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Rosh Hashanah 5774 September 5, 2013

“Birth Cries”

I cannot remember much of the first few months of either of my children’s lives. I knew then that I wanted to imprint those days in my soul, to hold them and keep them forever, but I couldn’t. We were just too tired. There are a few images, however, which stand out clearly against the blur. The clearest of these are the births themselves. Both boys were born at home, both birthed by Felicia with the help of a midwife, but each birth was entirely distinct from the other. Benjamin was born in the morning, as the sun rose in the East. He was born under water, in a birthing tub. I remember seeing him crown, feeling his head in my hands, and then slowly he emerged into my arms. I remember instinctively rushing to lift him above the water so he could breathe, forgetting that he was breathing through his umbilical cord, and I remember holding him in my arms, looking into his face, astonished as I passed him to Felicia. “Hi,” I thought. “I’m going to know you.” Eitan was not born under water, he preferred a bed, thank you very much. And he was born with the stars and the moon high in the sky. Though his labor was long, his entry into the world was fast. From the moment he crowned, he flew out right into my arms. I literally caught him. Nothing about the second birth was like the first, and the child who emerged was not like the first, but an entirely new and different person, from the shape of his ears to the look in his eyes. “Hi,” I thought, “I’m going to know you, too.”

I remember a lot of crying. Felicia’s cries of pain and courage and exhaustion and determination and endurance and finally of relief and joy. My cries of awe and love and gratitude, the cries of family and friends circled round, and then the cry of each new baby as he entered our world.

Hayom Harat HaOlam. (Hold up Ben Shahn machzor) Today the world was conceived. We call Rosh Hashanah the birth day of the world. Our tradition says that on this day the world was both conceived and came into being.

The Talmud¹ has it that on Rosh Hashanah Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel all conceived², and our haftarah portion just told us that Hannah conceived on this day. The Midrash also says that Adam and Eve were born on this day,

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 11a, From rabbinic thesis of Rabbi Lisa Edwards

² From Rabbi Edwards’s rabbinic thesis

and that Isaac and Rebecca were born on this day, and that it was at noon on this day that “the bondage of our ancestors ceased in Egypt.”³ Emerging from Mitzrayim, which means the narrow place, through the birthing waters of the Red Sea, we were born as a free people.

Many of us in this room have not and will never give birth, some of us cannot give birth and for some this has been the source of great pain. But all of us were born. Today on the birth day of the world, we consider our births, as we are offered the opportunity to symbolically begin again.

You might know that on Yom Kippur we rehearse our own deaths. That’s why we wear white, we don’t eat or drink or bathe or make love. We rehearse our deaths to give us perspective on the meaning and brevity of our lives. Have you ever considered that on Rosh Hashanah we relive our own births?⁴

The shofar is the symbol most associated with Rosh Hashanah. The root of the word Shofar, *shin feh resh* is shared with Shifra, the midwife who helped the children of Israel be born and survive in Egypt.⁵ The name of the other Egyptian midwife, Puah, means pant, moan, cry. The Talmud describes the sound of the shofar as “a long sigh, moans, short, piercing cries.”⁶ Midrash Tanhuma⁷ describes the blast of the shofar as the cries of pain and joy in childbirth, or, as Rabbi Lisa Edwards describes it, “the sound of life coming into the world.”⁸

This morning we hear the sound of the shofar. Rabbi Edwards writes: “Imagine hearing the blasts of the shofar with the cries of a mother in labor foremost in your mind. We are there, we are participants ...” And it is our births we are re-enacting. In the Talmud (Yerushalmi) God says, “Since you entered into judgment before me on the holy day of the New Year, ... I attribute it to you as if you were made a new creature.” We are re-born.

As a new creature, everything becomes possible for you, anything can come from you, be born through you. And here you are so now – imagine it – so vulnerable, so fragile, it breaks your heart wide open. What will you *do* with this one, brief and precious life? This is the call and the cry of the shofar.

