

Birthdays and Rosh Hashanah

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Rabbi Daniel Greyber

As I mentioned last night, this year I want to reflect on moments in the Jewish lifecycle: birth, bar/bat mitzvah, marriage, death and the afterlife. So today, as we reflect on birth, I want to begin with a question: if, as the Mahzor (High Holyday prayer book) tells us, Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world - “Hayom Harat Olam,” what would you think should be the Torah reading for today? Genesis 1! The story of God creating the world. But it is not. What do we read about? The Torah reading recalls the birth of Isaac and the Haftarah recalls the birth of Samuel; what both these stories have in common is the pain of barren women and the miracle of birth. Why?

The liturgy refers to Rosh HaShanah as the birthday of the world but that’s not quite the whole story. An early Midrashic source, Pesikta Rabbati, states that the world was actually created last Shabbat, 6 days ago on the 25th of Elul, and that today, Rosh Hashanah, is the sixth day of Creation, the day on which humans were created. What we remember today is not just the creation of the world, but the **birth** of human beings.

Anxiety

I don’t profess great insight into the physical experience of giving birth. I’ve never done it except, like all of us, when I was the one being birthed. I don’t remember much of that. But I do know that the Jewish tradition doesn’t seem to make much of birth. That may be what happens when you have a 2,000 year old tradition written almost entirely by men. As women’s voices join the chorus of our tradition, that will, God willing, change. But for now, I looked up birthdays in the new Encyclopedia Judaica. Here’s what it said: “The celebration of birthdays is unknown in traditional Jewish ritual...The only reference to a birthday in the Bible is that celebrated by Pharaoh” (Genesis 40:20), not a great precedent. We celebrate birthdays on Shabbat morning at Beth El. There’s nothing wrong with it but historically, Jews didn’t make much of birthdays. There’s no blessing when a baby is born, except perhaps a general blessing: hatov v’hameytiv – acknowledging God as

the One who is good and makes good. We say a mi she'berach for the mom, a prayer for her speedy recovery and for the health of the baby. You can learn a lot about Jewish attitudes towards things from our greetings, our one or two word responses to various moments. The difference between Shabbat Shalom and good shabbas; between shana tova (a good new year) and tzom kal (an easy fast). When we hear a woman is pregnant, the tradition is not to say, "mazel tov," but rather, "b'sha'ah tova" which means, "in a good hour," a sort of short-hand for the wish that the birth is uncomplicated and that everyone makes it through safely. Birth is filled with anxiety.

Kohelet, the book of Ecclesiastes, teaches, "טוב שם משמחן טוב ויום המות" / "...Better is the day of death than the day of one's birth" (Eccles. 7:1). Rabbi Levi explains it via a parable: "Two ships sail in the Mediterranean Sea. One is leaving the harbor and the other is returning home. Everyone was happy at the ship which was leaving, while the ship which had completed its journey slipped in without incident. There was an intelligent man there, who said, "I see something topsy-turvy. There is no point in rejoicing at the ship which is leaving, since they know not what conditions she may meet, what seas she may encounter, and what wind she may have to face, whereas all should rejoice for this ship which has successfully completed its voyage" (Ex. R. 48:1). The wise man is saying something profound: life begins with anxiety, not joy, for we don't know what seas a child may encounter, what wind she may have to face.

Today we are born again. Today we prepare to set sail for another year. Do we know what the seas hold in store? Do we believe we can keep illness at bay? Are we certain our marriages will last? That we'll have a job? That conflicts across the world will stay far away? That Israel will survive? Rabbi Yaakov Leiner (1818-1878), the rebbe of Izbica and later Radzyn, once taught that a person should not pray while drunk because the whole world appears before you like a flat wide plain, no mountains, no valleys, just easy going. The rabbis knew a life isn't like that. They were filled with anxiety when a baby entered the world, not knowing what the world held in store.

Human Goodness?

