

Rabbi Bec Richman  
Rosh Hashanah 5782  
**Erev RH Sermon - The Creative Force**

Six months into the pandemic, and I hadn't stepped foot in my ceramic studio. Determined to return, I double masked and rose at the crack of dawn to have the studio all to myself. When I arrived, the pieces I had thrown six months earlier had long turned to what potters call "bone dry," a brittle, snapable state. I was not finished trimming or carving the forms, and so I stared at unusable cups and candlesticks, feeling the weight of time and my disappointment at needing to start again.

I placed my pieces in a bucket of water and listened to the disintegration, watched my pieces turn to watered dust. I poured off the clear water, scooped out the slip, muddy clay, and spread it on a plaster slab where the watery clay would dry into a workable form in less than a day's time.

How fast, I thought, we can destroy and begin rebuilding.

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In just a few weeks, we will return to the beginning of our Torah scroll, reading yet again the story of creation: *Bereshit bara elohim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz* - When God began to create heaven and earth - *v'ha'aretz hayita tohu vavohu v'choseh al p'nei t'hom, v'ruach elohim merachefet al p'nei hamayim* - the earth being chaos and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water— (Genesis 1:1-2).

In this story of creation, G'd transforms *tohu va'vohu*, chaos and void, into something new. Chaos and void are the raw materials **with which** G'd creates. G'd's creative act was not one of completely new emergence; rather, it was one of transformation - turning over and recasting materials into a different form, an ordered world. In just the second verse of Torah, we learn that **to create is to transform what is**, even if chaotic and seemingly void of meaning.

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This divine drive to create by way of transformation is one that we, as human beings, are vested with, as well. *Vayivra elohim et ha'adam b'tzalmo, b'tzelem elohim bara oto* - And God created the first being in God's image, in God's image, God created Adam (Genesis 1:27).

G!d is a creative force, and we - human beings - are created in the image and likeness of that divine. Put simply by Rabbi Adina Allen: **human beings are created creative**. And it's a good thing, because G!d did not finish the work of creating the world - G!d's work was just the start. Our work, our labor continues the process that G!d initiated.

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Every single one of us, in the past year and half, has been called to lean on our creative capacity to survive through a pandemic and the havoc it has left in its path. Whether or not we think of ourselves as “artists” or as the “creative type,” we have all stretched our creative muscles to figure out how to stay in community, how to safely connect with people we love and rely on for support, comfort, friendship, companionship, and more. There has been no way for us to ignore or turn away from the chaos of this period in our history. Instead, we have returned to our most core of capacities, transforming the mess of the moment into something workable, something more ordered, something more whole.

My teacher and friend, Rabbi Adina Allen, co-founder and creative director at the Jewish Studio Project, teaches:

“Creativity is a way of moving beyond all we think we know and tapping into the place of all possibilities. Each day in the morning liturgy we describe God as  
מחדש בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית —  
the one who “renews daily the work of creation.” We human beings are God's partners in the ongoing work of creation. We need to be creative, and God needs our creativity.”

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Although we remind ourselves each day of the ongoing work of creation, we focus on the creative force in particular at this time of year. During the Musaf service on Rosh ha-Shanah, our liturgy reads: *Hayom harat olam*.

Literally:

*Hayom* - today  
*Harat* - being born  
*Olam* - world

Today, the world is being born.

**On Rosh ha-Shanah, we celebrate the active, laborious, fundamentally creative process of birthing ourselves into new being.**

This is not easy work. The High Holiday season asks us to reflect on the year past, to consider the ways we have gone astray in our thoughts and actions, to make amends where we have made cracks in relationships, and to set intentions for how we will be in the year to come.

*Teshuvah*, the spiritual work of focus in this season, is often translated as “repentance.” But it can also mean “to return.”

Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, wrote in 1941:

“The time for teshuvah is Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world. This is because teshuvah...is also a kind of creativity. The Hebrew word teshuvah means repentance and return. However, as a creative act, teshuvah is not a simple return. We return to who we are meant to be, but have not yet become. We return to growth and possibility that has lain dormant within us and not yet flourished, much as a sculpture lies hidden within a brute block of stone. That is why the process of teshuvah, as painful and even humiliating as it can be, is in fact very joyous and hopeful.”

These words are so powerful, especially having come from the Warsaw Ghetto midst World War II. “We return to growth and possibility that has lain dormant within us and not yet flourished, much as a sculpture lies hidden within a brute block of stone.”

***Teshuvah*, the rebbe teaches us, is to sculpt even from the ashes, to form with an openness to all that can still be.**

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Tonight begins *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah* - the Ten Days of Repentance (or Return). Next week, still midst these days, still in the window of spiritually elevated opportunity to return to our core selves, the Yom Kippur *ma'ariv* (evening) liturgy will call us back to images of a creative divine source. Standing before the open ark, we will chant<sup>1</sup>: *Ki hinei kachomer b'yad ha'yotzer* - Like clay in the hands of the potter, if they will, they can expand it, if they will, they can contract it; so too are we in Your hand, Preserver of kindness and not the accuser!

Like stone in the hand of the mason...

Like iron in the hand of the smith...

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<sup>1</sup> Machzor Yom Kippur Ashkenaz, Maariv Service for Yom Kippur Eve, Yaaleh 78-84

Like the rudder in the hand of a person at sea...  
Like a tapestry in the hand of an embroiderer...  
Like silver in the hand of the refiner...

*Kein anachnu b'yadeicha* - We are in your hand, sacred creator.

In this season of returning, **we join the holy one as active, partnering creative agents in bringing about the re-sculpted world we wish to carve out for ourselves.**

Like clay in the hands of the potter...  
Like stone in the hand of the mason...  
Like iron in the hand of the smith...

*Kein anachnu b'yadeicha u'b'yadeinu* - **We are in your hand and in our hands, partnered creators.**

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The ceramic studio I belong to is a communal one, and so the plaster slab I used to reclaim my clay was stained with iron from another potter's darker clay. When I wedged my re-hydrated clay, it was no longer the cream color I had started with; it was tinged with just the slightest hue of reddish-brown.

Just like my ever so slightly reddened clay, when we return, when we create, and when we transform, we will be changed. That is, after all, the essence of what it is to become anew.

On the eve of this new year, I want to bless this most beloved community with brave creating. Let us open our hands and pick up whatever materials we have handy as we get to work molding, shaping, forming the world we yearn to live in this year.

May the Holy One, Creative Source of the universe, who reminds us daily of the works of creation, vest us here on the start of this new year, with the energy and openness to create and to create again.

*Shanah tovah u'metukah u'yetzirah* -- may it be a good, sweet, and creative year for us all.