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25 September 2014 / Rosh Hashanah  
Beth Haverim Shir Shalom  
Mahwah, NJ

## Responding to Life's Biggest Question

I remember the first time I ever tasted cheese-eggs.

When I was growing up, my dad would, on special occasions, prepare scrambled eggs for breakfast instead of our usual cereal and milk. I always looked forward to that rare treat, especially if I could have my eggs on a piece of buttered toast. And then, one day, my dad asked me if I wanted cheese in my eggs. "Sure," I said. "Why not?" Little did I know that my entire experience of scrambled eggs was about to be overturned.

That first bite was like walking outside on a summer afternoon after a day spent in a windowless and too-air conditioned office. The cheese amplified the eggs' hearty flavor, adding a richness and a texture unlike any I had ever tasted. It was literally life-changing. From that moment forward, I always asked for cheese in my scrambled eggs, and to this day, I hold that a good egg is a cheesy one.

First times and new experiences are wondrous. That's why I still remember that first bite of cheese-eggs. And that's why we devote so much of our leisure time to discovery, whether by traveling to new places, reading novels, ... building worlds in Minecraft: Encountering something new is profoundly satisfying.

No wonder, then, that the new *year*, full of potential new discoveries, is so prominent in societies around the world. Indeed, Judaism commemorates no less than *four* new years in its traditional calendar. Today's new year, Rosh Hashanah, is said to be *hayom harat olam* - the birthday of the world. But not just the anniversary of the world's birth; today is imagined to be the *actual* day of creation. Today, we enter a brand new world, urged to consider erased anything that happened before. To taste cheese-eggs again for the very first time.

Now, we all know that today isn't a *physical* day of creation. And our tradition knows that, too. So, what is meant by the assertion that *hayom harat olam*, today is the birth-day of the world? Let's start with the classic mishnah, composed over 1800 years ago in the Land of Israel: "The first human being was created as one person to teach you that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world" (Sanhedrin 4:5). In other words, Judaism posits that you are a world. You have a unique set of perspectives and beliefs, you organize what you see and experience in a unique way, and you relate uniquely to everything and everyone else in the universe. So, while today isn't a physical genesis, it is essentially a *spiritual* day of creation, of *your* creation. Today is your day for spiritual rebirth.

Again, if today were a physical day of creation, there would be nothing for us to do. After all, we wouldn't exist yet. We'd simply be waiting to be made. But, since

today is a *spiritual* day of creation and not a physical one, we *do* have work to do. We are involved in remaking ourselves.

This has been a central theme of the past seven Weeks of Consolation following Tisha B'Av, the holiday that mourns the Roman conquest of Jerusalem. In the wake of destruction, we pray for restoration. We turn our thoughts to the final line of the Book of Lamentations: הָשִׁיבֵנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנָשׁוּב. חַדֵּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם, "Return us to you, O Eternal, and we shall return. Renew our days according to what might be" (5:21).<sup>1</sup> Renew our days. Give us new life. Help us through our spiritual rebirth. But if and only if נָשׁוּב, we do *teshuvah*.

*Teshuvah* in this sense doesn't simply mean "repentance," although that's part of it. *Teshuvah*, in its most basic aspect, is a *response*. In rabbinic literature, *teshuvot* are rabbis' responses to questions posed by their communities, and in Modern Hebrew today, the word *teshuvah* likewise translates as "response." So when we talk about *teshuvah* on the High Holy Days, we should think of it not as a correction made to past mistakes but rather as a response to the most important and critical questions we can imagine.

Today, with our thoughts in Genesis, we face the question that has been addressed to humankind since the Garden of Eden, the question posed by God to Adam when he hid in the bushes, ashamed of his nakedness after eating the forbidden fruit: אַיֶּכָּה, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). Not "what have you done" or "why did you do it," but "where are you?" Of course, God knows perfectly well where Adam is – it is *Adam* who needs to answer the question for himself. And each of us needs to find a response to this question in our own lives as well.

Martin Buber, perhaps the most influential Jewish philosopher of the twentieth century, teaches us that God constantly asks us אַיֶּכָּה; we are called to answer this question each and every day.<sup>2</sup> But there's something special about it today, on Rosh Hashanah, the day on which we contemplate creation. As Rabbi Lawrence Kushner teaches, "The creation of the world is a metaphor for the emergence of awareness."<sup>3</sup> Thus, as we embark on the spiritual recreation of our own worlds, we make room in ourselves for a deeper awareness of spiritual truth.

