

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Rosh Hashanah Day 1, 5778/2017

What are you longing for this Rosh Hashanah? What is your heart, your soul, yearning for this year, this moment?

The matriarchs we read about today, Sarah and Chana, are women who yearn for children. The stories and liturgy of Rosh Hashanah are full of the pain of not conceiving and the joy of conceiving. Their yearning was to grow something inside themselves that they then would bring into the world. And the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 20b) tells us that Rosh Hashanah was the day Sarah and Chana conceived.

I know there are people here struggling now with fertility, and people who have struggled in the past with fertility. This is such a real issue for so many of us. Sarah and Chana, we know, never forgot their struggles with becoming pregnant, and neither do we.

And we remember too that some of us are yearning for love, for a partner, and to even think about and struggle with parenthood would be an incredible privilege.

What are you yearning for this Rosh Hashanah?

Today we say is the birthday of the world, *HaYom Harat Olam*. But literally, *HaYom Harat Olam* means that “Today is pregnant with eternity,” or “Today is eternally pregnant,” as Rabbi David Seidenberg points out (<https://theshalomcenter.org/node/1453>). Every single day we wake to is pregnant with the possible, and today, Rosh Hashanah, the first day of this new year, is the most fertile day of all. What would it mean for us to imagine that our dreams, the things for which we yearn, are conceived on this day?

This got me thinking about the idea of pregnancy as a metaphor, as I know that we all long to have something holy, something that we and the world need, growing inside of us, that eventually emerges into the world, and its emergence changes us and changes the world. I’ve never been pregnant, in the literal, biological sense, although I’ve been through three full pregnancies as a partner. But I have had the experience of something gestating inside me before it emerges outside.

What in the world do I mean?

I had an idea for a sermon about pregnancy. I conceived of the idea, and it gestated for weeks. And then, it was born, slowly, painfully, and late at night. Birthing and writing so often are labors of the night. There were a few doctors, or in this case, editors, along the way--while the sermon was still inside me, and after it came out. But now, as I speak these words, it is alive, and breathing, no longer only a part of me, but now out in the world and becoming a part of you with every word.

I’d like us to think about pregnancy as a metaphor for the process of doing the work we do, in the world, and on ourselves.

Throughout that exploration, let us remember that there are three partners in the creation of a human being, the Talmud teaches (Niddah 31a): the mother, the father, and God, and I hope we’ll be able to sense in all of this the presence of a “silent” partner, of the source of life.

As we explore this metaphor a little more, by thinking first about before pregnancy, then about pregnancy itself, and then about birth and what comes afterward, sit with the question, “What do you long to bring into the world this year?”

So often before pregnancy, there is a sense of longing for something missing, something that will make our life more full, more complete.

How does one become pregnant? This is NOT “the talk” about the birds and the bees! Speaking metaphorically, sometimes an idea starts to grow inside of us.

My family became “pregnant” with a dog earlier in the summer. That is to say, we (meaning Tammy) started thinking about getting a dog, investigating rescues, breeds and breeders. And after much thought and research and waiting, our new family member arrived at our house and peed on the floor. And we love him.

I know someone, now a member of our congregation, who after Ferguson three years ago, started thinking about what would happen if white families from all across St. Louis decided to start talking to their young children about race and racism. After many conversations, much research, and deliberating, she and another mother of young children started an organization called WeStories that uses kids’ books to help a new generation of St. Louisans to see and be able to talk about skin color, and helps families show up differently for racial equity.

I know someone who years ago, when he was in high school, starting becoming interested in Judaism. He wasn’t Jewish, and didn’t know anyone Jewish. A decade later after that first curiosity, I was on the beit din--the religious court of rabbis--that officiated at his conversion to Judaism. For him, Judaism was gestating in him--he was pregnant with Judaism for a very long time, until his new Jewish self was born.

The first stage of pregnancy is not being sure you’re really pregnant. Is this idea, this project, this dream, really growing inside me? Can my body, my soul, my intellect, sustain and support and hold onto it? Will anything dislodge it? Because we know that if even one thing is not just right, whatever’s growing may not stick.

Many of the resolutions we may make this Rosh Hashana are like that--they start growing in us for the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, but then by Sukkot five days later, they are gone without a trace, with no sign of having ever been there. And we barely even notice. Maybe something was wrong with the resolution we made--whether the time, the reason, or our commitment to it.

The seed, the idea we are growing inside of us, needs to be viable, and we need to be healthy, nourishing hosts, wombs of a sort, for whatever it is we want to grow.

But if we hold onto it for a little while, we start to notice that we have something growing in us. Often we notice because we’re exhausted, and or maybe even a little queasy. Growing something new takes enormous inner resources--time and energy we are used to devoting elsewhere.

Eventually, people around us may begin to notice, or we start to tell them what we’re growing. We’re getting a dog! I’m starting a new organization! I’m not eating carbs! I’m writing a memoir! I’m getting my master’s! I’m studying Judaism! I’m starting to keep kosher! We’re downsizing to an apartment!

In the last stretch of pregnancy, there's a part of us that is so proud for growing this amazing thing inside of us. But there's also a part that wants this thing inside of us to come out already, that wants the new thing to be, the new change to happen.

And then it comes. Birth is sometimes slow, sometimes fast. Sometimes planned, sometimes quite unexpected. But things are never the same after as they were before, in ways we can never quite anticipate.

