

## Sermons from Rosh haShanah

### Day one

RH: Happy Birthday World?

*2011 – The second version of Minecraft: Pocket Edition is released for Android*

*2001 – The US Invasion of Afghanistan begins*

*1996 – Fox News begins broadcasting*

*1963 – President Kennedy signs the ratification of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*

*1944 – Jewish prisoners at Birkenau stage an uprising and burn down one of the Crematoria*

*1916 – Georgia Tech defeats Cumberland University in the most lopsided game of football in American history. The score is 222-0.*

*1777 – American revolutionary forces defeat the British at the Battle of Bemis Heights*

*1691 – The charter for the Province of Massachusetts Bay is issued*

*1520 – First public burning of books is held in Louvain, in the Netherlands*

*1477 – Uppsala University is inaugurated in Sweden*

*1403 – The Genoese fleet, led by the French, is defeated by a Venetian fleet*

*336 AD – Pope Mark's death leaves the papacy vacant*

*3761 BCE – The universe is created, according to a literal reading of the Torah*

All of these things happened on the 7th of October. Big day! The most important is surely not the newest release of Minecraft for Android, but rather the creation of the world. To be fair, most Jews have never seen the Creation story in Genesis literally. Some have suggested each day described is actually a thousand years, others have seen them as unequal (after all, how could you count the days before the sun existed?). Regardless of its dubious accuracy, the tradition developed to count the Hebrew calendar from the 1st day of Tishré in the year 3761 BCE, *exactly* 5780 years ago.

What exactly happened on that Thursday – it was a Thursday by the way – is irrelevant. What matters is that for quite some time now, we have been counting each year from it, and each year coming together on the 1st day of Tishré to wish the world a happy birthday. So– what

exactly are we commemorating on Rosh haShanah? And, more to the point, is this any more than just a cosmic birthday party?

Notably, our culture is not one that cares much for birthdays. Jewish texts always mention the day of someone's death— their *yahrzeit*, *nahalah*, or *yom hillula*— but almost never bother to recall or remember someone's *yom huledet*— day of birth. Why is this? Because when we remember someone we want to remember them at the completion of their life— when they have become their fullest self. If we focused on the day you were born we would be celebrating something in potential, not in actuality. On the day in which a new baby enters the world— no one can possibly know what kind of person they will be; on the death of death, everything is certain. That's why we have no religious rituals for birthdays but innumerable ones for *yahrzeits*. So why— in light of our slightly morbid focus on death rather than birth— do we stand here today and sing *hayom harat olam*, today the world was born. Or, was it?

As usual, the particularities of Hebrew language reveal how much we get wrong. *Hayom Harat Olam* can mean a variety of things, but critically, the verb *harah* is not about giving birth— it is about conception. *Harah* means, clearly and unequivocally, to become pregnant. Our *machzor* tries to capture this, but once again fails. There the English reads: 'Today the world stands as at birth.' Not even close. My translation would be: Today the world was conceived.

I'm sure no one here is surprised at me being pedantic about Hebrew grammar, but birth and conception are radically different things. The reason that our *machzor* and every other that you'll see gives a false translation is because the translators are trying to make the Hebrew consistent with their conception of what Rosh haShanah is— that is, the birthday of the world. However, if we're not trying to stretch it to fit a meaning which isn't there, the translation is quite simple. All that is required is that we rethink what creation itself means, and what exactly we are commemorating today.

We have been led to believe that we are discussing birth and not conception because we have imbibed the wrong idea about what Creation *is*. As with many other things, we have inherited a Christian and Greek lens in looking at our own text and as a result not seen it correctly. The

assumption of the Christian approach is that Creation was an *event*. The assumption of the Torah as it is, however, is that Creation is a process. More than just that– it is a process which *is still ongoing*.

What if Creation never stopped? What if what we will read in parashat Beréshit in a few weeks is not a full account of Creation from start to finish but simply the story of its start. The first chapters of Genesis do not describe an event which took place 5780 years ago and was neatly tied up when God laid down to rest on the seventh day. Rather, they describe God initiating, *conceiving*, of a *process* which began with God shaping the heavens and the earth out of chaos and void, a process that continues even after God finished God's part of it. What if Creation is intrinsically and irrevocably a part of the Covenant which we praise so often? What if, as it seems to be– we are *partners* in Creation and not simply its beneficiaries?

