

THE BIRTHDAY OF THE UNEXPECTED

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"Today the world is born. Today all creatures everywhere stand in judgement, some as children and some as slaves. If we merit consideration as children, show us a father's mercy. If we stand in judgment as slaves, grant us freedom. We look to You for compassion when You declare our fate, awesome, holy God." –Rosh Hashana Musaf liturgy

Rosh Hashana is the most unlikely time to be the birthday of anything. Pesach is the holiday that surrounds us with all the symbols of birth and new life, and the time when we recount the birth of a nation, with its spring-like emergence from darkness into light. At the High Holidays, the year is old and winding down. With the final harvest only a few weeks away, at Sukkot, the earth is spent. It has already given its all and is ready for a long, quiet recovery. This is the time of year for aches and weariness, it's the season of contraction, of middle age, of darkening, cooling and withdrawal.

At this moment, when it is entirely unexpected to contemplate birth, we are presented with stories of unexpected births – the birth of Isaac in the first day's Torah reading, and the birth of Samuel in the haftara immediately following. But the unexpectedness of these births is as vital to these stories as the births themselves. The importance of these births is that they are miraculous – Sarah, at the age of 99, is past the season of fertility, and barren Hanna has long waited in vain for her season to arrive. It is exactly because this is *not* the season of birth that we read these stories: if this is the season of births, it is only so by surprise.

The agricultural year, whose centrality is evident as the harvest approaches, is predictable. The earth and its mechanics are predictable. They may not be reliable – one year bringing good rain and another year drought – but they are regular. Human affairs are not. It is at this season, the culmination of the agricultural cycle, that our tradition reminds us that our spiritual lives, our possibilities of birth and renewal, are not bound by the earth's orderly timetable. We live with the earth and rely on its cycles, but we remain fundamentally separate from it.

So it has been since our creation. Man¹ is the last of all God's creations, slipped in at the end, after the sky and sea and land had each been created, together with the corresponding birds, fish, and creeping things that inhabit each zone. Man corresponds with no zone – our only proper place is the world itself. We are the odd Man out.

All the categories of creation come into being with God's command, "Let there be..." – except for Man. And while God reflects on each of His creations, seeing "that it is good", He conspicuously does not say this of Man. Instead, He reflects on all of creation and declares that it all of it together is "very good". Thus is our place in nature defined: on our own we not "good", but when we are introduced into the rest of creation, it all becomes "very good." We do not have the choice to be merely good, we belong to the separate category of the "very good".

We also see that only through our relation to the rest of nature can we – or it – become very good. No other creature lives in relation to anything. We live in relation to everything. And considering the personal attention that God directed to our creation – instead of "Let there be Man", He says "Let us make Man in our own image" – we live necessarily in relation to God as well. The sphere of the "very good", then, is the sphere of these

¹ I use "Man" in the egalitarian sense of "humankind", following Jacques Barzun, see, e.g., *From Dawn to Decadence*, Harper Collins, 2000, p. 82 ("A Digression on a Word").

relationships – the sphere of morality. And just as Man is restricted to no particular zone of creation, morality is restricted to no particular season.

Indeed, the challenges of morality burst in uninvited at all hours of the day. Consider how suddenly the angels appear at Abraham's doorstep in the reading for the first day of Rosh Hashana. How instantly Jonah is called on for prophecy, is swallowed by a fish and then saved, how suddenly his plant grows to protect him and how suddenly it disappears. How unexpectedly Abraham is called on to sacrifice Isaac, and how suddenly God calls it off. The abundant occurrence of miracles in these assembled stories may be prescribed for us during these holidays to underscore God's overriding and mysterious power in human affairs. But perhaps they are also given to us to remind us that reversals, changes, and new directions can sprout at any time, even when we least expect it. ...Maybe only when we least expect it.

So, Rosh Hashana actually turns out to be a very good time to consider new birth. The transition from summer to fall is a season of conspicuously pre-determined events– as the seasons change, they call attention to the grand and fixed cycles in which we live. So it is with eye-opening contrast that the holidays assert that spiritual change occurs *without* fixed seasons, that spiritual seeds may be sown at any time.

At the same time, it is a season of conspicuous change, and it is the churning of change that these holidays seem to be drawn to. They tell us that the normal state of life is not to be found in the constant warmth of summer or the constant darkness of winter, or even in the constant cycles of growth and gathering. The normal state of human existence is in the shifting shadows, the disarming mix of brightness and chill that accosts us at this time of year.

The weather holds us in flux, reminding us now of upcoming winter and now of the waning summer. Our suite of autumn holidays does the same. Past and future are interwoven as we observe the new year before the harvest puts a closure on the old year. Before we reach the agricultural harvest, we perform a spiritual harvest, clearing up the old year's moral business, as a prerequisite to tying up its material business.

