

Hayom Harat Olam  
RH 2<sup>nd</sup> Day Drash by Adina Allen

Literally translated as the Head of the Year, Rosh Hashanah is known by many names. Yom Ha Zikaron – the Day of Remembrance, Yom Teruah – the Day the trumpets sound, Yom ha Din – the Day of Judgment. It is also known as Hayom Harat Olam – the Day of the World’s Conception. While throughout the machzor we will refer to God as Ha Melech and Aveinu Malkeinu, calling on the strong, powerful masculine aspects of God, these are also the days on which we will repeatedly call out God’s attributes, beginning with “Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v’hanun,” relating to God as the source of rachamim—compassion—the eternal rechem or womb from which the world came—and continually comes—forth.

I have never really paid attention to this name for Rosh Hashanah before, but, for obvious reasons, it stood out to me this year, so I wanted to take the rare and special opportunity of delivering a Rosh Hashanah sermon while pregnant to explore what insights pregnancy might afford into this unique name for the holiday.

In some ways, this name seems so incongruous, at least in terms of our Torah cycle. Why should *today* be the day the world was conceived? One would think that perhaps Hayom Harat Olam should be a name for Simchat Torah, when we begin the book of Beresheit and read the breath-taking account of the creation of universe. If not Simchat Torah, even Sukkot would seem to make sense. Sukkot is when, after mourning the destruction of Great House on Tisha b’Av, we begin, weeks later, to rebuild a semblance of a house for ourselves. It would seem that when we lay our wooden beams in place and drape nature’s canopy atop, we are marking the creation of the world by enacting it.

Over the past months I have been reading about what happens when one conceives. It is striking to me how much I didn’t know prior to being pregnant. I learned that pregnancy is actually marked roughly 10 days before fertilization because the body at this point is readying itself for the potential of conception. Before sperm even enters or the egg is released, the body is preparing itself for the possibility of creating new life. In a similar way, during this month of Elul, the month that precedes Rosh Hashanah, God has been preparing God’s self to receive our intentions and co-create with us in this New Year.

Rabbinic literature teaches “Adam olam katan, olam adam gadol” the human is a microcosm of the universe, the universe a macrocosm of the human (Otzar haMidrashim, *Olam Katan* 406). There is a direct relationship between the world without and the world within. In this way we can see ourselves as embodiments of the sacred calendar, the sacred calendar a larger scale manifestation of the inner workings of our body. We can map the holiday cycle onto our own cycle. This past month of Elul is a time in our tradition when we prepare ourselves for the possibility of creating some sort of new Life. It is a time when we ready ourselves emotionally, psychologically and spiritually with the idea in mind that today, on Rosh Hashanah, we might conceive—a book, a new course of study, a new career direction, new emotional patterns.

At this time of year, these days of turning and returning, all of life lies before us, the experience of each one sacred. I am saddened over the pregnancy loss and infertility struggles I know to be so present in our community. I speak on this topic because this pregnancy has informed so much of my spiritual and emotional life over the past year. It has allowed me to realize the way in which we hold all of life in the womb of community, sharing in joy and sorrow, in seeking and striving.

Our tradition does not shy away from the pain of these longings on Rosh Hashanah—in fact, it confronts them head on. This year more than ever I am struck by the stories we read about Sarah and Hannah during these two days. Yesterday we read of Sarah’s yearning for a child and her surprise at conceiving even after her cycle had stopped. And of Hannah’s burning desire for a child that, after many years, finally came to be. What can we find as a connection between these stories of barren women yearning for children and the name of Rosh Hashanah as Hayom Harat Olam. While the story of Hannah is feasible; perhaps the story of Sarah is more metaphorical. Sarah’s miraculous ability to conceive teaches us that no matter how we see ourselves, as long as we are alive, we possess the ability to bring new creations into the world. Today is a day when conception is much broader than the ability to produce children. This day is one of infinite possibilities where each one of us becomes a vessel for bringing into being that which we most yearn for.

While commonly translated as the Day the World Was Born, Harat does not literally translate as “birth,” but rather as conception or pregnancy. Today is the day the world is conceived, the day when the forces of the universe unite and the possibility of something new is formed. The difference between the two is subtle.

A midrash in Vayikra Rabbah teaches that God created the world on Rosh Hashanah. God had a thought, consulted with the angels, and went ahead to form human beings from the dust, placing them in Gan Eden. One, two, three, a seemingly direct path from the idea to the reality. The word used in this midrash is “bara” meaning that God “created” the world on Rosh Hashanah. Where bara implies a sense of creation in a moment, harat or conception entails a need to wait, to nurture over time, to grow and change, to sit through not knowing, to wonder, to expect, to become attached, to have sleepless nights of fear and anxiety, to have moments of joy and anticipation, to remain present to all the possibilities, to acknowledge the chance of loss or complications, to wonder, and to yearn. As someone who gets an idea and wants to see it manifest immediately, this is a lesson that has been challenging for me. but one that has become clear to me through this pregnancy. There is no rushing the growth of this life; it will develop in its own natural time.

On this day we are invited to open ourselves to that tender and vulnerable place from which our deepest desires arise. We have the opportunity to come into alignment and to release into the universe our intentions for ourselves, for our world, for our year. We challenge ourselves to give over to God and trust in the co-creative partnership that is our faith, without knowing what the outcome will be.

We never know what will come from our conception—of a human, of an idea, of a world. Though we may resist, ignore or look away, once we put the pieces into place we have no choice but to allow what will be...to be. Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, the name the God uses to describe Godself to Moses. I will be that which I will be. This is the nature of the Divine, of the universe, of new life coming forth. Of the idea, the project, the plan. Somehow pregnancy makes this all the more clear. I have no idea who this little being developing inside me is, who they will turn out to be, or if they will turn out to be at all. The immensity of the lesson of Hayom Harat Olam is that it's a mistake to believe we can simply resolve to make something happen when in fact what is required of us is to relax into the vulnerability and to learn to discern the signs and cues that arise to guide us on our life's path.

Through a human act the pieces are put into place, and then we wait. It is crazy and terrifying to know that even though we are not conscious of creating, life is growing and changing within us. Life unfurls following an evolutionary blueprint for development. In this way, we are true partners with God. In the Zohar, it says that God looked into the Torah and used what was written in it in order to create the universe (Zohar, Terumah 161a).. The blueprint of the world existed in the letters of the Torah, the vowels and punctuation represent the actuality of what came to be. The consonants are constant but the absence of vowels teaches us that an infinite number of possibilities exist embedded there. So too do we each evolve according to a blueprint, yet each unfurl into a unique manifestation of a human being.

And so each year we must return, return, return again, engaging in the act of teshuvah. This is the act of turning back to wholeness with others and within ourselves. It is the act of returning to our relationship with God, of rediscovering creative partnership with the Divine. It is not easy to return, despite the faint calls in the distance beckoning us home. It takes courage and faith to continue to strive towards wholeness and healing, toward the conception of new possibility on this day of beginnings, Hayom Harat Olam. Each year we have the opportunity read the text of our lives differently according to the vowels we supply. Hayom Harat Olam reminds us to gently and lovingly bring ourselves back to God, the eternal mother whose womb is always open and ready for the seed we wish to plant. As I pray for this little one, so may we pray for every seed that is planted, and for all those that were conceived in hope and have not come to be as dreamed; watering new dreams with our tears, those of joy and sorrow shared with each other. We enter the world through determination and planning mixed with an utter lack of control and abundant mystery. The process of teshuvah helps us to remember this mix of embrace and surrender, power and vulnerability is the true nature to which we must return.