Pediatrician Mark Sloan writes: “Birth is about radical, creative, life-affirming change. It is about adaptation on a nearly unbelievable scale. There is no time in life, not even the moment of death, that can compare to the human body’s transformation in the first five minutes outside the womb. ... We go from dark to light, from warm to cold, from wet to dry, and begin to breathe through our lungs. We emerge blue and slippery, covered in blood and amniotic fluid, bandy legged, pigeon toed, squinty eyed and squalling. In a few short minutes, our initial frantic cries are soothed by our [parent]’s touch and familiar voice, our color shifts, we open our eyes and look at the world.”⁹

³ *ibid*

⁴ Rabbi Larry Hoffman in Edwards

⁵ This idea, and the concept for the sermon, came from chevruta study with Rabbi Lydia Medwin

⁶ Edwards

⁷ Emor 11 and Tazria 4, from Edwards

⁸ Edwards

⁹ Mark Sloan, *Birth Day*

The Zohar teaches that in the womb we can see the world from one end to the other, and we know and understand the meaning of life. And then, at the moment we are born, an angel taps us on our lips and makes us forget it all, so that all of our lives, as we adapt and learn, we are merely remembering.

Judaism teaches that nothing about your birth, nothing about you being here in the world, is an accident. You do not exist merely to fulfill a biological imperative: to carry a particular combination of your progenitors' genes into the future. No. You have something to give to this world, you are needed, you have a purpose to fulfill.

Drawing on the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5), Martin Buber wrote: "Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, entirely original and unique ... If there had been someone like you in the world, there would have been no reason for you to be born."

So what is the reason that you were born? Why are you here? What is your purpose? These are Rosh Hashanah questions. For on this day, we are judged and we judge ourselves by whether we are living up to the purpose of our births.

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman suggests that if on Rosh Hashanah we relive our birth, and if on Yom Kippur we rehearse our death, then the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Days of Awe, the Ten Days of Teshuva, represent our lives. And they model the very best our lives could be. For in the ideal we would use each day of our lives to try to do better, to be better, which is what we do in these ten days.

Remember that the root of the word Shofar was related to Shifra, the midwife? It's also related to a verb: l'shaper. L'shaper means to improve, to make better, to do better. When we hear the shofar, we are being called to improve. And if these ten days represent our lives, then these days come to tell us that the *purpose of our lives* is to improve ourselves and our world.

If you think about it, that's what human beings do. From the moment we are born, we always are learning and improving. Lifting our heads, coordinating our limbs, developing language, learning empathy, mastering abstract concepts, we always, every moment of every day are learning, developing, improving. Not only ourselves but our world: making tools, solving problems, fixing, adapting, inventing. As we grow older, we develop deeper understanding and insights, even wisdom. We might say, it's just our nature – striving to learn, to grow, to develop, to do better. But Judaism brings an essential element to this. Judaism says that this improvement has a moral dimension. We shouldn't only work to become faster, stronger, smarter, but we should also work to become better: kinder, more loving, more generous, more fair. And when we develop tools and technologies that enable us collectively to become faster, stronger, and smarter, we ought to use these improvements not only for our own enrichment, but to make our world more just, more kind, more loving, more peaceful. This is our collective purpose: to become better and to make our world better.

And as Martin Buber and the Mishna said, each of us has our own original and unique reason for being born. Only you know your particular challenge for self-improvement, what the sound of the shofar, the sound of your

birth – calls you to do. And only you know your particular gifts: what you, and only you, were born to give to this world. There are countless problems in our world to which you can apply your gifts and your effort – hunger, homelessness, global warming, the food supply, and on and on. What are you here to give? How will you improve our world?