And yet as we do this we have already entered the new year. Like the first fruits that our ancestors gave as sacrificial offerings, the first weeks of our new year are a measure of time that we devote to sacred service. They form a probationary entrance to the new year, with a gauntlet of challenges that we must meet between Rosh Hashana, when the world is born, and Simchat Torah, when we are finally permitted to read the story of that birth out loud.

The agrarian mind would be weighted with harvest-time responsibilities at this season. The High Holidays add the weight of reflection on the past year's deeds. They raise the question of whether the bounty to be reaped has been well deserved. (Though by placing the harvest across the line of a new year and on the other side of a spiritual cleansing, they also provide an escape from that question's harsh implications.) They imply that while the work in the fields may be coming to an end, the work in the moral sphere continues. When we wish each other a "*gamar tov*" – a good completion – on Yom Kippur, the greeting refers to the day's demanding affairs, but perhaps it also suggests a completion of the remaining work of *tshuva*, which always lies ahead.

These consecrated weeks of anticipation before the harvest are like the racer's home stretch, when the end appears comfortably near, but the mind races with thoughts of what could happen between here and there. We are like an actor in the wings before an entrance, who has memorized his lines but can't bring them to his mind or lips in these last moments before stepping into the light. Our holiday readings, in fact, are full of stoppages of speech just like the actor's: Abraham falling silent as he walks Isaac to Mount Moriah, Sarah emitting only a laugh when she is told she will give birth, Hannah's fervent prayer in which her heart pours forth but her voice closes up, Jonah saying all the wrong things when God calls on him to speak. These are moments

that hang between the past and the future, between one state and another, when the mind can't settle between what is, and what is about to be.²

No part of our liturgy expresses this instability more than *Kol Nidrei*. In our desire to avoid transgression in the coming year, we cleverly accede to a contract declaring that our commitments are not commitments and our vows are not vows. *Kol Nidrei* clothes our noble aspiration in words. But we know that the words cannot transform our intention into a reality.

...If we are disavowing our vows so as to avoid transgressing our vows, isn't the disavowal itself a species of vow, a declaration of the status of our other declarations? ...And if it is, doesn't last year's *Kol Nidrei* negate this year's? Or other way around? ...And even if not, then if we back out of all our vows, in what medium shall we express our commitments to God and Man? ...And if we repudiate all our vows, then aren't we withdrawing from the whole enterprise of making any commitments at all? ...Surely that is not what we intend and certainly it's not what we do – so don't we end up violating our declaration from the start? ...And what kind of an aspiration to morality is it in the first place to walk away from the commitments by which morality is established? To walk away from our commitments smacks more of Jonah, our negative role model, than of Abraham.

But look, it's the best we know how to do. *Kol Nidrei* is an extravaganza of our unshakable imperfection – we futilely exempt ourselves from the promises that we futilely make, in a futile attempt to avoid error. We may not express ourselves perfectly, or succeed in avoiding responsibility – but we get the idea, and we have to think that God does, too. If God had made us fish to fill the ocean that He created a day or two before, we wouldn't have to worry about these things. But God in His mercy has saddled Man with the perpetually unresolved dilemma of knowing what to aspire to, but not quite knowing how to get there. He created us, uniquely, as moral, relational, “very good” beings. Even if we are not very good at being “very good”.

It is the uniqueness of Man that makes Rosh Hashana the birthday of the world. A Talmudic discussion places the beginning of creation not on Rosh Hashana, but on the 25th of Elul. It is the creation of Man that occurs on Rosh Hashana, six days later. So when we say Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the world, we mean it in the French sense of “world” – *tout le monde* – not the birthday of the earth, but the birthday of all the *people* on earth, the birthday of Man.

Observing a birthday on the sixth day rather than the first (and in Tishrei, which is Biblically the seventh month of the year) reminds us that a birthday is not a day of absolute origins, but a day of emergence. It follows a period of gestation, so it is a day with a history as well as a future. We place ourselves in that history when we say “Today the world is born”. We don't say it “was” born – the birth we are speaking of is not a one-time occurrence. It is a perennial emergence, which each of us is granted, in light of, and in spite of, our history. We are all present at the birth of the world, much as our tradition holds that we were all present at Sinai. The creation is *now*. Surprise! And now. And, wait a second...*now*. The act of creation telescopes from the moment the earth was formed to the moment you turned this page.

The notion that each of us exists across all time and in the company of all our forebears is itself quite a bracing surprise. A surprise that might shock us into new consciousness and new action just as much as the blast of the shofar. And isn't that exactly the point?

² I wonder if Moses's stutter reflects his constant existence at this spiritual edge...