אַיֶּכָּה, "Where are you?" One possible answer: מֵעוֹלָם וְעַד עוֹלָם, from eternity to eternity. Rabbi Kushner elaborates:

There are two directions of astonishment. Here is how it happens.  
Above, there arches the immensity of the heavens. That if the thickness of

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<sup>1</sup> (1) The Masoretic tradition reads וְנָשׁוּבָה, "And let us return." This translation follows the written text וְנָשׁוּב, "And we shall return." (2) Also, the term כְּקֶדֶם is usually understood as "as what has been." The root ק.ד.ם, however, can refer both to the past (as in קודם, "before") as well as the future (as in קדימה, "forward;" see also Ps. 95:2). Here, I use the latter sense. (3) Finally, the "final verse" of Lamentations is actually 5:22, though Jewish tradition—which often arranges texts to conclude with a *nechemta*, an uplifting note—repeats 5:21 after the reading of 5:22 during public recitation.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *The Way of Man* (1950), "The First Hasidic Tale." Trans. Bernard Mehlman and Gabriel E. Padawer.

<sup>3</sup> *Honey from the Rock* (1977, reprinted 2000), p. 124.

[a piece of paper] were to equal the 93 million miles between the earth and the sun then the distance to the edge of the known universe would be a stack of papers 31 million miles high.

And within, there breathes the intricacy of the human body. That in each of the 100 trillion cells there are roughly 100,000 genes coiled on a molecule of deoxyribonucleic acid, which, if uncoiled and unwound, would string back and forth between the earth and the sun over 400 times.

[Human beings] stand at the center of these two infinite directions. Above [us], space and time are literally astronomic. Within [us], space and time are infinitesimal. ...

Beyond the farthest reaches. Within the innermost depths. Light sparkles. Consciousness shines. Awareness permeates the universe.<sup>4</sup>

Rabbi Kushner, in his unmatched gift of expression, teaches that each of us miraculously exists at the intersection of eternities. Not only space but also time stretch infinitely away from us in every direction, even within our very bodies. What's more, we also hold within us a *spiritual* infinity, possessing unending capacity for creativity and relationship.

Each of us is a shard of the great spiritual unity that binds all of creation – within the physical world and also outside it. Our souls are unique and wondrous beings who, for a certain span of time, choose to cohabitate with physical forms in order to experience life in a new way. Why? Simply to have a variety of experiences. Or put another way, to taste cheese-eggs for the first time. This – in and of itself – is a virtue, a spiritual goal that our souls crave and seek out for the same reasons that we love to travel and read and play. Life exists in all its fabulous diversity because we souls, in the image of our All-Encompassing Creative Source, delight in creativity.

So, when we try to answer the question, “Where are you?” we can turn in an infinite number of directions. We have the freedom to locate ourselves in the universe and to select a path of discovery that can lead us to a higher awareness.

And what might we learn? Perhaps that the differences between those paths aren't as distinct as they appear. Consider this further teaching of Rabbi Kushner's:

Where does a person end and begin? Is it really at the outer border of one's skin? As if to say everything that is inside is person, everything outside, non-person. Is this not saying that our least subtle sense, the sense of touch, defines a person? And what if our ability to see were as fine as that of the electron microscope? When we came to the skin line

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 117-118.

there would still be spaces. ... Or what of the influence a person has? Does a respected person's boundary end with his or her outer skin?

Where does anything begin and another thing end? If all the cells in a body are replaced many times during a single lifetime, then what makes a person the "same" person? Why have we so ruthlessly superimposed borders on things? Fragmented the cosmos. Maybe there are no "objects." Maybe we have only invented them! Agreed to pretend they are, so we can exploit, use and control. Hoping thereby somehow to outwit death. But we do not realize that the very means we have chosen to stay alive fragment us from ourselves and from one another and from our source of life and therefore are what kills us in the end.

The fragmenting, controlling, separating, saying that one thing ends here and another begins there. I own this. Control that. Extend my boundaries to there. Over yours. Will have more. Be more. Live longer. But surely this is death. Suppose instead that we are all of one piece.<sup>5</sup>

"Where are you?" In truth, you are one with the One. Science has demonstrated that the physical boundaries we perceive are, in fact, merely illusory. And our experiences of relationship teach us that spiritual boundaries between people, who inspire, influence, and change one another constantly, are also fluid. We know with absolute certainty that we are unique. And yet at the same time, we are not fully separate.

Here is the great paradox of being created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Like God, we are One, unified with all that is. Unlike God, we experience the world from a particular vantage point, seeing ourselves as separate and different from others. If we were to lose our godliness, to turn away from our inherent connection to the rest of the world, then we could never grow, create, and learn. And if we were to lose our humanity, to dissolve our individuality into the endless sea of the creative force of the universe, then we would lose out also on the variety and diversity that we have already seen is truly and genuinely good. We need both aspects of our being, divine and human. And at heightened moments of awareness – at moments of spiritual recreation like today's birth-day of the universe of our selves – we can sense the profound relationship between the divine and the human that motivates our growth and inspires us to keep on living.

The call of the shofar is intended to rouse us from our slumber, to slough off the illusion that our provincial physical perspective is all there is to the world. We are called to see ourselves as relevant actors in the drama of creation, to take responsibility for the part we have to play in the grand design of the universe.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 145-146.