This idea may sound radical– but I sincerely believe it is the intention of the Torah and our tradition. The only reason it sounds mad to us is because we look at our own tradition through other people's eyes. Creation is a process which has continued since the moment that God spoke and the world came into being– and continues today. Creation, that is, the effort to draw order from chaos, is not done. It is not over. And it *needs* us.

There are many rabbinic sources I could marshal to prove to you that this view is supported by our Sages– ones in which they describe our current position as being on the afternoon of the sixth day, still waiting for Shabbat. Others where they reinterpret the language of Genesis from 'and God completed' to 'and they will complete.' For our Sages, it was a given that Creation was not an ex-nihilo event, but an ever–expanding process. Much like our own understanding of the Big Bang theory today– a distinct event (the bang!) gave inertia and momentum to a process– the expansion of the universe– which is still ongoing. So too, God's formation of life from non–life and order from chaos was the spark which ignited the universe to develop and continue. Moreover, it helps us to understand the significance of the covenant. A fancy word for a simple thing, a *berit* or covenant, is a deal. Two parties agree to terms, typically mutual support and allegiance. It is obvious what we need from God, but until we reshape our thinking about Creation, it may not be clear what God needs from us, from you.

Since God only inaugurated the Creation, the responsibility for continuing that project falls on us. So what do we do? Our A-Level Physics students here can easily remind us of the Second Law of Thermodynamics: the total entropy of any system always increases over time. Entropy is precisely the opposite of Creation. What God did all those years ago was bring order to chaos, structure the world and all life within it in orderly ways– but Creation can't be a done deal because otherwise we'd constantly be sliding toward entropy. Instead– it is *life* itself, the creations, which hold the tide against chaos. Technically called 'Negentropy'– there are several ways in which we can, and perhaps *must*, continue the work of creation in preserving and adding to the order of the cosmos. **Life** itself is considered to be **negentropic** because it takes things in which have less order, like dead **food**, and turns it into things with more order, like **cells** in the **body**, **tissues**, and **organs**. In doing so, it gives off **heat**. Another example of negentropic things are **societies**, or social **systems**, because they take disorderly things such as **communications**, and make them into order which is useful to people. Thus, by improving the health of our bodies, our societies, and our planet– we work to continue the project and process of Creation.

Now– why should you believe this? Isn't it easier to think that Creation happened all those years ago, and that we live in the world created as a result? Actually, I don't think so at all. For me, there's four major benefits to us choosing to believe that we are partners in Creation today:

- a. Gives life purpose – the purpose is to contribute to creation's completion
- b. Makes more sense textually – it is what the Torah and our tradition actually says
- c. Notion of partnership is empowering – even if it also means more responsibility
- d. Answers the questions of natural evil – chaos remains to be conquered

I believe that a correct understanding of Creation helps shape our sense of purpose and power– we are God's partners in Creation. There is more to do, much more– and it cannot be done without us. Stemming the tide of entropy requires conscious and consistent effort on our part to continue creating, developing, improving, and ordering the world around us. It helps as well

that it also allows us to make more sense of our tradition– even to make more sense of those words we read today, *hayom harat olam*, today the world was conceived; but is yet to be fully formed. Yet the most important result of this belief is that it allows us to explain natural evil.

Explaining human evil is easy enough– most people are a bit rubbish at some point or another. Many are good, most are decent perhaps, but many more make bad choices and hurt, exploit, and damage other people, other animals, and our natural environment. But humanity being a bit naff doesn't quite explain the horrors of what we call natural evil: disease, hurricanes, genetic mutations, tsunamis, and the like. Those are the things which most often challenge our belief– but if we maintain the belief that Creation is *incomplete*, they need not be a threat.

If Creation is not finished, if indeed we have more work to do, then that means that there is still chaos in the world. Order has not been completely imposed on the cosmos. If so, perhaps it is the remaining chaos and entropy which is responsible for the inexplicable destruction we see around us. If that is the case, then we can approach God not as a vengeful dictator who brings wrath upon us– but as a patient partner whom, like us, is collaborating in the project of Creation and working to reverse the tide of entropy.

