

Order from Chaos: Creation Anew

One person at a time, Do Not Despair

My two October children, Aliza and Ben, were each born shortly after the *Days of Awe*, offering poignant personal experiences of the Rosh Hashanah theme, *Hayom Harat Olam*. “Today the world stands as at birth,” as the Machzor reads. The literal meaning of the words is even more powerful, “Today the world is conceived.”

Our machzor proclaims,

“Today the world stands as at birth. Today all creation is called to judgment, whether as Your children or as Your servants. If as Your children, be compassionate with us as a parent is compassionate with children. If as Your servants, we look to You expectantly, waiting for You to be gracious to us, and as day emerges from night bring forth a favorable judgment on our behalf, awe-inspiring and Holy One.”¹

Rosh Hashanah symbolically celebrates the birthday of the world. What do the metaphors of the biblical creation narrative tell us about life—about OUR lives?

The mythic creation story is ripe with metaphorical meaning:

“At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste,
Darkness over the face of the Ocean,
Rushing -spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters—
God said: Let there be light! And there was light.
God saw the light: that it was good.
God separated the light from the darkness.

¹ *Mahzor Lev Shalem*

God called the light: Day! and the darkness he called: Night!

There was setting, there was dawning: one day.”²

God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.” God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so.

Rashi points out that since the water already existed, creation was completed by separation.

In the midst of chaos, the world was shaped by separating the parts, creating order. Once there was light and everything was in its place, the earth could be a place of becoming.

Hayom Harat Olam -- today is filled with possibility. We can find our way out of the chaos that is swirling all around us.

“Between nothing and everything, {there is form and structure.} ...an organizing system, a certain way of setting boundaries and delineating how content can be structured.

Creation is not a process of making something out of nothing, but rather of shaping what is already there.”³

In the creation narrative, God separated the light from the darkness. Creation was about distinction, “the ability to discern between light and dark, water and earth, good and evil.”⁴ Rabbeinu Tam commented that the creation of the world actually involved

² The Five Books of Moses. Everett Fox. Schocken Books. 1983

³ Hadar Cohen, NiSh'ma, fall 2019

⁴ Rabbi Andy Bachman, NiSh'ma, fall 2019

a prolonged period between conception and birth. While we need to see clearly, we are also called to cultivate patience. Then the light and good will guide our vision.

Many people have commented to me in recent months and weeks that the world feels as if it is spiraling out of control. Chaos in the world leaves many of us with a feeling of chaos in our own individual lives. It can be unsettling and even frightening.

How are we to find our footing, to stand on firm ground, separating from the choppy waters below us?

Surely our ancestors in many generations found the tools to make order from chaos, to renew creation in their lives. Every generation faces this challenge. Every one of us, in our own unique way, experiences unsettling confusion in times of change and difficulty. The New Year is a turning point, when we can clear out the chaos in our souls to be reborn, to return to our souls and create ourselves anew.

How will we creatively respond to the frightening waves below the surface of the deep?

How many of you enjoy cleaning out and reorganizing? I know, it's a personality type. An impossible chore for some of us; a welcome restart for others of us. Finding the time and space for taking everything off the surfaces and shelves, out of closets and drawers of our spaces can be overwhelming. And how do we decide what to keep and what to purge? Maybe just considering the question is giving you a knot in your stomach.

In the end, the newly organized spaces of our lives make what is old feel new, and our renewed energy and fresh start. The kabbalists teach that this clean slate, blank and open, is where God is found, waiting for us. This is the soul-work of Rosh Hashanah – to clean out from all the compartments of our lives the debris that should be discarded. Only then can we truly see the open possibilities of a New Year clearly.

If we are overwhelmed by the challenges of the world, this is our starting point – each one of us needs to start with *ourselves*. That is about all we can control anyway. So, consider, *who* will be the newly refreshed, re-created YOU in this New Year?

Think about the times in your life when you have endured a difficulty, a transition, a new reality. Sometimes these liminal moments are by choice, sometimes welcome, and other times, unwelcome, sometimes even traumatic. But every time our souls travel from one reality to another, we have a choice to make: Will it be toward the light or shadowed in darkness?

{Starting over story -***Israel Story*** episode: *Yehudit Schwartz*}

I'd like to share an extraordinary story of a woman whose life went from chaos to order, over and over, throughout her lifetime. I learned it from the podcast "Israel Story" by Mishy Harman.

We enter this dramatic story on June 7, 1967, in the middle of the 6-day war when a group of Israeli paratroopers captured the Temple Mount, then liberated the Wailing Wall, the *Kotel*.

The soldiers had not slept in three days. They paused to take in the quiet, cool shade at the *Kotel*, awed by the holiness. In front of them was the poor Palestinian neighborhood, *Shchunat HaMugrabim*.

Just as they were starting to appreciate the significance of the moment, a high-pitched cry pierced the silence. Two little kids came screaming, "doctor, doctor, doctor." The commander, battalion's doctor, and the medic ran after the toddlers into the Palestinian neighborhood. There were still snipers in the streets. They made it to a house where a local Palestinian woman was on the floor screaming in agony, in the middle of giving birth. They fetched clean water from the canteens of the soldiers and washed her. The commander later recalled feeling, 'what a world this is, what a world. 'We are now treating the enemy!'

