

Bringing the Light into the Newness

And just like that, poof, we are in a new year, a new chance, a new self. It's actually a bit overwhelming when we think about it. We just wake up tomorrow and what, we have a clean slate? Seems like a lot to take on in just one, or in our case, two days.

Today is Rosh HaShana, a day of many names; hayom harat ha'olam - the day the world was created, yom t'ruah - the day the horn is sounded, the date the gates open, and we begin to face a fate, soon to be sealed, for the year to come. Today we have the opportunity to start afresh, we are blessed with a newness of our own. This is a big deal - so shouldn't we be doing some serious prep work for an opportunity like this?

Thankfully, our tradition has provided us with a pretty long on ramp so that we may enter into the magnitude of the day fully prepared. And while there is a "traditional" warm up routine so to speak, I am willing to wager that on some level, whether or not we were even aware of it, each of us has been doing some serious preparation for this holiday.

Personally, I have a lot of newness in my life this year. Liz and I have newly returned from living in Israel, we moved in to a new home, I am starting a new graduate program, and I am joining this community in a very new way. This newness is exciting and it is also intimidating. I spent the summer pondering what it would all be like, asking myself if I will be ready to enter each of these aspects of newness in my life fully present and prepared to make the most out of the opportunities.

My own preparation for Rosh Hashana began with my first visit to GJC upon returning to Mt. Airy. I came here and davened shacharit in the Magil chapel as we celebrated Rosh Chodesh Av. The morning was joyful. We sang hallel together, but we also began a spiritual journey of reflection that brought us face to face with the suffering our people and the world has endured. A week and a half later on Tisha b'av, I sat on the floor in this room and as we chanted Eicha and felt the weight of the destruction and hardship our world has faced this past year.

For me the spiritual preparation for Rosh Hashana has been a journey across the whole spectrum of emotions and reflection. Emerging from the depths of Tisha b'av, forty days ago, I stood in a room with Jews from all different backgrounds and I blew shofar to announce the new month of Elul. I love the piercing sound of the shofar, its blast seems to awaken me, propelling me forward, while anchoring me at the same time, its sound reminds me of my dad, a master of its craft, and brings me back to my childhood. As I blew the shofar that morning I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up under the tallis Liz gave me last summer at our wedding, I was totally overcome in that moment, and I began to think about the past year. I thought about the relationships I strengthened and the ones that need repair, the things I accomplished and all the stuff I wanted to get to and just never did. But mostly I thought about the person I have been and the one I want to be in the new year ahead.

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In this way, I think that Rosh Hashana is, to use a cliché, more about the journey than the destination. In my own preparation and reflection, I have felt both emboldened and embarrassed. Proud of all that I have accomplished and uncomfortably aware of all that lies ahead. I wonder if I could ever really be prepared: to serve this community, to live up to my potential, to be the son, brother, and husband I want to be, to stand before God, or to begin something new. Yet in spite of it all I am here, like each of us is, as prepared as we can be to enter a year which is totally unknown.

One of the center points of this evening's service is the sanctification of the new year, the *kidush ha'shana*. Our mahzor begins this section of prayer with the first few verses of the torah and in doing so invites us to examine our own role in the creation of the world. We read:

Bereshit bara elohim et hashamim v' et ha'aretz. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. *V' ha'aretz hita tohu v'vohu v'choseh al pnei tahom, v'ruach elohim m'rachpet al peni hamaim.* And the earth was in a state of chaos and darkness covered the depths, and the breath of God swept over the water.¹

These are the first two verses of the torah. ***V' ha'aretz hita tohu v'vohu. And the earth was in a state of chaos.*** This might be the most resonant line of Torah this year. Our world is in a state of chaos. Reflecting on the year that has passed we all know that it has been a hard year - for everyone. We have all felt the fear that has come along with this chaos. We have been terrified and outraged as the safety of our coworkers, friends, family and community members has been threatened because of who they are, who they love, the color of their skin or where they come from. Hatred has reared its ugly head in the public square, and all of us have come face to face with a vicious and public anti-Semitism.

When I look around, it seems a little bit like the Torah's primordial description is an apt assessment of where we are living today. **The earth was in a state of chaos.** And so, as we sit here on the eve of the world's birthday, it seems we have found ourselves in a space quite similar to the one God inhabited at this very moment millennia ago – in the darkness of chaos' shadow.

In my study for today I pondered what God's preparation routine looked like? How did God face this chaos? Did God also have a six-week spiritual journey to this moment? Who did God invite to dinner and what was written on God's shopping list? What words did God whisper in confession during slichot and what insecurities did God bring with to the first day? How, even before the birth of the world could God be prepared for the fresh start that lay ahead?

This being our first recorded moment it's hard to say what God's preparation consisted of, but there is a great lesson to be learned from God's first actions in the newness. *V'ruach elohim m'rachpet al pnei hamaim*, God breathes, and then, *v'yomer elohim y'hi*

¹ Gen.1:1-2

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or, v'yhi or. And God said let there be light, and there was light. *V'yaer elohim et ha'or ki tov, v'yavdel elohim bein ha or v'bein ha'choshech.* And God saw that the light was good, and separated between the light and the darkness.²

The great sages debated the necessity of starting the Torah with these lines. Rabbi Yitzchak explains that the purpose of the Torah is to instruct us in mitzvot and should therefore begin with the laws given to the Israelites.³ I think more than anything we need these opening verses, at the beginning of our new year we need to see God begin anew from the midst of the chaotic. We need to know that we too can do the same. That we can be creators. But more than that, we need to place ourselves in the story and to enter this moment of newness with the faith and confidence to know that we can bring light out of the darkness.

It is in no way simple, but I there is a great lesson we can take from God's experience as we prepare to enter our own newness over the next few days. We can look around and take stock of the chaos. We need to really feel the darkness. But then, we can breathe and let our spirit float out over the world. It's what happens next that is really incredible though, because when we take that next breath, when we step out into that chaos, we will find that we too can create light, can separate from the darkness, and it will be good.

² Gen. 1:2-4

³ Rashi on Gen. 1:1