On this Rosh Hashanah, after this particular summer and after the events of last week, whose significance Rabbi Chasen discussed with us last night, I feel compelled to suggest, for your consideration, an area that needs our effort and attention. You may call it race, or racism, or economic injustice, but when we put it in historical perspective, it is the legacy of slavery in America. Here are the facts we all know. A baby born to a Black mother in America is likely to grow up in a worse neighborhood, attend a worse school, have worse job options, experience more violence, and have worse health outcomes than a baby born to a White mother in America. If he's a boy, he will be seen as a criminal – he will experience this no matter what he does – even if he is a professor at Harvard or if he grows up to be the President of the United States. This Black baby boy's chances of going to jail will be seven times that of the baby born to the White mother. He may be shot at and killed walking down the street eating Skittles, or sitting on a swing set, or riding the BART home through Fruitvale Station on New Year's Eve.

The sound of the shofar has another association in the Midrash, and that is the cry of Sarah, when she hears about the binding of Isaac, and thinks that her son has died. How many hundreds, thousands of Black mothers cry out each year over their dead children?

Dr. Eliza Byard wrote "We will never recover from slavery, nor will we ever truly be great, until we value the lives of Black people more than the fears of White people."

Those fears are real. As Langston Hughes wrote: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore, and then run? ... Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?" Those of us who are White are afraid because we know that it's not fair, that we happened to be born on the winning side of an unfair system. And we are afraid because we are so segregated, most of us don't know Black people from South Central or Watts, we have so few opportunities to look them in the eyes, to be there for each other when our children are born, to cry together when we are sick or dying. We live in two separate worlds, miles apart. And we build walls and gates and alarm systems to protect ourselves from that other world. Because, though it's just a quiet hum in the background most of the time, we know that as long as there is an economic chasm between us the peace cannot last forever. Until Black babies are born into a world that is safe, and open to them, and full of possibility, there will be no lasting peace between us.

Fifty-two years ago last Spring, the Freedom Riders risked their lives to integrate transportation depots and lunch counters in the South. Fifty-two years later, our country is almost as segregated as it was then. And not just in the South. According to 2010 census data, Los Angeles is the tenth most segregated city in America. And racial segregation is actually getting worse here, because economic segregation is getting worse. According to a UCLA

study, in the 1970s, the average Black student in L.A. went to a school that was 14% White. Today the average Black student in Los Angeles attends a school that is 6% White.

We know what happened to the Voting Rights Act this summer. In their decision striking Section 4 of the Act, the majority argued that Congress was using old data, and times had changed. But just a few years ago, Congress found egregious voting rights violations in the nine covered states, including extreme gerrymandering and the cancelling of elections when it looked like Black candidates would win.¹⁰ We still do not have consensus in this country about whether the great grandchildren of slaves should have the same right to vote as the great grandchildren of slaveowners. And we still do not have consensus about whether and how Black children and White children should go to school together, or Black families and White families should live next door to each other. The problem is not just the racists in Alabama and Mississippi. One hundred and fifty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, what have we done to make room in the American Dream for our Black sisters and brothers? We have work to do.

Fifty years ago, there were signs in the South that said “No Blacks, No Jews, No Dogs,” usually with less nice language. And as Rabbi Chasen reminded us last night, Jews were there, some of you were there, marching with Dr. King, Jews were there as Freedom Riders, Jews were there registering Blacks to vote.

Where are we now? By and large we’ve moved on, into better neighborhoods, on to greater success. Meanwhile the wealth gap has continued to grow, and Black people are twice as likely as Whites to live in poverty.¹¹

Sometimes it feels overwhelming or even impossible to heal the legacy of slavery in America, but we can. We must. And that healing has to begin with those of us who are White. The barriers of segregation are high and wide and deep, and mostly economic, but until we cross them, until we find and know and love and work with and break bread with and celebrate with and mourn with our Black sisters and brothers, we will continue to live half lives marked by anxiety and anomie.

A recent study by Manuel Pastor at USC¹² concurred with a number of other studies showing that when metropolitan regions intentionally seek racial integration and equity while building the economy, they have better and more sustained economic growth. Fighting for equity without attention to growing the economy doesn’t create jobs or improve the lives of the poor. Pushing for growth without regard to equity leads to long term stagnation. The two must go hand in hand. This is not altruism, it’s good for us all.

