

Creation: Take Two, Three . . .

In the Fall of 1966, John Lennon, then at the height of his Beatles fame, went to see the art exhibit of a rather obscure conceptual artist, Yoko Ono. Several of her pieces from that original exhibit were on display just a few years ago at MOMA (The Museum of Modern Art) in New York City; including the one that captured John Lennon's attention and eventually his heart.

In the room of the exhibit was a tall ladder which you had to climb a bit gingerly. At the very top of this ladder was a magnifying glass. The viewer had to take the magnifying glass and, while balancing on that tall wooden ladder, look closely at a message written in tiny letters on the ceiling. Looking closely, John made out the letters; they spelled "YES".

As he said later, what struck him was that it was a positive message. He said that he felt relieved; he was tired of the negative and the cynical and the blasé. John and Yoko's relationship began at that moment.

It was a thrill to climb a similar ladder at MOMA's recent Yoko Ono exhibit.

Seeing that tiny "YES" gave me a glimpse as to what John Lennon experienced some 55 years ago. It also reminded me how important it is for us to do what we can to maintain a positive spirit during difficult times.

After all we have been through, we certainly cannot take it for granted that we are able to maintain a positive attitude.

Our patience was already stretched when we came together last year for the High Holy Days during COVID. At that time, we hoped that after six months of masks, isolation, and gallons of Purell that we would soon get through the pandemic. The rollout of vaccines was eminent and, surely, everyone who could do so immediately would get their shot. Right? And once we had the vaccine - - - well, one didn't have to be an optimist to believe that the New Year 5781 would soon see the elimination of COVID-19. Accordingly, I optimistically spoke last year about opportunities for the creation of a new and better society, one based on the lessons that we learned: lessons of resilience, creativity, and a greater appreciation for family, friends, and community. Well, those lessons are still apt; it's just that our timing was all off.

The sad fact is that with the Delta, Epsilon, and other variants of COVID now plaguing our world, we still do not know when the pandemic will be over. After nearly 20 months, the disruption of our lives is still on-going. So here we are again, beginning another New Year with Holy Days services held under stressful and somewhat chaotic circumstances.

And yet, despite it all, it is essential that we do not succumb to negativity and despair. Rather, it is a time to review and reflect on the very nature of a post pandemic creation and renewal. Or, if you will: Creation: Take Two.

As you know, Rosh HaShanah celebrates ***yom harat olam***, the birthday of the universe. The prayer *Yom Harat Olam* is recited three times this morning, once each during the three soundings of the *shofar*. In our *machzor* we read: "*Hayom Harat Olam* --Today the world is born anew.

This day, the whole creation stands before You to be judged. As we are Your children, love us in the way of mothers and fathers. As we are Yours in service, guide us by the light of Your justice, grace, and holiness.”

The repetition of the prayer three times has been understood to reflect the three times of creation that are described in the Torah. The first is the original story of creation that we read at the beginning of the Book of Genesis. The second is the re-creation of humanity after the *mahbul*, the terrible flood that Noah and his family alone survived. The third creation is the beginning of our family's story at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah.

It is important to note that each of the three creations came after upheaval, destruction, and chaos. At the beginning of the Torah, we read: “***B’reisheet bara Elohim***, When God began to create heaven and earth; the earth being ***tohu vavohu*** ---unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep. (Gen 1:1-2) Out of “chaos and void and darkness” came the magnificent tale of the creation of all life.

The second story of creation comes after the *mahbul*, the terrible flood that wiped out humanity and much of life on earth. It is another of the Torah’s extraordinary metaphors, one that hits rather close to home because it is a story of how humanity’s corruption, arrogance, abuse, and violence caused the entire planet to revolt.

However, the lesson of the flood story is not one simply of punishment for human wickedness. Rather, it also comes to teach us how we created life anew after the destruction. It teaches that all humanity is related, *B’nei Noach*, descendants of Noah. We are one family of humanity.

The third story of creation in the Torah comes at Mount Sinai. After being enslaved in Egypt, oppressed, and threatened with genocide, we found ourselves in the wilderness. We can imagine how frightening and forbidding it seemed to our ancestors: a chaotic caravan of refugees without recognizable resources of food and water; civilization nowhere in sight, and our destination a Promised Land that seemed more myth than reality. How could one believe that there was a home that flowed with milk and honey when merely finding water and manna was a miracle? Moses wrote about our dire situation in his concluding song, and he reminded the future generations that God never abandoned us:

*God found him [Israel] in a desert region, in an empty howling waste.
God engirded him, watched over him, guarded him as the pupil of
God's eye. (Deuteronomy 32:10)*

It was there, in that empty, howling wasteland that we received and conceived the fundamental revelations and teachings of what became the Torah. After all they had endured, the Children of Israel were transformed into a nation with a covenant of meaning and sacred purpose. In a place of vast nothingness, a forbidding place seemingly void of potential, Israel was recreated as a people with a mission. We were elevated with a sense of identity; with values, ethics, and morality; and with laws by which a new civilization could be created. How utterly unfathomable it would have been to critics, cynics, and naysayers that the strivings of those Israelites would create a vision and hope that would transform all of humanity.

Indeed, there were those who mocked our ancestors. The Egyptian historian Manetho, who lived in the 3rd century BCE (some 2,300 years ago) and the 1st century Roman historian Tacitus jeered and denigrated Jews and Judaism. To them and many others, it was laughable and absurd that Judaism's teachings would ever be significant.

And yet, the inspired teachings of our ancestors are now taught, cherished, and considered sacred by people of different faiths and cultures, including in Rome, Greece, and Egypt. Out of *tohu vavohu*, chaos and emptiness, there is creation.