A baby girl was born; in the midst of death and the sound of the shooting, there was happiness. The doctor suggested that they call the girl 'Jamila'-- meaning

'beautiful' in Arabic, and he told the mother that he'd come back and check on her once the fighting was over. Then the paratroopers ran back to the *Kotel*.

Over time this story was told repeatedly, becoming almost mythical. "Have you heard how Israeli paratroopers helped a Palestinian woman give birth?" people would say admiringly.

Four-and-a-half years later, in 1972, an Israeli journalist in Jaffa came upon a woman speaking Arabic with a Hungarian accent. Intrigued, he introduced himself to her, a woman named **Yehudit Schwartz**, and learned her extraordinary story. She had been born in Budapest in 1927, and endured a very rough childhood, having lost her father when she was a year old, she was sent to a foster home, then forced out, eventually found herself homeless with her three brothers. In March 1944, when the Nazis invaded Hungary, she was deported to Auschwitz.

Ultimately, she was the only member of her family to survive. In 1946 Yehudit left Europe on the ship *Hagana*, headed for Israel. The British seized the ship and detained all the refugees in detention in Atlit. Finally, Yehudit ended up on *Kibbutz Afikim*, near the Sea of Galilee.

A year later, she moved to Jerusalem, utterly alone in this world. Yehudit befriended a local Arab from the Old City. He invited her to his home, and she remained with him; apparently, he forced her to marry him, and to convert.

Then the War of Independence broke out. When the war ended **Yehudit** found herself in the Old City, now part of Jordan, living as a Muslim woman. Her name was changed to **Layla Natasha**.

The marriage was extremely difficult. Her husband locked her in the house, afraid she would escape, or that the locals would think she was a spy and hurt her. They had two daughters, but in 1957 her husband left and took their girls to Amman.

Once again, Yehudit was on her own and devastated. Good-hearted neighbors introduced her to a nice man from Hebron who was looking for a wife. They married and moved into a shack in *Shchunat HaMugrabim*, in Jerusalem.

Laila/Yehudit started a new family. She gave birth to a girl and a boy. These were the kids screaming, "doctor, doctor, doctor," on June 7, 1967.

The Israeli paratroopers had no idea that the Palestinian woman whose baby they had helped deliver was **Yehudit Schwartz** - a Jewish Holocaust survivor. When the doctor returned later to check on her after the war, she was gone. He searched for mother and child, to no avail. He didn't know that the baby would be given the biblical name "*Hulda*," for the female Biblical prophet.

Thanks to the journalist's find, Yehudit's story was published in *Ma'ariv* in 1972, making national headlines. Then came a meeting between the Yehudit, Hulda and the doctor, an emotional and joyous reunion.

Yehudit settled in a small apartment in an Orthodox community, B'nei Brak, working as a part-time nanny, and she died in 2009.

Later, the paratroop commander felt driven to reconnect with Hulda after 50 years. Researchers searched for her fruitlessly for months, then went on national radio seeking public help. Someone noticed circumstantial clues in a lifestyle blog, leading them to a woman named Fanny Sabag.

Indeed, Fanny was Hulda. There were tears and laughter as she met the researcher. Fanny told how her father had died from Leukemia when she was eighteen months old. Towards the end of her mother's life, Samira - one of the two daughters from her first marriage, re-established contact. Samira was living in Arab East Jerusalem, and every day she would travel to the Orthodox community of B'nei Brak to help her mom.

For years Yehudit had lived behind a border. She had always been a Jew. She had a very tough life from the beginning until the end. But her life brought others together.

In 2019, there was a reunion of sorts next to the *Kotel*. Everyone from the June 7, 1967 birth or their descendants met up. Some of them hadn't seen each other in decades, others had never met before. They were there because a single act of altruism, performed fifty-two years ago, forever tied their fates together.

The paratroop commander who had been looking for Hulda came with his partner, *Shuli Natan*- famous for being the vocalist who first sang "Jerusalem of Gold" in 1967. And there was one, excited, overwhelmed, and dazed woman. A woman whose life began right there, at the Wailing Wall. Jamila. Hulda. Fanny.

This day, the world is born anew, and all creation awaits Your judgment. We are Your daughters; we are Your sons — So love and remember us in the way of mothers and fathers. We are Yours in service — so let there be light to guide us in the corridors of justice and on the path of holiness. (Mishkan Hanefesh/Reform machzor)

Ultimately, it is just us and God. God will be there for us in our beginnings of the New Year. *Hayom Harat Olam* comes to teach us: **Do Not Despair!**

“As the New Year approaches, we yearn to emerge from the surrounding despair. Can we see darkness not as a limitation of our vision, but as a fertile source of anticipation? Can we learn not to fear the dark but to embrace its promise of light, of hope? Let’s not wait for darkness to lift before bringing more light into the world, or for fear to abate before illuminating the world with courage, or for hate to recede before reaching out with love. Let’s not wait until we no longer see today before declaring a vision for tomorrow.”⁵

“Giving birth to anything entails, “a need to wait, to nurture over time . . . to sit through not knowing, to wonder, to expect, to become attached, to have sleepless nights of fear and anxiety, to have moments of joy and anticipation, to acknowledge the chance of loss or complications, to remain present to all the possibilities.”⁶

“Hayom harat olam. May we be brave this year. Knowing all the risks, may we reach out to the world to embrace it.”

⁵ Rabbi Adina Lewittes, NiSh’ma, fall 2019

⁶ Rabbi Adina Allen, Boston Hebrew College Elul Booklet