For me– this is essential. I cannot believe in a God who willfully brings plague and pestilence upon the world simply out of petty vengeance. Rather, God to me is our partner in completing Creation– the Creator and the Creations working hand-in-hand to continue the process of negentropy.

As we begin the year 5780, as we commemorate the day on which the world was *conceived*, I hope that you will reconsider what Creation means. Perhaps it is not an event but a process. Perhaps it is not finished but still waiting for all creatures to contribute to furthering it. Perhaps God needs us as much as we need God. Perhaps October 7th, 3761 BCE was nothing other than the very first push towards ordering the cosmos, defeating chaos, and completing the task of Creation. Perhaps understanding Creation differently can help us understand our own power and responsibility, and help us explain the darkness we still find around us. If so, if I am right, then we'd better get to work– there's an *awful* lot to do.

## Day Two

### RH2: A Literate Self

In the not too distant future, all people wear body cameras that record their daily lives non-stop. This footage is known as their 'lifelog,' and in it, all the victories and vicissitudes of life are memorialised for posterity. Like a photo album, people consult their lifelog to relive happy memories or check something that happened which they're struggling to recall— but those occasions are few and far between, and like our own photo albums, the lifelog spends most of the time 'on the shelf.' That is, until a new software is developed called Remem. Remem has perfected search algorithms to such an extent that at the slightest mention of a past event in your life, it searches your lifelog and displays the video projected upon your retina. So as you talk to a work colleague, trying to identify what that chinese restaurant was you ate lunch at a fortnight ago, Remem has already found and displayed the video of you entering the storefront. Intended at first to become a helpful search tool, over time Remem sidles into being a replacement for one's natural memory.

Remem's new place in the human experience means that no one need argue about what happened, or what was said. Marital tiffs are easily resolved by consulting the tape. Unsolvable crimes are pieced together by cross-checking lifelogs. The phrase 'forgive and forget' has become meaningless as since nothing can be forgotten, forgiveness is something other than just the gradual retreat of memory.

This near-future is the setting of Ted Chiang's story *The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling*. In it, the protagonist is reticent to adopt Remem because of the implications it might have. Eventually, for the sake of journalistic exploration, he tries it— and in doing so realises that for twenty years he has misremembered an argument with his then-teenage daughter. It turns out the horrible thing he had remembered her saying, *he* had said. In the vagaries of memory, he had reconfigured it over time, but being confronted with the actual events thanks to Remem leads to a total collapse in his sense of self. A pivotal moment in his life was remembered wrong— how does one revise that? In the story, the narrator leaves us with the following advice:

*“Right now, each of us is a private oral culture. We rewrite our pasts to suit our needs and support the story we tell about ourselves. With our memories we are all guilty of an interpretation of our personal histories, seeing our former selves as steps towards our glorious present selves. But that era is coming to an end. Remem is merely the first of a new generation of memory prostheses, and as these products gain widespread adoption, we will be replacing our malleable organic memories with perfect digital archives. We will have a record of what we actually did instead of stories that evolve over repeated tellings. Within our minds, each of us will be transformed from an oral culture into a literate one. And I think I’ve found the real benefit of digital memory. The point is not to prove you were right; the point is to admit you were wrong. Because all of us have been wrong on various occasions, engaged in cruelty and hypocrisy, and we’ve forgotten most of those occasions. And that means we don’t really know ourselves. How much personal insight can I claim if I can’t trust my memory? How much can you? You’re probably thinking that, while your memory isn’t perfect, you’ve never engaged in revisionism of the magnitude I’m guilty of. But I was just as certain as you, and I was wrong. You may say, ‘I know I’m not perfect. I’ve made mistakes.’ I am here to tell you that you have made more than you think, that some of the core assumptions on which your self-image is built are actually lies. Spend some time using Remem, and you’ll find out.”*

For better or worse, instant memory recall facilitated via retinal projection is a far cry from today’s technology. You and I cannot consult Remem to resolve relationship disputes or determine who was precisely at fault in a traffic accident– but we are not too far away, either. What Chiang’s story so brilliantly demonstrates is that there is a tremendous gulf between literate–culture and oral–culture. Most of our life is governed by literacy– reading, writing, encoding data. Yet, literacy is a fairly new invention in human history. Humans have been a recognisable species for about 200,000 years, and writing has only been in effect for the last 5,000. That means that out of the history of human life and language, writing has only existed for 2.5% of the time.