And then we have something new in the world. A new Jewish self, a new apartment, a new job, or degree, a new relationship, a new painting, a new book or article or poem, a new melody, a new skill, a new level of fitness, a new patience, a new resolve, a new commitment to something.

Pregnancy can be a metaphor for so many different kinds of change.

I want to contrast this with a very different, and very familiar Jewish change metaphor: Exodus. Exodus is about leaving slavery--leaving somewhere really bad, by a power not your own, and then being in the wilderness for an indeterminate but very long period of time, where there's little to eat or drink, and lots of internal fighting and rebelling. There is regret about leaving Egypt, where the melons, cucumbers, onions and leeks were so delicious, and where there was plenty of meat. There will be many casualties before reaching the Promised Land, and things in the Promised Land won't go as smoothly as we thought we had been promised, and may eventually end in exile.

The metaphor of Exodus, of leaving Egypt, is a valuable one when it gives us the courage to leave a bad place and get to a better place. Exodus is crucial when we use it to identify oppression and identify with the oppressed. Exodus is the story we turn to when we cry out for justice, and when we listen to hear the cries for justice of our brothers and sisters.

But as a metaphor, not only around Rosh Hashana, but almost year round, I'd rather be pregnant Jews than wandering Jews.

You may have noticed that we're not in our usual spaces for the High Holidays. We look a bit like wandering Jews, and Kol Rinah looks like a wandering congregation. I myself have called us wanderers, but I won't any more. I want to change the conversation.

You see, Kol Rinah is not in the wilderness. The wilderness is an empty place, without a sense of permanence or promise. Us here today are at a moment of great potential. This congregation is getting ready to create new life.

Kol Rinah is pregnant. Brith Sholom Knesset Israel and Shaare Zedek, our two legacy congregations, came together to form Kol Rinah. That coming together was an idea that had a conception, a pregnancy and gestation, and birth in itself that concluded four years ago when the two congregations merged.

And now Kol Rinah is pregnant. We are pregnant with a new building. There was a lot of longing for this pregnancy, a lot of yearning for a home to call our own. But also ambivalence about whether it was necessary, about whether we could actually do it, about whether the time was right.

Being pregnant for a congregation is hard. It means change is coming, and we don't know what it will be like.

It means our clothes, our spaces, no longer fit, and we're stretching and uncomfortable.

Being pregnant means we can't focus on very much else right now.

Being pregnant for a congregation means we need lots of help from lots of people in all kinds of ways. And it means we have to learn how to ask for that help.

And as we all know, the particular nourishment needed by a congregation pregnant with a building is the financial kind.

A shul being pregnant with a building means being full of sacred hopes and dreams and possibilities for a future we can picture, and see more and more images of as time goes by, but that we won't really see or understand or be sure if we can love until it arrives.

A shul being pregnant with a building means anxiety--will we be able to do it, will it be born full and healthy, with ten fingers and ten toes--or in our case, with a social hall, with a sanctuary, with storage, and closets, and windows, and bathrooms, and place to plug in the toaster for bagels after minyan? And will I still love it even if it's not quite what I had envisioned and dreamed of?

A shul being pregnant with a building means wondering if we'll ever love the new one as much as we know we love the one we have now.

This building we are pregnant with is ours--mine and yours, to love and support, to care for and nourish before it's born, and to care for and nourish after it comes into the world.

I remember going years ago now with Tammy to doctor's visits, so excited to see sonograms, in a kind of joyful anticipation. The difference here is this building has not one or two parents, but hundreds and hundreds.

Being a synagogue pregnant with a building means excitement and energy, with so many people curious and interested in us, and excited to get to know this new arrival.

Being pregnant with a building, or with plans, hopes, changes, ideas--this is a new metaphor for us--maybe not brand new, but newish. "New metaphors have the power to create a new reality." That's what renowned linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write in their seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 145). "This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it... Much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones" (ibid.) they write.

I offer you and us as a community this metaphor of pregnancy as a way of helping us to think about all the complicated issues and tremendous blessings that surround any effort to bring something new into the world, and especially, a new home for a synagogue.

And as I mentioned earlier, this day, this Rosh Hashanah, this first day of a new year, is the most pregnant of all days: pregnant with our yearnings, our longings, with new possibilities, and new hopes.

This year, Kol Rinah is pregnant with a building, and a dream.

What yearning, what hope, what dream, is growing inside of you this year?

I'd like to ask everyone to stand now, if you are able.

Put your arms around those near you.

This is a blessing composed by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso that I adapted slightly for this moment.

Please have in your mind all the hopes which you have for yourself, for your family, for our community and for our world in this new year, all the hopes with which you are full, at this moment.

*We stand breathless before the Power of Creation that works through us to bring forth new life. We tremble with fear and joy. May this promise of life come to be. We trust in the source of life, this power which grips us within and yet transcends us. Protect this fragile new beginning. May we find love and strength to nurture this gift of creativity and life. Sheltered under wings of love, may we grow to be partners with the source of life in the miracle of creation.*

Join me in the words of the shehechyanu:

*Baruch ata ado-nai, e-lo-heinu melech haolam, shehechyanu, v'kiymanu, v'higianu lazman hazeh.*

*Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who gives us life, who sustains us, and who helped us reach this moment.*

I wish you a Shana Tova u'M'uberet--a sweet and pregnant year.