Every one of us in this room has something to do. We can be agents of equity, integration, and job creation. Whether that’s by fighting for universal, high quality early childhood education, or a radical increase in funding

¹⁰ Detailed in an article by Dr. Sherrilyn Ifill on www.TheRoot.com.

¹¹ Paraphrased from President Obama in conference call with rabbis Aug 30, 2013

¹² *Just Growth*, Chris Benner and Manuel Pastor

for our public schools, for teacher salaries and teacher training and better curricula, or for incentives for business creation in South LA, or for affordable housing in our own neighborhoods so that they can be diverse. If you're a developer, or a city planner or a builder, what can you do to bring more mixed-income housing into White neighborhoods? If you're a realtor, how can you sell to more Black families in White neighborhoods? If you own or manage a business of any kind, or a law firm, or a medical practice, how can you integrate your workforce more, or create better opportunities for lower-income workers to learn new skills, go back to school, and advance? If you're a writer or filmmaker or work in television, what can you do to create and promote complex Black voices and stories? If you're a parent in a school, what can you do to reach out to Black and Latino families? When you're at the grocery store or go shopping anywhere, what can you do when Black people are ignored by salespeople or treated as if they can't pay? If you read the newspaper, you can write a letter to the editor expressing your grief or outrage when Black children are killed or profiled. Those of us who have benefitted from being White in America must not be merely spectators on the sidelines as the moral fate of our country unfolds. There is collective teshuva, collective repentance, to be done.

Just a few days ago, President Obama held a conference call with rabbis for the New Year. When asked what Jews could do to address the persistent and structural racial and economic inequality in our country, he said: "Tell the world this matters to you. Speak out forcefully about inequality. Justice is not just the absence of oppression, but the presence of opportunity."

Here at Leo Baeck Temple we have a storied history of action on racial and economic justice – from the early days of school desegregation, when the women of Leo Baeck Temple organized an after school program for children bussed from South LA to Westside schools – to CLUE, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, co-founded by Rabbi Beerman with Civil Rights veteran James Lawson. These days, we have two big, ongoing initiatives. You can get involved in community organizing with One LA, and work with Black and Latino communities for access to health care and affordable housing and education and a functional public transportation system. Because Blacks and Whites can't know each other until we can physically get to each other. Or you can get involved through the Community of Elders with the Kinship in Action network of the Community Coalition – family foster care in the mostly Black community of South LA. No matter where you stand there is something you can do.

Why is the sound of birth a cry? Because it hurts. It hurts to give birth and it hurts to be born. And it hurts to live. There is so much pain and there is so much improving to be done. When we acknowledge how much it hurts, when we cry out with the pain of the world, we can begin to heal and do better.

There is one more word related to shofar: Shafar means glistening beauty or splendor, radiance. When we overcome the legacy of slavery in America, when we strive to become better human beings, when we give our own original gifts to improve our society, when we make it so that all babies are born into a world of possibility, we will experience shafar: beauty, radiance, splendor.

Today on Rosh Hashanah you are born. In ten days on Yom Kippur you die. What will you do with this one, brief and precious life?

When the shofar sounds today, let us return to our beginnings, when every possibility was open, remembering who we are and why we are here. Like Shifra, let's help birth a new day, I'shaper, to do better, to be better, to make our world better. So that we become something shafar: beautiful, radiant, splendidous.

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu lishmoa kol shofar. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of our Universe, who sanctifies us through commandments and commands us to hear the voice of the shofar.

Benediction

Eternal One, help us to live out the purpose of our births, to be better, to do better, so that every new baby is born into a world of possibility and equality. Let us heed the prophet Isaiah who said: "Cry with a full throat, without restraint; raise your voice like a shofar! ... Then your light will shine (in darkness) and your gloom shall be like noonday." (Isaiah 58:1, 10) *Shanah Tovah.*