And so, the question *איפה אתה*, “Where are you,” requires an actual response, a *teshuvah*. Emerging from theoretical reflections on the nature of our souls comes the very real responsibility to make something of our lives, to expand our experience and our influence in a variety of directions.

I’d like to suggest three possible dimensions for our *teshuvah* this year, three areas that might deserve particular attention in the coming weeks and months.<sup>6</sup>

The first is mental or intellectual. Judaism has from its very earliest days called us to learn, to expand our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Classically, the rabbis have focused their attention on Torah, which translated into English simply means “instruction.” For the sages of our tradition, Torah included not only the written text of the sacred scrolls we keep in our ark but also the oral tradition of questioning and developing the received interpretations of those texts. And Torah also encompasses more than just religious learning. Judaism’s greatest rabbis have also been accomplished scholars in other fields, including medicine, astronomy, agriculture, philosophy, literature, mathematics, and more. In their honor, then, one avenue of *teshuvah* we might pursue in the coming year is to commit to a new regimen of learning. Choose a topic of interest – perhaps something that you’ve always wondered about but never made the time to investigate – and “go and learn” (Shabbat 31a). Sign up for an adult ed class here at Temple, enroll in an online course, check some new books out of the library. All I ask is that you find some way to share what you have learned, to continue to expand the knowledge of others through your own studies.

The second dimension of *teshuvah* I offer today is emotional. The expansion of human awareness does not occur only in the mind but also in the heart. Emotional growth, so needed in our society, involves opening up our boundaries, turning ourselves outward toward others rather than seeing ourselves only as receivers. Consider the two major bodies of water in the land of Israel: One is the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth and the terminus of the Jordan River. It receives water but never gives any away. And its salt content is so high that nothing can live in it. Contrast that with Israel’s other main body of water, the Kinneret. This freshwater lake, bursting with life, receives water from the north and then releases it to the south. In both giving as well as taking, the Kinneret thrives and spreads life to the surrounding fertile region of the Galilee. The very land instructs us: be Kinnerets, not Dead Seas. We are called to open our hearts to the lives and experiences of others, to cultivate compassion for the environment, and to erode the boundaries that divide us from our spiritual Source. Those choosing this path of *teshuvah* will seek to stretch the heart to open as widely as it can. Practically, this may involve reforging a broken connection with a loved one, finding a new way to understand a parent or child whose life choices baffle us, or pushing ourselves to explore social interactions that have been outside our comfort zones. If this is the path you choose, don’t be surprised to find as you widen your heart that it has less room for judgment and ever more room for love.

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<sup>6</sup> The following draws from Arthur Green’s [Radical Judaism](#), p. 27-30.

Finally, the third dimension of *teshuvah* we might embrace this Rosh Hashanah is that of human action. As a community charged with *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, we have a responsibility to empower others to reach their full intellectual and emotional potentials. Contemporary spiritual master Rabbi Arthur Green reminds us, “A person cannot be expected to discover the image of God within himself or herself as long as he or she is hungry, or as long as he or she is homeless or degraded by poverty, addictions, or the seemingly overwhelming burdens of everyday life. Our task has to be to lessen and lighten those burdens as ways of helping all to see the radiant presence that surrounds us and fills us in each moment.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, we are called to direct our actions toward others, to assess how we are making our lives mean something to the entire human community, and to work with our hands and feet to make the world a better place. Work in this area of *teshuvah* may involve making a new volunteer project, advocating for an issue of social justice, or increasing one’s commitment to charitable giving. As we amplify and multiply our own blessings by helping to provide for others, we will bring ever closer the prophetic vision of a world redeemed.

Here, then, are three *teshuvot*, responses, to the question “Where are you?” They are not simple, and they are not brief – rather, they are steps on a journey, entrees to a conversation, and brush strokes on a canvas. Commitment to *teshuvah* is grounded in the assertion that we are part of something greater than ourselves, something that lays claim to our lives and our behaviors, a higher order and set of principles that asserts “this direction is healthy” and “that direction is harmful.” Call it God. Call it Life. Call it Justice, Peace, or Love. Whatever you call it, the force that binds us together gives us today the power to recreate ourselves.

There are as many ways to do *teshuvah* as there are people in the world, and each of us may be drawn this year to a more intellectual, emotional, or active role. Regardless what path we choose, so long as we seek out new experiences – or new perspectives on familiar ones – then the year can truly be considered new. On Rosh Hashanah, we can be reborn, looking with fresh eyes upon the light of God’s creation. And following our sincere *teshuvah*, we may respond as God did on that very first day five thousand seven hundred and seventy-four years ago: כִּי טוֹב, Behold, this light that we sanctify in our minds, in our hearts, and in our deeds is truly and deeply good.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 30.