

“TODAY IS PREGNANT WITH ETERNITY”:

THE DESPAIR AND THE RESILIENCE IN JUSTICE WORK AND THE CRIES OF THE SHOFAR

D’var Torah for Rosh HaShana
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The Torah gives just one unique commandment for Rosh HaShanah, to hear the sound of the Shofar ([Leviticus/VaYikra 23:24](#)), producing that raw, emotionally complex, array of sounds that evoke:

- the summoning of courage for dangerous battle ([such as before Jericho’s walls came a-tumbling down](#)),
- the awe accompanying realization of the implications of freedom and the magnitude of our responsibility (such as when the shofar blasted at the [revelation at Mt. Sinai](#)),
- the hyperventilating wailing and the despondent sobbing of a mother whose child will not return home — ([even a child who is our foe, such as Canaanite Commander Sisera](#));
- the terror of Isaac, inches from death at his father’s blade, redeemed with the ram through whose horn we echo his inevitable cries ([Talmud Bavli, Rosh HaShanah 16a](#)),
- the alarm to “Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep!” from our sleepwalking lives ([Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:4](#)).

How do we respond to these cries? In the liturgy, our response to the shofar all three times in the Musaf (“Additional”) service is the words, “[Hayom Harat ‘Olam](#)”. This strange phrase is usually translated, “Today the world came into being” or “Today is the conception of the world,” or the like. “Hayom” = “today”. “Harah” = “to conceive”. “Olam” = “world”. Sometimes translations even elide pregnancy and birth, rendering it, “Today is the birthday of the world.” In this understanding, the phrase expresses the tradition that the world was created on Rosh HaShanah ([Talmud, Rosh HaShanah 27a](#)), which appears elsewhere in the classical liturgy: “This is the day, the beginning of Your creation, a memorial of the first day” ([introduction to the section of “Remembrances”/Zikhronot in Musaf](#)). The shofar, then, arouses our sense of possibility. Today is the beginning, when the unlikeliest of miracles, life itself, came into being. We hint at this by reading of the births of Isaac and Samuel to previously barren mothers, Sarah and Hannah, in the Torah and Haftarah readings for the first day.

That is a strong meaning of Rosh Hashanah, but I don’t think it can be exactly what “Hayom Harat ‘Olam” means. First of all, that translation conflates pregnancy and birth. “Harah” means “pregnant” or “conceive”. Second, while “*olam*” comes to refer to “the world” -- ie, total space -- in later Jewish literature, in the Bible, it means “eternity” -- ie, total time. Third, even if it meant “the world”, it would need a definite article and should be “Hayom harat ha-’olam”. Therefore, it should be translated not as “today is the conception of the world”, but, rather, “**today is pregnant with eternity,**” as Rabbi David Seidenberg rendered it in [this excellent article](#), or, perhaps, “**today is infinitely pregnant**”. The cries and anguish, the fear, the loss, the danger encompassed in the shofar — they, themselves are pregnant with eternal possibility and vitality.

But this understanding has a cloud over it. “Harat ‘Olam” is a Biblical quote, with a dark contextual meaning. Let’s set the scene: The prophet Jeremiah emerges from a traumatic beating and imprisonment by the corrupt and despotic priest Pashhur, who wanted none of Jeremiah’s incessant, rabble-raising against corruption and injustice; wounded and scarred by prison, Jeremiah breaks down. He can’t take it anymore, the life of the dissident, the activist, the prophet:

“I have become a laughingstock all day; everyone mocks me.

Every time I speak, I cry out; ‘violence and plunder’, I call out.

For the word of YHWH causes me disgrace and contempt all **day** (‘Hayom’)” ([Jeremiah 20:7-8](#)).

The pain and trauma visited in this world upon courageous and righteous opponents of tyranny leads the prophet to a death-wish:

“Cursed is **the day** (*Hayom*) when I was born;
a day on which my mother bore me should not be blessed.
Cursed is the man who brought my father the news, saying,
‘A baby boy was born to you!’, delighting him with such delight.
Let that man be like the cities which YHWH overturned remorselessly;
Let him hear cries in the morning and wails (*teru’ah*) at noon.
Because he did not kill me within the womb (*rehem*),
So that my mother would be my grave, and her womb **eternally pregnant** (*harat ‘olam*)” ([Jeremiah 20:14-17](#)).

