

היום הרת עולם
Hayom Harat Olam
Kol Haneshamah page 652

היום הרת עולם, היום יעמיד במשפט,

Hayom harat olam, hayom ya'amid bamishpat
Today the world is born; today shall stand before You

כל יצורי עולמים, אם בנים אם בעבדים.

Kol y'tzurey olamim, im k'vanim im ka'avadim.
All the beings of the cosmos, whether as Your children or as Your servants.

אם בנים, רחמנו כרחמת אם על בנים :

Im k'vanim, rachameynu k'rachemet eym al banim.
If as Your children, show them mercy, like a mother toward her children.

ואם בעבדים עינינו לך תלויות,

V'im ka'avadim eyneynu l'cha t'luyot,
If as Your servants, then our eyes are turned toward You in great anticipation,

עד שתחננו ותוציא כאור משפטנו, איום קדוש.

Ad shet'choneynu v'totzi cha'or mishpateynu ayom kadosh.
That You may be gracious, rendering judgment for good, on our behalf, as clear as light of day.

HaYom harat olam – Today the world was born. But the translation isn't right. The Hebrew isn't in the past tense, but a kind of ongoing present: the birthing is still happening. And *Hara* is not birth but pregnancy (as in *herion*) or even teaching (as in *moreh*); and it seems closely related to *hari* -- behold. And it doesn't say *ha-olam*, the world, but *olam* – which usually means eternity. So, **more literally, “This is the day of the world birthing,” or, “Today - the eternal pregnancy,” or “Today, the eternal teaching,” or even “today, forever-seeing,” -- “this is the day of eternal pregnancy teaching.”**

Why celebrate the birthing-day of the world? And, honey cake notwithstanding, why not with a bit more frivolity? And why is the birthing still ongoing and what is this eternal teaching?

Last year, talking about this text, I started with the creation of Adam as a single, two-sided, multi-gendered, ancestor of us all. Genesis is the first concerted attack on the aristocratic claim that some of us have better ancestors, more *zkus*, or bluer blood, than others.

The fundamental message of one god's creation of one humanity is that we are all *bnai' adam* – all the divisions that separate us are family affairs. That doesn't mean, of course, that the divisions aren't real; there are no battles as fierce as intrafamilial ones.

But it does mean that the foundation of our foundational myth, the reason that we are called to reject idolatry, the eternal teaching that drives the rest, is the radical claim that we are all children of one parent, fundamentally equal because equally members of the human race.

- The refugees fleeing man-made drought and war in Syria or climate change in Africa;
- The US citizens and residents that too many of our politicians are, sotto voce or yelling into the microphone, denigrating and seeking to condemn to second-class status;
- The prisoners we are obligated by Jewish law to redeem, not sacrifice to the private profit of privatized prison investors;
- The Americans who will not be allowed to vote or whose votes will not count because of voter-suppression laws surgically designed to racially discriminate,
- The poor in our midst here and abroad;

These are our family; these are the brothers whose keepers we are, whose bloods cry out from the earth. (Gen. 4:9-10) קול דמי אחיה, צעקים אלי מן האדמה

As the teaching the rabbis claimed the Sanhedrin used in charging witnesses in capital cases puts it: Adam was created single so that no one might say my family is better than yours.

So, on Rosh HaShana, we remind ourselves

- to hear the shout of the shofar and the still small voice that follows it,
- to hear the call to abandon the idolatries of power and nationalist prejudice,
- to remember that whether your skin is light or dark or even orange, you are just another *adam*, made of dust and earth, *adama*, doomed to return to the earth far too soon.

But that's the birthday of humankind, and while our mythology is often quite narrow in its focus and nearly always deeply anthropocentric, the Genesis myth also has wider implications, perhaps especially important in this season of ecological catastrophe, mass extinction, coal and oil-powered hurricanes and threats of nuclear war.

Our myth contends that the equality of the origin was so equal that in the eyes of the Creator, any of the animals was a potential spouse to the man. As Gen 2:18-20 says, "And he brought them to the man ... but he did not find a suitable mate."

But beyond equality, it also demands responsibility.

The story of the expulsion from Eden is often retold as an authoritarian celebration of the importance of following orders, however arbitrary, from the powerful. And of the devastating consequences of resisting unbridled power, or of letting yourself be persuaded by the wrong sources, or even of the perils of exploration and curiosity.

This reading is, to be sure, comforting to those who wish to downplay the call of Genesis to end human *ovdut* – to replace service to human masters with service to only one Master, who has neither body nor image of a body, who neither speaks nor, so far as we can tell, listens, thus leaving us radically free to birth our own social worlds.

But it is not the only nor even the obvious reading of the myth.

The *harat-olam*, the eternal teaching or ongoing lesson, of the story of the tree of knowledge is that

- only by leaving Gan Eden do we enter the human condition:
 - only the knowledge of good and evil,
 - the need for ongoing work to keep the creation of the world continuing,
 - the pain of giving birth and the doom of death,
 - the constant presence of the present –
- only those parts of the ongoing birthing of our world make us human.

Whatever life in unchanging paradise is, it is not human life. Instead, the *harat-olam-adam*, the birthing of the human world, begins with

- the knowledge of good and evil
- and the need to work,
- and the blessings of vegetables to eat
- and a mission to tend the world and make it better.

This lesson is made explicit by a midrash to Kohelet that is, I believe, the earliest use of *tikkun olam* in its sense of the eternal task of repairing the world and its eternalness: One god who

gives one humanity one world, and in putting us in charge, says – take care of it, because I’m not going to clean up after you.

“When the holy one created the first Man, he took him and led him around all the trees of Gan Eden, and said to him – See what I’ve made, how pleasant and splendid they are. Everything that I created, I created for you – so pay attention, take care not to mess it up or destroy my world, for if you wreck it, *ein mi sh y’takain akhary-kha* there is no one who will repair it after you.” Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

בשעה שברא הקב"ה את
אדם הראשון נטלו והחזירו על כל
אילני גן עדן ואמר לו ראה מעשי
כמה נאים ומשובחים הן וכל מה
שבראתי בשבילך בראתי, הן דעתך
שלא תקלקל ותחריב את עולמי,
שאם קלקלת אין מי שיתקן אחריך.

It is not yours, but you are responsible for taking care of it: in your role as a human being (just as in your roles as professionals and managers and officials and decision-makers of all sorts), control and power mean responsibility and obligation and even servitude. Not ownership or the privileges of the aristocrat.

On the birthday of the world, our foundational myth says that our King,
the only king we recognize,
the one who declares idolatry – that is, recognizing the claims of anyone or anything to be our masters even if we ourselves set them up above us –
the one who declares idolatry the worst sin of all,
sent us out into the world, endowed with the knowledge of good and evil, to care for and tend the world.

All Israel guarantors for one another, and all people as well, and indeed for the entire world.

Hayom harat olam. Today the world is pregnant with all that is. Today we must take courage, strengthen ourselves, work to make this a better world and not a barren one of hatred and heat.

May we all be inscribed for a happy, healthy, peaceful, productive and wealthy—but not excessively wealthy—year. Shana tova.

-- Daniel JH Greenwood, Sept 20, 2017, Rosh HaShana 5778