

For The Sake of the World *Rosh Hashanah 5764*

Where do we first hear about Rosh Hashanah? In the Torah, in the book of Leviticus, we read:

Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites, saying: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, shall be for you a day a rest, a memorial proclaimed with the blast of the shofar, a holy assembly. (23:23).

It then goes on to give instructions about the 10th day of the seventh month-the month we're now in, the month of Tishrei-the 10th day of which is the Day of Atonement. But about this first day, the day we now call Rosh Hashanah, we don't hear anything else. No mention in the Torah of a new year, creation of the world, a book of life.

The idea of Rosh Hashanah as a new year (not the only one-there are three others in the Jewish calendar!) and the "birthday of the world" is a rabbinic invention, discussed in the Mishnah and the Talmud hundreds of years after the Torah was written. And unlike all of the other major holidays ordained in the Torah-Sukkot, Passover, Shavuot-the rabbis did not connect Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur to our mythology as a people. Rosh Hashanah is not, in the rabbinic imagination, related to going out of Egypt or receiving the Torah or coming into the land of Israel. It's a more universal day, a day for celebrating the beginning of the world and the creation of humanity. For the rabbis of the Talmud and later, this is the day on which God surveys all of creation, and human beings in particular, and decides what will be in the year to come.

It is intriguing to me that a holiday that is essentially universalist in its meaning takes on such a personal, introspective form in practice. It's common to most cultures to have some kind of celebration of the new year, but given the juxtaposition of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, to Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish day of new beginnings has become an intense and self-reflective time, not an excuse for a big party. It's a day on which we not only celebrate the Godliness that infuses all of creation, but where we acknowledge the very particular commitments which we as Jews owe that Ultimate Power.

This relationship of the universal and the particular is at the heart of this day. We celebrate the creation of all humanity, but pray to be written into the "book of life" as individuals and as a Jewish community. We affirm and acknowledge that Godly Power which suffuses all of reality, yet coming to High Holyday services is a very particular act, an affirmation of our identities and commitments as Jews.

I don't think our ancestors experienced a great disconnect between these universal themes and the particularity of being Jewish. Traditional Jewish understanding embraced a fairly audacious sense of the centrality of Jews & Judaism not only to the course of human events but to the

cosmos as a whole. This sense is rooted in the Biblical notion of the Jews as the chosen people: the community chosen to receive the Torah, the revelation of God's will.

I recently read an interesting book called *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, by David Biale. Biale observes that the Torah myth of Jewish "chosenness" completely flew in the face of historical reality; the reality that the ancient Israelites and their land were essentially "peripheral to world history," located far from the ancient centers of power. In fact, Biale notes, it was most likely the fact that they were peripheral that kept the Israelites and their kingdom from being swept away like more powerful empires of antiquity. Yet at the same time, the Jews' persistent belief in their chosenness by God, in their divine election, gave them an internal strength that helped ensure their communal survival.

This belief did not diminish in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people from Jerusalem in 70 C.E. The Bible had asserted that the Israelites were God's chosen people, and that they had received the Torah as their contract, as it were, with the Creator. But for the rabbis of the Talmud, the Biblical notion of chosenness expanded into the idea that the entire world came into being in order that that the Jewish people could receive and implement the Torah's teachings. In the rabbinic imagination, the Torah preceded the creation of the world, and was in fact the blueprint for the Creation, and we are the privileged party to whom this blueprint is entrusted. As those who teach and learn Torah, who live by its laws, the Jews are cosmically central to all of the created universe.

This idea, that the Jewish people and our Torah are somehow vitally connected to God's universal plans, has entailed a sense of responsibility as well as a sense of superiority. The most radical ideology of cosmic Jewish responsibility was formulated by the Kabbalists, the mystics associated with Rabbi Isaac Luria in the 16th century. Mystical Judaism brings us the concept of "*tikkun*," repair. This is the idea that by performing Jewish ritual acts, *mitzvot*, with the proper intention, each Jew contributes to the reconstruction of the shattered cosmos. This strain of Judaism teaches that God has gone into exile, facets of God are hidden, and the process of *tikkun*—that is, practicing Judaism with proper intention—will not only bring about redemption of the Jewish people, but will ultimately bring God's own Self out of exile and into wholeness. And if that's not cosmic responsibility, I don't know what is.

So as you can see, previous generations of Jews had good reason to come to shul on Rosh Hashanah. Not just to celebrate, to reflect, to see friends or fulfill a religious obligation. Underlying all of that was a sense of responsibility not only to ourselves but to the Jewish people and, ultimately, to the world as a whole. Even if those Jews were praying primarily for themselves, there was an underlying sense of a larger divine mission that was the basis not just of those religious acts, but of our very existence as a people.