“*Hayom harat ‘olam*”, “Today is eternally pregnant”, for Jeremiah, is the dark wish of a beaten, rejected fighter-for-justice who is losing; it’s his wish never to have been born. These scary thoughts, this despair, are well-known to many people broken by state violence and popular rejection, but who know that that violence is evil and can’t help seeing things as they are. It’s the feeling of hearing every cry, every *teru’ah* (the name for the short, staccato shofar blasts) exclusively as mourning.

The liturgy challenges us to recognize that despair in us, to hold it, to know it, and to work through it. Even in Jeremiah’s despair, he couldn’t quite go all the way with his death-wish. He uses death language, but then imagines his mother eternally pregnant with him. This image may be horrific for those of us who have had a fetus die in their womb and had to deliver it, but it also winds back to the image of pregnancy itself: maybe this danger and this pain are pangs of life and possibility. The liturgy responds to this quote defiantly: “*Hayom ya’amid bemishpat kol yetzurei ‘olamim* - Today [God] will make all creatures from eternity stand in judgment”. This, too, is a Biblical allusion, to Proverbs 29:4: “By justice a king makes the earth stand”. A life of justice work, which is demanded of us, can lead us into immense pain, fear, and brokenness, as it did for Jeremiah. It can feel like death, but it is, in fact, what enables the earth to exist. It is life. Being judged is a translation of God’s sustaining the earth with justice. Our deeds matter. Our lives are important. How do we stand in judgment, according to this piece of liturgy? “Whether as children or as servants. If as children, have compassion on us, as a father has compassion for children.” This passage, too, alludes to Jeremiah’s language. The Hebrew word for “compassion” is “*rahamim*”, from “*rehem*”, which means “womb”: *if we are Your children, womb us, like a father wombs children*. This gender-bending turn of phrase sets the womb as a universal model for human and divine possibility, in resilient response to Jeremiah’s half-death wish for the womb. When we address God as *HaRahaman*, it means God is The Compassionate One, but it really means that God is The Wombing One. To treat someone with compassion is to bring them in for warm protection and nourishment, to acknowledge that none of us is ever fully ready for life, that we all need some more time. We are always alive in justice/judgment at this moment and we are all always still in the womb, seen for our eternal potential.

Post-menopausal [Sarah](#), married to a sexually non-performing spouse, gave birth ([Genesis/Bereishit 18:12](#) and [21:1-2](#)); can we find vitality in the parts of ourselves that feel most hopeless? Can we birth life out of the doom and death of the collapsing planet and murderous regimes? Hannah, the barren outcast, scorned by the religious establishment, which mistakes her sincere, vulnerable prayer for drunken blathering in violation of Temple decorum, gives birth ([1 Samuel 1:12-20](#)) and the Rabbis in the Talmud ([Berakhot 31a-b](#)) stylize her prayer as the legal paradigm. To pray according to halakha (Jewish law), we must bring out into the open our inner Hannah, our vulnerable, heartbroken, and rejected self, despite the fear. In hearing the cries of the shofar, we have to express our inner Jeremiah, to work through our despair to reach the nourished place of rebirth and possibility, eternally.

May you have a sweet new year, pregnant with eternity — a year of audacious bravery and honest confrontation with danger, of attuning our ears to shrill cries everywhere and awakening from our sleepwalking, a year of “removing malicious government from the land,” [as we pray in the liturgy](#), a year of dangerous prayer, resilient midwifery, and wombing compassion.

Shana tova.

For more inspiration on what it means to live a life immersed in justice work, with all the pains and joys, watch this 2020 video with Ruth Messinger from Avodah’s *Speak Torah to Power Lecture Series*: [“Creating Lasting Change for a More Just World.”](#)