reflected on these same questions. She shared:

“I know that there will be moments whether on the streets or in the school yards where my son will be seen as foreign, as suspect, as a terrorist. Just as black bodies are still seen as criminal, brown bodies are still seen as illegal, trans bodies are still seen as immoral, indigenous bodies are still seen as savage, the bodies of women and girls seen as someone else’s property. And when we see these bodies not as brothers and sisters then it becomes easier to bully them, to rape them, to allow policies that neglect them, that incarcerate them, that kill them...²”

I shutter, knowing that I will need to explain to my daughter that we live in a country where this is the reality for so many, that this is the system, and that our family also benefits from this system. That people

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2uv6-2FVhA&feature=emb_logo

view me - and her - as white, and there are securities and privileges that come with the sheer luck of being born with our skin color. How do I come to terms with the fact that I may need to talk to her about anti-Semitism, but I will never have the have “the talk” with her explaining how to behave when she gets stopped by the police - a talk that nearly all people of color in this country have with their children at an all-too-early age? And I wonder what I will be able to say to her when she asks what I’ve done to fix it for others. How I have worked to ensure that the spark of God is honored not just in those who are seen as white, but in all of our holy neighbors. I hope that I will be able to tell her that I listened to the Torah verses that scream for my attention and action: “God created humanity in the Divine image,”³ “You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor,⁴” “You must love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵ I pray that I’ll be able to tell her that I helped end this period of darkness in our country - that the light I see in her inspired me to illuminate our world and banish the heavy darkness.

³ Genesis 1:26

⁴ Leviticus 19:16

⁵ Leviticus 19:18

Valarie Kaur continues: "...The mother in me asks what if? What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all of our grandfathers and grandmothers are standing behind now, those who survived occupation and genocide, slavery and Jim Crow, detentions and political assault? What if they are whispering in our ears "You are brave"? What if this is our nation's greatest transition?"

In our shofar service, after each set of blasts we find these words: "*Ha-yom harat olam* - Today is pregnant with eternity". On Rosh ha-Shana we recognize this reality. Though it may be dark, there is eternal hope for rebirth, for the re-creation of our world. This is the darkness of the womb and our new year is pregnant with possibility for light and life.

As a holy community, it is our task to engage in the hard work of bringing our nation and world to a more just place. It begins with ourselves and our own congregation. Together, we must take a hard look at the ways in which many of us have benefited from the systems that unjustly keep black and brown people from being viewed as fully human

in our country. We commit to anti-racism and to undoing what centuries of injustice have created. We will continue to labor and bring justice into our land when we discuss Robin DiAngelo's "White Fragility" on October 25. We will reflect openly about where we have fallen short and what steps we can take in order to birth a world where the light of the Divine is seen and acknowledged within every person, within every parent's child.

We labor to bring light and breath into our land by voting on or before November 3rd, by planning now, not later, how to vote and how to do so safely. We will labor to bring light and breath into our land by ensuring that every one of our friends, loved ones, and members of our communities can do the same. We will do this in honor of Congressman John Lewis, and we will do this in order to honor the memory of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg - *alei hem ha-shalom*.

We will help birth this country from darkness into light and chaos into love. We will build a world where the helpers infuse breath into every body and see the Godliness in all. And it will be good.

Shabbat Shalom, L'Shana Tova U-M'tuka - May the year 5781 bring us
all sweetness, goodness, and justice.