Infant mortality used to be much higher. A boy was not named until the bris. A girl was not named immediately. Full mourning rites were not observed if a baby died in the first 30 days of life not out of cruelty but because such deaths were, if not commonplace, not unexpected. But the rabbi's anxiety about birth may not have been rooted merely in concerns about infant mortality, about whether a child would live, but rather about what kind of life they would live. We may take human goodness for granted. The rabbis were not so sure.

Rabbinic Debate According to the Talmud, the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel once spent two and a half years arguing whether it would have been better for human beings never to have been created in the first place. Beit Shammai said yes, it would have been better if we'd never been created. Beit Hillel said, "no," it's better that we were. They took a vote. You know who won? Beit Shammai. Beit Shammai almost never won, but on this, they won. Perhaps, the rabbis said, the world would have been better off had human beings never been created but, now that we have been, each of us must investigate our past deeds or, others say, must examine our future actions. We must try to make ourselves worthy of the life we've been given.

Benjamin Abba Debate: I had my own little debate this year. On a hot and humid summer day, I needed some help weeding the flower beds in front of our home so I asked our son, Benjamin, if he'd help. That's not really true. I **told** Benjamin to come outside and help me. Well, Benjamin wasn't too pleased about this and he knows me well, so he asks me: Abba, "What makes something a weed? I mean, why shouldn't we just leave everything to grow? Isn't better for the weeds to grow because that's the way God made the world?" Now, what Benjamin was really saying is, "I don't want to weed," but, fully owning my rabbi-ness and, at the same time, pitying him for growing up with a rabbi for a father, I decided to answer him the way that every 12 year-old boy wants to be answered, by reflecting on book of Genesis. "You see, son," I said, "Adam, the first human being, was taken

from the ground, from the *adamah*, and the very first thing that God did was actually place him in the garden and tell him *l'shomrah u'l'ovda*, to guard and work the garden. The very first thing God asked us to do was to weed!" So get weeding!

This quieted him for a while, but it did get me to thinking about how his question reflects a very old debate: is it better to just let the weeds grow? Or should we try to make an impact on the world? Is it better that human beings were created or not?

I am trying, like many of you, to minimize my carbon footprint. I'm trying to raise my kids with a sense that they need to be stewards of the earth, but I wonder to what extent we, and our children, carry with us a sense of "original environmental sin," by which I mean that our very existence on the earth is a blemish rather than a blessing. That it'd be better to have a patch of weeds than a manicured garden. That the world would be better off without us.

I struggled with that once. In the midst of my deepest grief for my friend Joel, I went running for a few blocks on the streets of Phoenix and stopped, out of shape. I thought about my childhood spent working out, how strong I was, in shape, and became profoundly aware of the pull, the gravity of our body's slow decay towards death. I thought of my children, so young, and what awaited them. A wave of anguish rushed over me and I asked: "What have I done? To bring them into a world filled with so much pain." Could it be that the world would be better off without me, without us?

It has been rough summer, filled with pain and bloodshed in Israel. It is easy to feel despair; to think sometimes that after so many wars and so much pain, Israel is a blemish rather than a blessing, that perhaps we should have left the swamp alone, not tried to make the desert bloom, not struggle to carve out for ourselves a place of our own. War and bloodshed, grief and death can make us wonder if it's possible for us to do any good after all. But that is not what Jewish tradition teaches. That is not what we believe.

Human Influence on the Natural World

We do not celebrate birth and birthdays because those are natural, biological moments. What we celebrate is the entrance of a child into the covenant. We celebrate not merely natural life, but the life of the spirit, the special role only human beings can play. A famous Midrash tells of a conversation between Rabbi Akiva and Turnus Rufus, a Roman Governor. Rufus scoffed at the mitzva of circumcision, asking Rabbi Akiva, “Whose handiwork is more impressive – that of God, or that of human beings?” This challenge to the brit mila essentially reduces into, “If God wanted circumcised males, God would have created them circumcised.” Rabbi Akiva replied by showing the Rufus raw stalks of wheat alongside freshly baked loaves of bread. The first, he pointed out, is the handiwork of the Almighty, whereas the second was that of man. This shows that, in fact, the work of the human being surpasses that of the Almighty.”