Today the relationship between our universal commitments and our Jewish affinities is more complicated, and more problematic. There are two very different directions that Jews in the modern period have gone, in relation to this tension. On the one side are those who evaluate everything in terms of whether it is "good for the Jews" or "bad for the Jews"; people who feel

little sense of commitment to anyone outside our own community, who experience the world as basically unfriendly or even hostile to the Jewish people. And at the other extreme-people who experience Jewish commitments as inherently opposed to more universal demands, people who fear being “too Jewish,” who experience Judaism and Jewish life as a potential trap, a limited world-view which inhibits and constrains a full sense of self.

The problem with the first attitude is that it loses that traditionally profound sense of Jewish mission in the world and puts in its place an overriding concern with Jewish “survival” for its own sake. This stance comes out of a sense of victimization, a sense that no one else cares for our survival, and so in response we will care for little beyond ourselves. Centuries of anti-Semitism contribute to this attitude, but it was really the Holocaust that led to a transformation in modern Jewish consciousness, that led to a new focus on Jewish survival for its own sake. As David Biale writes:

With the Holocaust, the attempt to find a solution to the Jewish question in the states of Europe suffered a death blow; only the search for a life outside of Europe remained viable. With the destruction of the secular ideologies that had worked to transform the Jews into a “normal” nation, all that remained was a belief in the continuity of a unique Jewish fate. A new ideology of survival revived the old theology of divine election as the basis for Jewish life... (p. 144)

Biale goes on to discuss the founding of the state of Israel, an enterprise which was conceived by the original Zionists as the only way to create a “normal” Jewish existence, as one nation among nations. Yet due to the trauma experienced during the Holocaust and the ongoing conflict with the surrounding Arab nations, the goal of “normalcy” was replaced by this “ideology of survival.” Biale traces how many non-religious Jews took on the “chosenness” idea in a secular form: not a sense of Jewish mission in the world, or a traditional notion of the Jews’ special relationship with God, but a belief that we are historically, existentially unique-and so our people must continue to survive just for our own sake.

The reality of the past 2000 years of Jewish history—a complicated history, where Jewish communities have alternately experiences great oppression and relative privilege; where an endless cycle of prejudice, expulsion and violence has been matched by an equally impressive record of survival and continuity—this history has done a number on the collective Jewish psyche. We have inherited, we have internalized, an exaggerated sense of Jewish powerlessness along with the exalted notion of Jewish chosenness-which combine to produce a strange mix of superiority and fear.

This has led many people, those who embrace the “ideology of survival,” to be on constant watch for “enemies” “out there.” This attitude demands eternal vigilance against all opposing forces, whether Arab armies, European anti-Semites or the forces of assimilation here at home. In the words of Emile Fackenheim, an eminent Jewish philosopher, an 11th holy commandment was issued after the Holocaust, and it states that Hitler must not be given a “posthumous victory”—that Jewish survival has taken on a sacred value in and of itself.

Yet at the other end of the spectrum, there are many Jews for whom the legacy of the Jewish past has resulted in a profound sense of ambivalence about Judaism and Jewish identity. If the traditional belief was that precisely by being a “good Jew,” by keeping the *mitzvot* and maintaining Jewish community one helped sustain the world, today those of us with a more universalist, humanist bent can be quite suspicious of, even hostile to, Jewish particularism.

Our ambivalence manifests as discomfort or shame around the too-obvious expression of our Jewish identity, a shame that sometimes becomes disdain for Jewish ritual and practice. This ambivalence leads us to see commitments to Jewish community and to Jewish life as being in direct competition with the claims of our common humanity. This is where the fears of being “too Jewish” live. If I am “too Jewish,” then Jewish concerns and commitments are taking up too much space in my life, at the expense of something else. If I am “too Jewish,” then I can’t be a full and well-rounded human being.

While most of us are at neither of these extremes, neither obsessed with Jewish survival nor profoundly ambivalent, aspects of each of these attitudes are present in some way for many of us. And what is ironic about these opposing positions is that they basically operate from the same assumption: that the claims made upon us by Judaism are fundamentally at odds with commitments to humanity and the world in general. In the realm of the “ideology of survival,” we need to clearly show our allegiance to the Jewish people and put Jewish concerns above all others—commitments beyond this are secondary or even treasonous. And in the realm of ambivalence, we need to downplay or outright reject our Jewish commitments in order to be good citizens of the world.

And so I think that Rosh Hashanah issues a special to us. The challenge is this: how do we affirm at one and the same time our Jewish particularity and our shared humanity, our Jewish commitments and our global concerns?

