



LeoBaeckTemple

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Hayom Harat Olam: Creating A New World

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782 - September 6, 2021

There is nothing like looking into the eyes of a newborn to clarify what matters. On March 29th, 2020, as I stared into our daughter Shiloh's eyes for the first time in the labor and delivery room at Cedars Sinai, I was at once paralyzed. And thought, "How reckless I must be as a mother to welcome a child into the world in this time."

This world: in which a movement seeking to say that black lives matter as much as white lives is vilified?

This world: in which my hometown of Miami could be underwater by 2050?

This world: in which my state, my own synagogue for that matter, is constantly under the threat of fire?

This world: in which my newborn daughter wouldn't meet another soul beside her parents, her sister, and her pediatrician for nearly a year?

This world: in which parents are petrified just to send their children to school?

This world: in which wearing a mask or receiving a vaccine to protect my unvaccinated infant from getting sick has become a cultural battleground?

No wonder I was terrified...I am terrified, truly, every time she leaves the house.

Which led me to wonder...what IS the world we want to create for her? For us?

I love the summer months, in part, because I love studying the book of Numbers, which contains tales of our ancestors' wilderness journeys from Sinai to the Promised Land. There is something so real and human about these stories, which often depict the Israelites and their leaders at their worst. A common theme throughout the book is the Israelites' penchant for complaining, which often puts them at odds with God or with Moses.

In one instance, the people weep bitterly for a better dining menu in the desert, saying, "We remember the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt, the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic! Now, our bellies are dry! Nothing but this manna to look forward to!" (Numbers 11:5).

Over and over again, we witness the Israelites struggling to accept their new reality. Terrified by what the future holds, they seek refuge in nostalgia, in this case, reimagining their bitter servitude in Egypt as a day at the palace. And each year, as we read these stories,

I grapple to understand why they are so stuck in the past. Is Moses not the leader they need if they can't move past their kvetching and nostalgia? Are they just ungrateful and not ready for liberation?

But this year, I looked upon the Israelites' struggles with new eyes... as I saw myself. I saw us. Yes, the Israelites couldn't move on. And yes, they are scared of change and are more comfortable holding onto the reality they knew, even if it was much worse than they remember. And yes, their nostalgia keeps them stuck.

But they are also in pain. They are experiencing a profound sense of loss... both in human life, as an entire generation dies in the wilderness, and in their way of life, which, at the moment of their liberation, is thrown completely into chaos. And they are so busy surviving that they don't even have the time to grieve. Their complaints aren't simply self-indulgent concerns; their complaints are expressions of that grief and trauma.

This year, that need to grieve rings true more than ever. This year, I moved from judgment to compassion as I began to better understand how fear, very real fear, can just as easily get us stuck, too.

But getting stuck isn't the only option.

Each year on the summertime Jewish observance known as Tisha B'Av, our tradition offers us a possible response to the Israelites' complaints in the desert... perhaps to the moment we find ourselves in today, by giving us a rather odd task. Definitely not a modern task. For on Tisha B'Av, our tradition calls upon us to lament. To cry. To feel. To mourn.

On this ninth of Av, when we commemorate the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, our ancestors' center of Jewish life and ritual – and really, the lynchpin of the ancient Jewish community and worldview – our tradition doesn't tell us to bury our painful past. It doesn't ask us to suck it up and power through. It doesn't demand that we pretend it didn't happen by making our lives so busy that we don't have to acknowledge the suffering or loss.

Instead, it says: Grieve. Lament. Tisha B'Av is designed to enable us to spend an entire day in mourning, reciting eicha, the Book of Lamentations, which teaches us how to weep. Says the Book of Lamentations: "My eyes are spent with tears, my heart is in tumult (2:11)... "shed tears like a torrent" (2:18). Our tradition asks us to dwell on the sheer enormity of this loss so that seven weeks later, when the New Year arrives, we are ready to return and to rebuild ourselves and our world anew.

And that's exactly what our ancestors did. Unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, who remained stuck in the past, the Jews who survived the destruction of the 2nd Temple in the year 70 looked toward the future with resolve and imagination.

First, they created space to grieve. And then, they used their creativity to revolutionize Judaism, standardizing the concept of the Oral Law, exchanging animal sacrifices for personal and communal prayer, and replacing the hereditary caste leadership of the priesthood with leaders who proved themselves through study – the rabbis. In so doing, they transformed an ethnic cult into the full-fledged religion we know and embrace today.

The differences between the Temple cult and the new Judaism were so stark we probably wouldn't even recognize the other. It makes me think about some of the times I've mentioned my love of mix tapes to our teen students. They literally have no idea what I'm

talking about. And, just like the Temple cult, mix tapes were pretty awesome for their time and helped us to innovate to the playlists we create and share so readily on our phones today, but... we're never going back to mix tapes, and we really shouldn't, because they no longer serve us.

Living through the twists and turns of a worldwide pandemic is no small feat. And far too many have suffered in its path. We must find our way to grieve and lament. And yet, we have remained at the crossroads of COVID for too long, hoping and praying that we can just walk it all back. But there's no going back. There's no, "when all this is over." This is our world now, and we can choose to stay stuck in Egypt, or we can choose to use our creative forces, like our ancestors after the destruction of their temple, to shape what comes next.

Hayom harat olam. Today, the world was created. And what better way to mark that creation than by affirming our powers to create? For we alone among the creatures of this world were formed in the Divine image and given the power to shape the future.

