

Rabbi Rebecca Richman

Erev Rosh Hashanah Talk - 5780

What Birth Taught Me About Starting Anew

One year ago, I led High Holiday services right as I was entering my third trimester of pregnancy. As I gave my sermon, as I knelt for a modified full prostration, and especially when the shofar blasted, I felt kicking from within.

More than ever before, I felt the call to *cheshbon hanefesh* - an accounting of the soul - and this time, it came not only from my tradition and from the blast of the shofar, but also from the life forming within me.

Together, the call I heard was this: make this a year of life-giving. Make this a year of spaciousness for newness to form. Make yourself ready to learn. Set boundaries and priorities so that this growing family can be your center. Take care to maintain your selfhood as it changes and expands.

A few months later, on the third day of Chanukah, with the help of G!d, a doula, some awesome midwives, my mother, and my incredible partner, Josh, I gave birth to our son, Netta Nissim.

The moment of birth was exhausting and powerful, a relief and energizing, beautiful and terrifying.

As I look back over this past year and ahead to the one that is upon us, I realize that so much of my learning about the world and myself, and so much of what I pray for in this year to come is reflected in my experience of giving birth and watching a new human encounter the world for the first time.

Tonight, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, I want to share three teachings that birth and Netta have given me.

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One - Be gentle with newness.

It's a wild thing, for a baby to take their first breath. When Netta did, he was calm. I expected crying, but my brand new baby just looked at us with gentle eyes, watching. In

the days and weeks that followed, I was astounded by the work Netta had to put into his new existence.

In the womb, he had everything he needed, and he never had to ask. Suddenly, with his emergence, he was thrust into the world of need and desire. He had to learn to eat, learn to sleep, learn to signal to us when he needed something, even if he had no idea what he needed. But he tried so hard, and he worked with all his might. When I think back on those early weeks, my memory of newness is laced with a reminder that birth requires the birthed one to engage the hard work of adjusting to a new sense of self in a new reality.

Tomorrow, after we hear the blast of the shofar, the machzor declares, “*hayom harat olam*,” often translated as “today, the world is born.” But *harat* can also mean “tremble.” On Rosh Hashanah, the world trembles. On Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish new year, the world trembles and is born.

A rabbinic midrash suggests that G!d began creating the world on the 25th day of Elul. On the sixth day of creation, G!d created human beings. And so, six days after the 25th of Elul, on the first of Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah, humanity was born.

A baby trembles and is born. On Rosh Hashanah, humanity trembles and is born.

It is a great gift to celebrate our humanity and even to re-birth our humanity on Rosh Hashanah. There is so much in our world that needs repairing, so much of our collective being that needs reform. But the world and our humanity, like a newborn baby, need our patience and care in these early weeks. As we anticipate the potential of newness and all that our fresh start might enable us to do in the world, we must also be gentle with ourselves. Our growing will take time.

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Two - We are formed and constantly forming.

Netta has now been out of the womb for pretty much the same amount of time he spent gestating inside. In these past nine and a half months, I have watched a tiny baby turn into an excited explorer who is fragile and sturdy, already formed and constantly forming.

In some ways, Netta has been himself all along. He kicked like crazy inside, and he has a bounty of energy in this world. He never wanted to be put down as a newborn, and he now prefers if we are all in the same room, even if he is playing with his own toys. He locked in on our eyes just minutes after birth, and he is, indeed, an incredibly observant and social baby.

But he is also surprising us. We could not have anticipated his love for gears and wheels, for tiny detail. We offer him an array of foods, but he is the one who picks what he likes, shows us what he prefers.

It seems obvious: Netta is his own person. But the deeper lesson here is that we can create ourselves, can change who we are and how we are in the world.

During the high holiday season, we engage in *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the self, as part of *teshuvah*, repentance. We examine how we have manifested ourselves in this past year, and initiate change where it is necessary.

Watching Netta become himself each day teaches me that *teshuvah* is not only about returning to the self we want to be or some core self that we have been, but also about becoming someone new. We are formed, and we are also constantly forming.

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Three - Love with the fullest heart.

V'ahavta et adonai elohecha b'chol l'vavcha u'v'chol nafshecha u'v'chol m'odecha.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Netta does pretty much everything with the fullest of his energy. When he cries, he really cries. When he is excited to see us, his arms flail and his feet flex. When he smiles, he does so from ear to ear.

Our tradition teaches us to love G'd with all our heart and all our soul and all our might. Often, we are children of modernity more than we are children of our hearts - we look up and turn to our intellect and thoughts more than to our emotions and desires.

Babies don't yet know from this tension, and they have so much to teach us about living with a full heart. At times, Netta's curiosity and unapologetic, untamed emotional

expression are tiring and make difficult our movement from place to place or from task to task. But his belly-laugh and full-fledged wails remind me to let myself fully experience the emotions of life.

Letting myself laugh with Netta and learning to be patient with his highly effective communication of upset have stirred up for me previously dormant chambers in my heart. In those dusty corners, I have found more heart and more soul and more might to love with.

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So I am left with three lessons as we enter this day of newness, of starting our humanity and world again on Rosh Hashanah: Be gentle with newness, remember that we are formed and constantly forming, and love with the fullest heart.

May we be patient and caring, open, and loving. And in so doing, may we merit health and life in this new year.