

Erev RH 5779

Hayom harat olam

As we come together once again to share the start of a new year, and we begin to focus on the individual journeys of teshuvah that we are about to undertake, one phrase from the liturgy has been echoing in my mind:

Hayom harat olam

It's a phrase that is often translated as 'today is the birthday of the world' - and indeed, the story that I will give out to our small people and their families tomorrow is based on that idea.

But there is a deeper meaning to the phrase as well, and that's where I would like us to begin to focus our thoughts tonight.

Hayom, colloquially, means 'today.' But literally translated, it means THE day. It's as if the Hebrew is saying that today is the only day that exists, the only time we have. There is an immediacy about it. *Hayom* is right now, the very moment in which we are living; once that moment has passed, it is no longer 'hayom'. And *Hayom* is us, as we sit here tonight with whatever experiences, thoughts, questions and fears we have brought with us.

Harat is quite difficult to translate. The verb *harah* is a uniquely feminine word that can mean both 'she conceived' and 'she was pregnant.' In its figurative sense in the Tanach, especially when used by the prophets, it carries the metaphorical sense of 'anxious and disappointed waiting.' (When I have heard mothers to be talk about the ninth month of pregnancy, they often describe it as feeling longer than the previous 8 months combined.)

In our prayer, the word is modified from *harah* to *harat* in order for it to be placed next to *olam*. This linking, or *smichut*, creates a relationship between the two words, so we get something more like 'the pregnancy of the *olam*' and hence the translation in our new mahzor, 'Today the world stands as at birth.' And we will talk more about birth presently.

But I am not sure this is the only translation. Let me point out the obvious - conception and birth are not the same thing. I wonder if the anonymous author of our prayer was hinting not at the end of the process but, rather, at the beginning. If so, *hayom* - this very moment - is the *point of origin* of something, the infinitesimal point that will expand in due course to become whatever it is destined to become.

And that brings us to *olam*. We tend to think of *olam* as meaning 'the world,' as in, 'Barukh atta Adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam,' for example. But that formula was created by the Rabbis, who somewhat limited the original meaning of the word. There are plenty of other words for 'world' in the Tanakh - *tevel*, *eretz*, the rare and lovely *heled*. But *olam* isn't used that way. Rather, it means *time* - often, a long period of time. (We of course retain this usage in the phrase 'le'olam va'ed.)

So another translation of *hayom harat olam* might be 'this very moment is the beginning of time.' As we sit here tonight, time itself is poised and waiting to begin for us.

Everything is new. Everything is possible.

Rabbi Matis Weinberg describes Rosh Hashanah as the "womb of the year". He quotes a Midrash [Vayikra Rabbah 29:12] in which God says, *My children, I feel as if today you were formed before Me...as if I had made a new creation.* On these days, all of the possibilities of the coming year exist, as it were, in embryo.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz further observes the vulnerability of this moment, this *hayom*. He notes that conception is the laying down of the blueprint for everything that will happen later. *The flash of conception contains everything, he writes; all later development is simply a revelation of what was created during that first flash.*

What will we do with this sense of infinite potential?

The tradition offers one answer in this teaching from the Talmud:

What is a child like when it is in its mother's womb? Folded writing tablets...a light burns above its head and it looks and sees from one end of the world to the other...and there is no time in which a person is happier than in those days. It is taught all the Torah from beginning to end...but as soon as it sees the light, an angel comes and slaps it on the mouth, which causes it to forget all the Torah completely. [BT Niddah 30b]

Many of you know the tradition that we still bear the mark of the angel on our faces - here, in the philtrum above our lips.

Let's consider how these two ideas - *hayom harat olam* and the child in the womb - fit together. *Hayom*, we can think of ourselves as being - metaphorically - in the state of a child before birth. If that is the case, we are presently in a state of enlightenment, with access to the whole of the Torah. Consider that for a moment. What do we know, *hayom*, that we might not be aware that we know? Can we close our eyes and slip into that parallel reality? What is it like, to be in this state of heightened insight?

I wonder if we can retain that sense of possibility and wisdom as we move through the next two days. Maybe, as we leaf through our beautiful Mahzor, we will be struck by something we never understood before. Can we 'talk Torah' over our dinner tables, however that translates for us - perhaps something we learned this year, perhaps something from the Torah of human kindness? Maybe we will catch ourselves reacting to something based on an old pattern - but *hayom*, there are no old patterns, so can we change?

And if that list seems too long, let me offer something specifically for tonight. I would like us to think forward to the moment before we fall asleep. Can we, in that moment, compose ourselves, focus our minds and open ourselves up to our own potential and the potential of the year that lies ahead? Maybe we can even pray to dream of something of significance. Maybe, as we slip into the oblivion of sleep, we can contact a distant memory of what it meant to be in a place and a state where everything was possible.

Hayom harat olam. This very moment is the absolute beginning of everything. May we come safely to birth as we begin a new year. Shanah Tovah.