What I would like us to reclaim is a bit of the early rabbis’ audacity, with a Reconstructionist twist. I would like us to believe that our Torah is somehow integral to the maintenance and perfection of this world—even as we acknowledge that other people’s teachings, other people’s truths, are also a path to redemption. I’d like us to believe that it matters that Judaism survives—not for survival’s sake, not just for our own sake, but because it’s good for the world. Because we have work to do that is unique in some way to us.

Mordecai Kaplan, the philosopher of Reconstructionist Judaism, had a very interesting perspective on what he called “religious civilization.” He took the view that all of humanity is oriented towards achieving “salvation”—which he defined as the full flowering of the creative and ethical potential in every human being. And he argued that salvation cannot be a solitary attainment, that people can only achieve salvation in the context of a community—more specifically, in the context of a civilization. And so it is the job of religious civilizations—that is, groups of people bound together by shared history, myth, sacred stories and practices, language and culture—to help their members achieve salvation. While the ultimate goal is the

salvation of all of humanity, the path to that goal, in Kaplan's understanding, was through the particular means of each unique civilization—of which Judaism is one. Moreover, each civilization has its own unique gifts to bring to this larger human project. So the life of the Jew within Jewish community should, ultimately, contribute to the self-realization of that individual, as well as contribute to the overall goal of justice and peace for all people.

Here Kaplan shares much with his rabbinic predecessors. He rejected the notion of Jewish chosenness, but affirmed the idea of our Jewish vocation, our special path to Truth encompassed in that word, "Torah." He didn't claim that Judaism was essential for the functioning of the cosmos, but he did assert that our commitments as Jews are compatible with, indeed part and parcel of, our larger human commitments. He saw it as a Jewish task to achieve economic and social justice, not just for Jews but for all people. He appreciated not just the contributions that modern American culture made to Judaism but also the gifts that Judaism could bring to the culture of America.

This understanding has great potential to liberate us from xenophobic isolation, on the one hand, and from deep ambivalence and discomfort with Jewish practice on the other.

It should help us overcome some of those burdens and scars of our history that I discussed earlier. It frees us to experience our Judaism, our Jewish connections, as neither something to be defended nor as a source of shame and anxiety. We need neither apologize for our existence nor obsess about how to make sure it continues. It is enough that we are here.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us of our universal responsibilities, in the context of our particular customs and traditions. What we are asked, today, is to take seriously our Jewish commitments as part and parcel of our human responsibilities—not in opposition to them. In the wonderful and diverse creation of humanity which we celebrate today, we also celebrate and affirm our particular portion of the larger human task: to bless the Creation, to appreciate the wonders that we experience every day, and to help create a world in which every human being can come into the fullness of who they are. Judaism is here to give us a structure within which to do those things, and to give us a community in which to find support, guidance, and inspiration.

So what exactly does it mean to take seriously our Jewish commitments as part and parcel of our human responsibilities? I think it will vary for each of us. For some, it might mean paying attention to those moments of ambivalence or discomfort, the resistance to engaging in Jewish practice, the fear of being "too Jewish." Not to berate oneself or feel guilty, but to explore those moments and try to gain some insight into their cause.

For others, it might mean challenging our own notion of Jewish inadequacy, of taking the plunge and trying some Jewish learning, experimenting with some Jewish practices, not being afraid to make mistakes and try again. I read an article in the Globe recently where a recently enrolled rabbinical student who had done years of practice in Eastern religions likened taking on Jewish practice to learning to play the violin. It sounds sort of screechy at the beginning, and it feels quite awkward, but over time it becomes possible to make beautiful music. So think

of Jewish practice like learning a musical instrument—it might take a little time, it might feel a little awkward in the beginning, but there are great rewards in practices like observing Shabbat, in saying blessings, in becoming familiar with Jewish prayer, in taking seriously the obligations of *tzedakah*—mindful giving—and *gemilut chasadim*, obligations of lovingkindness. These are practices that are designed to help us become better people, more grounded and centered people, more caring people.

I think all of us are asked to take seriously the traditional notion that all Jews are responsible for one another; to expand our sense of Jewish community from just our immediate congregation; to think about what it would mean to feel a sense of covenant with the Jewish people as a whole. What are our responsibilities to other Jews in Boston, around the world, in Israel?

And finally, we are asked to enter into relationship with other, non-Jewish communities, from a sense of being rooted in who we are, and with appreciation for what our tradition offers others, and what others can offer us. If redemption is to come to a world that badly needs it, then we certainly can't bring that day on our own—we need allies and friends in the work of peace and justice. I truly believe that our most fruitful collaborations come when we are comfortable and proud in our own sense of who we are. Just as we bless each of our children for their uniqueness, so let us bless our own unique qualities as a people, as a community, as a tradition, and work to bring that blessing to a world that needs us.

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