

From the Rabbi's Desk

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Today is the Birthday of the World!

D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5785



Happy birthday to you

Happy birthday to you

Happy birthday, dear world

Happy birthday to you.

I grew up knowing that Rosh Hashanah has four names, all of them related to the importance and power of this holiday.

Rosh Hashanah literally means "Head of the Year," because Rosh Hashanah marks the point when we begin the new calendar year (e.g. from 5784 to 5785).

Yom Hazikaron is translated as "The Day of Remembering."

Yom Hadin is translated as "The Day of Judgment."

Yom Teruah is translated as "The Day of Sounding (the Shofar)." This is the actual name that the holiday is called in the Torah.

And yet, a fifth name is Yom Harat Olam, translated as "The Birthday of the World."

So...

Happy birthday to you

Happy birthday to you

Happy birthday, dear world

Happy birthday to you.

Now, before the world makes three wishes and blows out the candles, let's revise this idea of Rosh Hashanah as the birthday of the world.

The midrash (Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 23:1) teaches:

Rabbi Eliezer taught: the world was created on the twenty-fifth of Elul... This implies that Adam was created on Rosh Hashanah. In the first hour [of that day] the idea arose [in the Divine mind to create humankind]... in the ninth [hour Adam and Eve were] commanded [not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge], in the tenth [hour they] transgressed the commandment, in the eleventh [hour they were] judged, and in the twelfth, pardoned by the blessed Holy One. The blessed Holy One said to Adam: "This will be a sign for your descendants. Just as you stood before me in judgment on this day and were pardoned, so too will they stand before me to be judged on this day and be pardoned."

What's going on here?

It seems that according to Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, the world was created not on Rosh Hashanah, but 6 days earlier, on the 25th of Elul. So, should we get the birthday cake or not?

To make things more complex, the short liturgical composition -Hayom Harat Olam- that closes the sections of Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofartot, reads:

הַיּוֹם הָרַת עוֹלָם. הַיּוֹם יַעֲמִיד בְּמִשְׁפָּט כָּל יְצוּרֵי עוֹלָמֵיךָ. אִם כְּבָנִים. אִם כְּעֹבְדִים. אִם כְּבָנִים רְחֵמֵנוּ כְּרַחֵם אָב עַל בָּנָיִם. וְאִם כְּעֹבְדִים עֵינֵינוּ לְךָ תְּלוּיּוֹת. עַד שֶׁתִּחַנְּנוּ וְתוֹצִיא כְּאוֹר מִשְׁפָּטֵנוּ אִיּוֹם קְדוֹשׁ:

Today is the birthday of the world! On this day all the world's creatures stand before You in judgment, whether as children, or as servants; if as children, have compassion for us as a father has compassion for his children! If as servants, our eyes are fixed on You until You favor us, and bring forth our judgment as the light, Revered and Holy One!

So, according to this prayer, Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world...so let's get out the pinata and the confetti...

Happy birthday to you

Happy birthday to you

Happy birthday, dear world

Happy birthday to you.

But if this is the case, what do birthdays have to do with judgment?

Why do you think a birthday might be a good (or bad!) time for judgment?

If you were judging our world on its birthday, what would you be pleased about?

Probably not too much...

What would you want the world to improve upon? The list is too long, I guess...

I presented you with a couple of technical problems - different dates, different names, different events - and with a couple of questions that perhaps you can take with you and discuss them over Rosh Hashanah lunch or dinner with your loved ones.

Now, allow me to share with you two insights as my birthday gift to the world, and to you as well.

The first insight comes from the fact that while the world was created on the 25th of Elul, complicating the Rosh Hashanah birthday theory, Adam and Eve, the first human beings, were indeed created on the 1st of Tishrei, as the Midrash reminds us.

Thus, my first insight is that the world without human beings to give meaning to it, is, for all practical purposes, non-existent. Yes, we have mountains, and trees, and lakes and oceans, and animals, and birds; but the world without humans, is like a book without a reader, like a sealed letter, like an unopened gift.

Imagine the Grand Canyon before the first "wow!!!," a beautiful blossoming flower with no one to appreciate it, a sunset without witnesses.... The first five days of creation are the prequel to the series, the prelude to the symphony, the setting of the table before the guests arrive.

Indeed, there is no world without human beings to give meaning to it. When we celebrate the world's birthday, we are celebrating humanity, we are celebrating the birthday of meaning.

Which leads me to the second insight.

הַיּוֹם הָרַת עוֹלָם - Today is the birthday of the world! – is an acceptable translation, but it is not the best one.

The Hebrew word *הָרַת*, associated with the modern Hebrew word *הָרִיוּן* - pregnancy, could be better translated as conception. Hence, *הַיּוֹם הָרַת עוֹלָם*—*should not be read as Today is the birthday of the world, but today is the conception of the world!*

According to the Jewish tradition, on Rosh Hashanah our matriarch Sarah conceived, ad so did Hannah, Samuel's mother.

Births and conceptions are two wonderful occasions worth celebrating, but they are not the same. A birth is the completion of a process, and each birthday is a celebration of the completion of a new year since that first completion. Today is 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, 58 years, since I came to this world. This is the celebratory aspect of Rosh Hashanah. We celebrate the past year, either its blessings, or the end of its challenges.