Throughout our 3,500 year Jewish history, there are many examples of our ancestors creating a new and better life after loss and destruction. After the destruction of Judea and Jerusalem in the year 586 BCE, our ancestors, exiled in Babylonia and Persia, edited and codified the Torah; they wrote Psalms and history and kept alive the faith and culture of our family. After the Greek armies unleashed oppression and destruction, we rallied to rededicate Jerusalem and the Temple with a *Chanukah haBayit* that has served ever since as a courageous exemplar to minorities struggling to survive.

After the Romans destroyed Judea and Jerusalem in the year 70 CE, our ancestors created modern Judaism, one that emphasized faith and community through the study of sacred texts and prayer instead of sacrifices.

After the onslaught of one army after the other: Byzantine armies, followed by Islamic invaders, and then crusaders, our people not only survived but found the strength and the will to build and create a new life even if it meant

going to distant lands to find safe harbors. In every generation, we understood that with will and determination, creation can be an on-going process.

Ferdinand, Isabella, and the Inquisitors of Spain destroyed a golden era of Jewish culture, but from that destruction we moved throughout the Mediterranean, to North Africa and the Middle East, eventually to the “New World” of South and then North American. So, too, when Tsarist Russia made life intolerable, when the vicious antisemites of Central and Eastern Europe oppressed our people, denying us the most basic rights, withholding from us common decency and humanity, our ancestors fled. Many came here to the United States. We came here, often with nothing. We didn’t speak the language. We didn’t have financial resources. And yes, we often had to deal with American antisemitism. But at each stop, we worked hard, we studied hard, we kept our wits about us, and we created a new life.

No doubt, many of you already are thinking about another example of our Jewish family’s creating a new life after destruction. After the Nazis and their allies in Europe and the Middle East murdered 6-million Jews, the survivors, together with Jews from around the world, rallied to strengthen the efforts of the growing community of Zionists in the Land of Israel. After the Holocaust, after the centuries of European antisemitism, after the centuries of Jews being abused and vulnerable in Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Jews created a new Israel in the land of our ancestors.

And, as if finally confessing to their centuries of misdeeds, most of the world's great nations voted to approve and celebrate the re-birth of the Jewish nation. The UN General Assembly Resolution 181 was approved on November 29, 1947, with 33 countries voting in favor, 13 countries against, and 10 countries abstaining. All of the Arab nations voted against (as did Cuba, Greece, and India). The English (United Kingdom) abstained. This new Israel, too, was attacked and terrorized by Arab nations but their efforts failed.

Today there is peace with Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, and greatly improved relations with Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Sudan, and many other Middle Eastern countries.

After chaos, after destruction, never give up hope for the creation of a new world. Of course, it is not easy. First, there is the pain and despair we feel after a loss. Second is the daunting task of going forward, of trying to rebuild, which can seem overwhelming.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sachs brilliantly connected the metaphor of God's creation to our own challenges:

And God said, let there be...and there was" – the second stage of creation, is for us the most difficult. It is one thing to conceive an idea, another to execute it. --- Between the intention and the fact, the dream and the reality, lies struggle, opposition, and the fallibility of the human will. It is all too easy, having tried and failed, to conclude that nothing ultimately can be achieved, that the world is as it is, and that all human endeavour is destined to end in failure.

Greek philosophy holds that fate is inevitable and we must resign ourselves to it. In contrast, Judaism holds that though creation is difficult, challenging, and fraught with setbacks, it is at the heart and essence of our existence. As the great Talmudic sage Rabbi Tarfon taught: “It is not for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” [*Pirkei Avot* 2.16].

Tyrants and oppression, loss and exile, the worst calamities; we have witnessed them all, we have experienced them all, and we have survived them all. Actually, we have done much better than simply survive and persevere. We have drawn on the inspiration of our ancestors and the indomitable will that is at the heart of our faith and our Jewish culture, and we have found ways to reimagine, to rebuild, and to renew life for the better. Quitting is not and never has been an option.

So now we face yet another task. We find ourselves in a world that is being rocked by a global pandemic. The waves of COVID-19 and the seemingly endless mutations threaten to overwhelm us. But we must not let them. We do not have time for despair. No one is helped by chanting the pitiful refrain of “woe-is-me.” Rather, this is the time to re-energize our efforts. And, as absolutely vital as they are, it is not enough simply to focus those efforts on protection and prevention. Yes, we have to encourage everyone who is eligible to be vaccinated. And as soon as we can get booster shots, we should take those as well. Those who are not vaccinated are risking their lives and the lives of others. I plead with them: “Please say YES.” Get vaccinated!

For all of us: that word YES is essential. It reminds us to stay positive and have faith. Let us say “YES” and wear masks when it is appropriate. Yes, use common sense. And, above all, let us enter this New Year 5782 with a positive attitude that YES, we will defeat COVID. Yes, we will survive. Yes, we will take the lessons we have learned to restore this world and our society for the better. Yes, we will rebuild our individual lives with a greater appreciation for family, friends, and community.

Eloheinu veilohei Avoteinu v’Imoteinu, Our God and God of our fathers and mothers, as You helped our ancestors find blessings and hope even during the darkest times, help us as well. Lift our hearts and embolden our will. Through every generation, we have held dear our sacred Covenant with You and You have nurtured us through howling wastelands of history and guided us through the torments of antisemitism. *Adonai*, O Eternal God, we call upon You again.

השיבנו יי אליך ונשובה, חדש ימינו כקדם.

Help us to return to You, O God; then truly shall we return.

Renew our days as in the past.

Amein