This doesn't mean that we throw out everything we have learned from the past. We, as Jews, know better than anyone that we should constantly revisit where we came from and what brought us to this moment and continue to learn from it. But we also can't live there. We must look toward what comes next. But how?

In a recent podcast, renowned conflict mediator Priya Parker, who wrote the beautiful and poignant book, *The Art of Gathering*, offers a taste of how we might move forward in this unprecedented time by asking us to think deeply about one particular element—what it means to gather in this moment. And she cautions us against defaulting to our old habits, when at some level, the decks have been cleared.

Think about it – for decades, we've gathered in very specific ways – often designed for the white, masculine, able-bodied, post World War II corporate culture – without ever bothering to consider if these methods worked for everyone. And let's be honest – they don't.

Rather than yearn for the way we've always done things, we have the opportunity to pause and ask: How should we do it now? What is the need we are trying to address? What have we learned during this year and a half of reckoning about relationships, about access, and about equity that needs to inform the way we gather and relate in the future?

Because in our reimagining, we don't want to skip over these essential conversations. For example, many studies have shown that women have disproportionately lost their jobs in the pandemic and that at the same time, the people who are most likely to want to work from home are women, as well as parents in general. And so, Parker challenges us to consider, for instance, how to restructure meetings and gatherings for true hybrid participation – so that the people who are staying home aren't punished. And to think about when we do gather in person, how we do so creatively and equitably.

Similar conversations are happening not just around workplace gatherings, but about schools, houses of worship, even the future of beloved institutions like movie theaters and restaurants. And while many of us are exhausted and just trying to figure out how to keep surviving—physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, when there are very real threats around us constantly, we also have to start asking these hard questions that reside at the heart of our ability to create the world we want for ourselves and for our community.

So as you sit, in whatever place you chose to transform into your part of our sanctuary here today, I ask you: What is the inner yearning that brings you into this space? And how might our world and our community evolve to fulfill the highest aspirations of our souls? 5 years from now? 20 years from now? What can you imagine our world, our community looking like in 5 years? 20 years? And how do you want to be a part of making it happen?

Asking these questions is more than simply an opportunity to shape the future for the better – it is, in fact, an essential task for the right here and now. Because we are at an inflection point. There are no longer best practices. Our best practices were created for a different time—and like the mix tape, they’re now obsolete. We are creating the new best practices right now, intentionally, or not. But it takes more than simply identifying our goals to move forward with integrity and care.

It takes listening: to our yearnings, to each other’s yearnings, to the yearnings of those who possess less power than we do... and consider: what is the work at hand and what are our priorities so that we can do our most expansive dreaming, knowing that people offer their most vibrant selves when they feel seen and accepted?

We aren’t just shifting communal structures; we are shifting how we allocate resources. The rules have changed. And that’s scary, but it’s also freeing because one of our super-powers as humans is not only to adapt, but to thrive amidst change...to explore how what we do next by radically experimenting in our own lives and in our communal spaces, and to learn and reflect with care so that we can continually adapt and rethink along the way.

When I consider the difficult questions that now confront us, I first think about our students and their worldview. In them, I get a glimpse of what could be—an expression of humanity in which identities are fluid—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion and more. For they see a world that is not binary, that isn’t one or the other, and can hold space for it to be both and all. And I get excited about the possibility of creating systems and institutions that think beyond categories—that aren’t bound or limited by labels or structures that might constrain our imagination.

Our students also crave a balanced existence, in which their lives aren’t dominated by goals that prove to be more elusive the more single-mindedly we pursue them, but rather, a journey where they get to know themselves and be...not always do. We have already started to see the beginnings of this change—people moving to places with a slower pace of life...people quitting their jobs at higher numbers than in decades to rethink what they want to do and how they want to spend their time... and as an aside, we must also take note that these choices come from privilege and not everyone has the ability to make them.

I also see in our students a profound care for the vulnerable, for the other, and a longing to shift the long-held systems that continue to keep some out. And so, when I get scared of what we’re leaving behind, I imagine the world that they, and we, are creating. A world of acceptance and complexity and presence. A world beyond definitions and categories that is much more expansive than any of us could have imagined. A terrifying world... but also an exhilarating one.

We named our youngest daughter Shiloh as a prayer, as a hope, as a choice to believe in the future, in her future. We named her Shiloh after the biblical city, *שילה*, an ancient gathering place that brought people together in connection with God and with one another. We named her Shiloh, yes, because when she was born two weeks after the beginning of quarantine, we could feel so palpably our desire to return to that feeling we experienced

when our older daughter Shifra was born 3.5 years ago... when we gathered together with our communities in this big sanctuary, arm in arm, to look out and know that she would be okay. And we also named her Shiloh because at this crossroads moment in our world, we were committing to participating and believing in the creation of something new—something we can't quite envision yet, but that we know is teeming with possibility. And we were affirming that even though we are afraid, all the time, we know that she deserves the best our human ingenuity can come up with...and that, together, we all can create something so much more for her... and for us.

Hayom harat olam. Today, the world was created. And what better way to mark that creation than by affirming our ability to create? For we alone among the creatures of this world were formed in the Divine image and given the power to shape the future of this world.

Are we brave enough to sit in this space of discernment? Are we resilient enough to try and fail? And are we curious and collaborative enough to create coalitions of yearnings that will move us past what we think we know and into conversation and then action toward who we, as individuals and as a collective could be?

I can't wait for you to meet Shiloh. And I can't wait for her—and for us—to meet this new world.

Shanah Tovah.