A conception, on the other hand, is a celebration fraught with trepidation and opportunity.

We can think of birth as an exclamation mark, a closing first chapter, a moment of amazement for the creation in front of our eyes. On the other hand, we think of conception as a question mark. Before ultrasounds were invented, we couldn't even know if that gestating miracle was a boy or a girl. During nine long months we dreamt, made plans, played with names, with endless possibilities. Everything was open.

Perhaps now we can answer one of our questions: what do birthdays have to do with judgment?

Birthdays, our own and Rosh Hashanah as the birthday of the world, are opportunities to judge the year just ended, to look back at what it was - and there is a lot to look back at.

However, if we think of Rosh Hashanah as Yom Harat Olam, the day in which the world was conceived, we might not be able to look back to the year that was, but rather to the year that might be.

We cannot undo the past, but the future is pregnant with possibilities. The past was already named. What it was, was. Tomorrow, however, this coming new year ahead of us, is a real mystery, filled with opportunities, and fears, surprises, trepidation, and hope.

Some of you are aware that I am fluent in Yiddish, product of a very good Socialist Jewish education at the Sholem Aleijem School in Buenos Aires, Argentina. One of my favorite Yiddish songs to this day, is Yankele, by Mordechai Gebirtig, the Polish Yiddish carpenter and master songsmith¹ killed in his native Krakow during the Holocaust.

The song, a lullaby, is the story of a mother dreaming of her little boy growing into adulthood. Let me sing a couple of stanzas to you. Please don't fall asleep...

שלאַף זשע מיר שוין, יאַנקעלע, מײַן שײַנער,
די אייגעלעך, די שוואַרצינקע, מאַך צו;
א יינגעלע, וואָס האָט שוין אַלע צײַנדעלער
מוז נאָך די מאַמע זינגען אײ-ליו-ליו.

אַ יינגעלע, וואָס האָט שוין אַלע צײַנדעלעך
און וועט מיט מזל באַלד אין חדר גיין,
און לערנען וועט ער חומש מיט גמרא,
זאָל וויינען ווען די מאַמע וויגט אים אײַן?

אַ יינגעלע וואָס לערנען וועט גמרא,
אַט שטייט דער טאַטע, קוועלט און הערט זיך צו,
אַ יינגעלע, וואָס וואַקסט אַ תלמיד-חכם,
לאַזט גאַנצע נעכט דער מאַמען נישט צו רן?

אַ יינגעלע, וואָס וואַקסט אַ תלמיד-חכם,
און אַ געניטער סוחר אויך צו גלייך,
אַ יינגעלע, אַ קלוגער חתן-בחור,
זאָל ליגן אַזוי נאָס ווי אין אַ טײַך?

¹ A number Gebirtig's Yiddish songs are sung to this day, including Es brent, Reyzele, Moyshale Mayn Fraynd, and Kinder Yorn.

נו, שלאָף זשע מיר, מיין קלוגער חתך—בחור,
דערווייל ליגסטו אין וויגעלע בני מיר.
ס'וועט קאָסטן נאָך פֿיל מי און מאַמעס טרערן
ביז וואַנען ס'וועט אַ מענטש אַרויס פֿון דיר.

Go to sleep now Yankele, my pretty one,
close your dark little eyes.
Momma still has to sing lull-a-bye
to a little boy who already has all his teeth?

Should a little boy who already has all his teeth,
and will, with luck, soon go to school
to study Torah and Talmud,
cry while his mother sings him to sleep?

A little boy who will study Talmud
(here's your father, beaming as he hears that!)
a little boy who will grow to be a scholar,
won't leave his mother be, night after night.

Should a little boy, who will grow to be a scholar
and a talented businessman alike,
a little boy, practically a clever bridegroom,
lie soaking wet as if in a river?

So, go on and sleep, my clever bridegroom,
meanwhile, you are lying in the cradle here with me.
It will cost a lot of effort yet, and mother's tears,
before a man will be made out of you.

Let me now invite you to play a little game of imagination.

Let's imagine that today we are not celebrating the past year (personally I have a lot to celebrate, but as a citizen of the world and the Jewish people, this past year is one I wish I can forget). Let's imagine that we are dreaming of a new year ahead, with a year pregnant with wonderful possibilities.

If you don't like the imagery of conception, let's imagine we are rocking this coming year in its cradle, imagining all the wonderful surprises and gifts it has in store for us.

Let's imagine that we are the parents of this coming year, dreaming a full measure of good news, dreaming of a year with more peace, with less violence, with more understanding, with less mourning, with less pain...

And as we rock our baby new year to sleep, let's think of what each of us can do to bring our dreams a little closer, beginning in concentric circles, with ourselves, and then moving to own homes, our families, our congregation, our people, our world....

תכלה שנה וקללותיה, תחל שנה וברכותיה - May the year end and with it, its curses. May the new year begin and with it, its blessings.

We all can dream. May our good dreams come true.

לְשָׁנָה טוֹבָה תִּפְתָּבוּ! - May all of you and your loved ones be inscribed and sealed for a year of peace and joy, meaning and fulfillment, for a good and sweet year.

Amen