What was life like then, for the 97.5% of history prior to that invention? Probably it corresponded much more to how we currently experience our memory— a series of oral tales and narratives, passed down, adapted, changed, but ultimately not surviving more than a few generations typically. The average human prior to the invention of writing would have been free of the weight of words with which we live— their lives would have been defined by the cyclical calendars of mythology and the stories and tales told by elders and ancestors. It is quite hard for us to imagine— especially since Judaism, although very ancient, comes onto the scene long after writing is already a part of human society. Not only did writing shape our faith— it is elemental to it. Ours is a religion *obsessed* with literality— the ritual reading and writing of the Torah, the chain of written interpretation and debate, the continual pointing toward the *text* rather than experience— we cannot imagine a Judaism which is independent of the written word.

It is especially true today— when the central image of our season is a literary one— the Book of Life. We ask to be written, to be inscribed, to be sealed in the Divine ledger— a written account of merits and demerits. Yet, we are also asked to search our memory and to make amends for those aspects of our life in which we have made mistakes— but we do so without the benefit of a technology such as Remem. Instead, we are suffused with the uncertainty of recollection— did it happen exactly the way we think? We were really at fault? Perhaps we're remembering it wrong. If we did have Remem to help us do *teshuvah* today— if we were to consult the mistakes of the past year, would we even recognise the person we see?

The truth is, we ask to be written in the Book of Life, but such an idea is a distinctly Rabbinic fantasy. We cannot conceive of such a record, one in which all actions are preserved. Thus, we imagine that God has the facility which we have described of Remem— to instantly see all things, overt and covert, remembered and misremembered. As we read in the *machzor* over and over:

*You know the mysteries of the universe,*

*The deepest secrets of everyone alive.*

*You probe our innermost depths;*



*You examine our thoughts and feelings.*

*Nothing escapes You;*

*Nothing is secret from You.*

Perhaps this is a scary thought to us. Perhaps, like a lifelog, everything is recorded perfectly, somewhere inaccessible to us. That is precisely the image conjured by our repeated appeals to the Book of Life, but I would guess that many of us find the image of God writing our names in a Book of Life frightening. After all, it implies a certainty about our actions that we can't even hope to have. Yet, it is precisely because our memories are so unreliable that we turn to an imagined ledger written by God. We cannot know if we are meant to be written in the Book of Life or not, because we cannot truly know our own actions.

This inability to know our own memories is essential in the journey of *teshuvah*. The characters in Ted Chiang's story have lost the ability to 'forgive and forget'— but we have not. We forget all the time, all we need do now is forgive as well. That relationship— between an imperfect memory and a posture of generosity towards ourselves and others is made possible by the fact that our minds work like an oral culture, not a literary one. Though we ask to be written in the Book of Life, we do not ourselves have the skills to read it. When it comes to the Divine ledger, we are illiterate. Instead, we live with an oral culture embedded in our brains— with all the failings of that but also with all the benefits. After all, there are many drawbacks to a reliance on the written word alone. In the words of contemporary philosopher John Gray:

*From its humble beginnings as a means of stocktaking and tallying debts, writing gave humans the power to preserve their thoughts and experiences from time. In oral cultures this was attempted by feats of memory, but with the invention of writing human experience could be preserved when no memory of it remained. Writing creates an artificial memory, whereby humans can enlarge their experience beyond the limits of one generation or one way of life. At the same time, it has allowed them to invent a world of abstract entities and mistake them for reality. (Straw Dogs)*

This year, as we recite those words, *In the Book of Life, Blessing, Peace, and Sustenance— please remember us and inscribe us*, we should make peace with the fact that even if God’s mind is like a book (or like a perfectly catalogued database like Remem), ours is not. Rather, our memory, our misdeeds, our passions and our pleasures, are far more like the oral cultures which defined humanity for most of its history: dynamic, always under revision, and always unreliable. Remember: it is precisely because life is *not* written, but experienced— that we are resilient, flexible, and adaptable. It also means we can lie and cheat and deceive (especially ourselves), but personally— I wouldn’t have it any other way. May we find ways to forgive, especially since we can’t help but forget— and despite the fact that our own records are deeply flawed, may God write each and every one of us, this year and every year, in the Book of Life.

Shanah Tovah.