The debate recorded here is a serious and fundamental one. Is nature the most perfect creation? Are human beings incapable of attaining anything greater than what occurs naturally and is each weed we pull, each imposition of our will upon the natural will ultimately a sin for which we must repent? Rabbi Akiva argues nature is not perfect. Nature contains both sweetness and poison. The human task is to elevate and perfect nature, to create bread from wheat, to circumcise a baby boy and, by doing so, inculcate in his heart the idea that he is a partner of God in creating the world and bringing it to its ultimate perfection.

For Rufus, creation belongs exclusively to God. God is the manufacturer. We are the consumers and, by making a sacrifice every once in a while, we can enjoy a world manufactured by the divine. We are receivers, not creators, of the world. The Jewish conception is radically different: God did not merely give us a finished product. Rather, the world we have is imperfect, in need of repair, and human beings charged with responsibility to repair. In the context of the covenant, human action is not

doomed to sin; it contains within it the potential, even the imperative, for ultimate redemption.

Free Will

Jewish tradition records no debate about the creation of the rest of the world. Only the creation of the human was open to debate, because the human being alone has free will and, because we do, only our actions can be good or evil. Mark Twain once said, “Man is the only animal that blushes...or needs to.” Our lives are never neutral. Through our actions, we write ourselves into the book of life and death. We can be judged because we have free will, because we were created not merely to be part of the eco-system, but to use our free will for moral and spiritual achievements. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik writes, “man must...strive to become subject and not object, one who influences one’s surroundings rather than one who is influenced, one who creates and is not created, one who acts and is not acted upon, one who controls his environment rather than being controlled by it...Sin,” he says, “occurs when man becomes an object.” When God confronts Adam after eating from the tree of knowledge, what does he say? “The woman who You gave to be with me, she gave it to me...” (Genesis 3:12) When God then confronted Eve, what did she say? “The snake tricked me and I ate” (Genesis 3:13). Soloveitchik concludes: “Both emphasized their helplessness in overcoming an external influence that ‘forced’ their fall.”

A baby is helpless, is born against his/her will. The covenant begins the process of initiating a child into the world of free will and responsibility.

Everyone a Parent

One final thought about these reflections and our community. I hope it is evident that the insights of these lifecycle moments don’t just apply to people who’ve personally experienced them. The question of birth is not merely a question of biology. I have counseled couples in our community this year who are struggling to conceive. Others in our community are single, and

will never have biological children. Still others may have children, but no grandchildren. I know we have a lot of doctors in our community, and I'm grateful for what you do; biology is important, but it is not the whole of human life. Not everyone can bring a child into the natural world, but everyone can bring a child into the covenant. The Talmud teaches כל המגדל כאלו ילדו / Whoever raises an orphan in his home is considered by Scripture as though s/he birthed that child (Sanhedrin 19b). The midrash teaches, המגדל נקרא אב ולא המוליד / The one who brings up a child is called parent, not the one who birth the child (Shemot Rabbah 46)

“It takes a village,” is a very Jewish idea. A child has many parents because, in a Jewish community, the life that matters most is not the genes we inherit, but the lessons we learn that transform the world. We are all children in need of parents, of people who can help us to take responsibility for our lives, to make a mark upon the world. We are all parents who can help one another to grow. Rabbi Levi Meir (z”l), the former chaplain at Cedars Sinai Hospital, once taught that the task of life is for us to be a midwife for others. A midwife helps a mother to breathe, to alleviate her suffering, is fully present, and, in the end, helps to give bring another individual life into the world. Can we do that for each other this year? Can help one another to breathe when life takes our breath away? Can we be present and, in doing so, help to alleviate each other's suffering? And can we help each other to change and, by doing so, bring another life into the world this year? Kein Yehi Ratzon, May God make it so, and let us say, Amen.