



TODAY'S TORAH



Rosh Hashanah

September 6 (Sundown) - 8 (Evening), 2021

Tishrei 1-2, 5782

Today the World was Birthed

By: Rabbi Dr. Gail Labovitz

On what day was the world created? The answer is not as obvious as we might like to think. We are told in Exodus 12:2 that Nissan is the first month. And yet we also refer to the first of Tishrei as Rosh haShanah, the beginning of the year. Moreover, when we blow shofar at the Musaf service of Rosh haShanah, we say "*HaYom harat olam*" – which may be translated as "This day the world was called into being" or perhaps even (taking "*harat*" to be related to the word "*herayon*," pregnancy) "Today the world was birthed." So that might place the Creation in this season, but we still have at least one other issue to consider: after all, we are told at the very opening of Genesis that Creation was a six-day process. Which day of that process was the first of Tishrei?

According to a midrash in Leviticus Rabbah (29:1), it is not the beginning of Creation that we mark on the first of Tishrei, but rather its culmination; the world is not truly birthed until it is complete:

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: on the twenty fifth of Elul the world was created...Thus you find that on the first of Tishrei, the first human being was created.

But the human being is not all that comes into the world that day, for human beings bring with them all of their frail and fallible humanity. The midrash continues:

At the ninth (hour of the day), God commanded Adam (about the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge); at the tenth, Adam violated God's commandment; at the eleventh, God judged him; and at the twelfth, God gave him pardon. The Holy Blessed One said to Adam: You will be a sign for your children – just as you underwent judgment before Me and I granted you pardon, so too your children will enter judgment before Me and I will grant them pardon. When? On Rosh haShanah, in the seventh month (i.e., Tishrei; remember that Nissan is still the first month!) on the first day.

Thus, both sin and atonement enter the world on the final day of creation, making it an appropriate day to initiate the Jewish season most dedicated to repentance and renewal.

Well, then – why don't we read about Creation and the Garden of Eden on Rosh haShanah for our Torah reading? And why do we read what we *do* read, two stories of Abraham and his sons Ishmael and Isaac? Frankly, both are instances in which Abraham's actions as a father are deeply morally troubling, for reasons likely to be obvious to readers. In Gen. 21, which we read on the first day, he banishes his elder son Ishmael with his mother (Hagar), and they nearly perish of thirst in the desert. And then, in Gen. 22, read on day two, he attempts to sacrifice Isaac on a mountaintop. Moreover, both times Abraham seems to put his son in mortal peril at the behest, or at least with the permission of, God (Gen 21:12 and 22:2).

And yet – in both instances it is also the case that the son is saved from death by the intervention of a Divine messenger:

God heard the cry of the boy and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven... (Gen. 21:17)

Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven...And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him..." (Gen. 22:11-12)

So what is it that God wants? Is it Abraham who has misunderstood something? And once again, what might any of this have to do with the first of Tishrei being the day on which humanity – but also human sin and forgiveness for that sin – came into, and completed, the Creation?

First, let me note that at the time the midrash of Leviticus Rabbah was composed, the time of daylight was divided into twelve equal "hours." Thus, forgiveness "in the twelfth hour" means that it occurs at the very last moments of the day, just before the onset of the first Shabbat. But there is also another set of rabbinic traditions about things that came into the world at these last moments of Creation, on the eve of the Sabbath. An early version can be found in Pirkei Avot 5:6:

Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight, and these are: the mouth of the earth (that swallowed Korah and his band, Numbers 16:32), the mouth of the well (see below...), the mouth of the ass (Balaam's speaking donkey, Numbers 22:28), the rainbow, the manna, the staff (which Moses used to bring on plagues and split the Red Sea), the shamir (a miraculous worm that was used to cut stones for the altar), writing, writing implements, and the stone tablets (on which the original Ten Commandments were engraved). There are those who say: Also the demons, and Moses' burial spot, and the ram of our father Abraham.

The last of these is, of course, a reference to the latter of our two Rosh haShanah readings, the moment just after Abraham has been stopped from slaughtering Isaac (Gen. 22:13):

Abraham looked up (*yisah...et einav*, literally "lifted his eyes"), and saw there was a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns, and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in the place of his son.

And now, as I hinted above, what of the well? Many commentators take it to be Miriam's well that followed the Israelites in their years of wandering in the Wilderness. But at least one other possibility exists, and appears in a later midrashic work, Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezer (Chap. 30) – this was the well that saved Hagar and Ishmael, as found in our reading on day one (Gen. 21:19):

The Lord opened her eyes (*v'yivkah...et einehah*) and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled the skin with water and give the child to drink.

To which the midrash briefly, but meaningfully, elaborates, "There the well was opened for them, which had been created at the twilight (of the first Sabbath)." What I want to therefore suggest is that for the rabbis, each of these stories hearkens back to the culminating moments of the creation of the world. Each of these stories is "resolved," - each son must be saved/redeemed - by something that hearkens back to that original first of Tishrei and the very nature of Creation.

This is the day that humanity in all its complexity - humans who sin, who violate God's commands when they shouldn't and perhaps also follow what they think God wants of them to horrific ends, who sometimes attempt (and too often succeed) to harm even those closest to them – come to be. Yet it is also the day in which forgiveness comes into the world. And at least one reason why we read these stories for Rosh haShanah is to teach us that the agents of our redemption – a well for the thirsty, a ram in place of a human sacrifice – have also been there all along, since the beginning, perhaps precisely because we difficult, fallible humans so need them. The challenge is, will we let ourselves see them? The best we can do is to try to lift our eyes, or to seek God's aid in opening our eyes.

Shanah tovah – may you have a year of striving to see what ultimately matters in this messy, marvelous Creation we have been given.



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Rabbi Labovitz is also the author of two responsa adopted by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, one on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur and the other on alternatives for egalitarian marriage.



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