

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 – 2021/5782  
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Shanah tovah!

If we were reading from the Torah this morning, we would read the Creation Story. Rosh Hashanah is considered the anniversary of creation – the birthday of the world, if you will. That is the reason why many Reform synagogues read the story of creation on the second day of Rosh Hashanah instead of the traditional Torah reading, the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, which we read yesterday, on the first day.

So, as we begin our ten-day journey of reflection before Yom Kippur, I want to talk about Creation....and Creativity.

The book of Genesis begins, “When God was about to create heaven and earth, the earth was chaos, unformed and on the chaotic waters’ face there was darkness.” (Gen. 1:1-2)

“*When God was about to create*”? What happened **before** God began to create? I chose to share this translation, from the 2005 revision of the URJ’s *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, which follows Rashi, rather than the more classic “In the beginning, God created.” “In the beginning” implies that God created *ex nihilo* - out of nothing – that Creation was really the beginning. Did God really create the world from nothing? Or did God look into some heavenly art supply cabinet, and pull out some raw material?

The earth was chaos and unformed.... Chaotic and formless, maybe, but surely not empty. The earth is/was filled with everything that is possible. An endless number of options.

This dramatic description from the first lines of Genesis has me thinking about the creative act of creation. We don’t usually think about the biblical creation story and creativity together. About the fact that God had an infinite number of possibilities – and God created **this** world and then created **us** – human beings – and presented us with an infinite number of possibilities. God used creativity in crafting the world and endowed us with ingenuity, with creativity. What we do with all these traits is up to us.

Throughout the Torah and the story of the Israelites, God is portrayed in many different ways. In the Creation Story, it is clear that God is, first and foremost, a

creator. We are told, in Gen. 1:27, that God created human beings *b'tzelem Elohim* – in the divine image. If God's fundamental nature is to be creative, then it follows that we, too, are endowed with creativity.

I would also note that creativity plays a role throughout the Torah; God is not the only creative one. Adam uses his creativity in naming the animals, (Gen. 2:20). The Israelites used their creative instincts in order to follow God's complex instructions for building the tabernacle, under the guidance of Bezalel, the master craftsman. Furthermore, the Israelites are reminded many times in the Torah to refrain from creating on Shabbat.

Rabbi Adina Allen, founder of the Jewish Studio Project, sees the creation story as a reminder that we – human beings – were imbued with creativity from the very beginning. Allen writes, "Each of us has the ability to imagine, to play with the raw material of our lives, to see things in a new light and to wrestle with the stuck places within us."<sup>1</sup> Our ability to think creatively about our lives helps us see things differently, enables us to make sense of the chaos and visualize a better world.

This season of the year is handed to us – a time built into our calendar during which to reflect upon the past year, to consider our possibilities, to think creatively about the future, to plot a new course for the new year. Perhaps, even, to create new lives for ourselves.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, said that the reason that Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of creation, is the time to do *teshuvah*, to reflect and repent, is because *teshuvah* is also a creative process. The Hebrew word *teshuvah* means repentance and return. However, as a creative act, *teshuvah* is not a simple return. We return to who we are meant to be but have not yet become. We return to growth and possibility that has been dormant within us or perhaps, has not yet flourished, much as a sculpture lies hidden within a block of stone. The process of *teshuvah* can be painful and even humiliating, but it can also be a joyous, hopeful, creative process.<sup>2</sup>

The words creative and creativity are often associated with art – painting and drawing for example. Musicians are creative people; film makers, writers, costume designers, dancers, actors – all are "creatives." Knitters, people who sew, quilt, and do other crafts are considered "artsy" and "creative."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/seventyfacesoftorah/2018/10/we-are-created-creative/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/338107?lang=bi>

However, I would propose that all of us have some spark of creativity inside us. During the past year, we have all had to think creatively in the face of this global pandemic. Some of us have had to recreate our lives. Many of us had to recreate our workspaces. We all had to think of ways to escape the confines of the pandemic, whether in reality, or in our heads. We tried activities we never thought we could do – we went snowshoeing, hiking, biking. We painted walls; we made art; we knitted socks; we wrote stories; we kept journals; we tried new recipes. We escaped the pandemic thanks to the creativity of others: we binge watched *Bridgerton*; we read books; we watched a lot of HGTV and Netflix.

Large companies, small businesses, restaurants, and organizations of all sizes had to creatively reinvent themselves to survive. Often, creative thinking is what helped them to survive. WeTransfer is a data transfer company that enables us to send large files to other people without attaching them to an email. I have used WeTransfer a lot during this pandemic. They are also known for an annual report called the Ideas Report, a roundup of insights from around the globe about the unpredictable nature of creativity. The 2020 Ideas Report found that almost half of people surveyed reported experiencing more creativity than ever before, despite the constraints of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Just one example of remarkable creativity coming out of the COVID-19 crisis comes from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, CA. As in most places around North America, most of the employees of the Jet Propulsion Lab began working from home at the beginning of the pandemic. A couple of NASA engineers asked themselves "Is what I'm doing right now the most important thing I could be doing?" These engineers – who usually design spacecraft – knew they had the ability to help. A combination of talent, innovation, focus, and creativity enabled a team of NASA engineers to develop an easy-to-use and easy-to-manufacture ventilator. They met with doctors, worked around the clock and in just 37 days, had a prototype ready to be tested by a doctor in NY. Shortly thereafter, on April 30, 2020, the FDA granted Emergency Use Authorization that enabled the manufacture of this new type of ventilator designed specifically for COVID-19 patients. By June 1<sup>st</sup>, they had received Emergency Use Authorization for a second ventilator for use in field hospitals. This team of NASA engineers used their ingenuity to help save lives during this pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, and synagogues around the world, also responded creatively to the COVID-19 pandemic. We all learned to use Zoom. We discovered

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<sup>3</sup> <https://metropolismag.com/viewpoints/pandemic-creativity/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0d-EU2E2trU>



many ways. Jewish tradition gives us this High Holy Day season, a special opportunity to reflect on the past year, and to think about how we may want to take a different path in the new year.

God created **this** world, placed us on **this** earth, and presented us with an infinite number of possibilities. God used creativity to make the world and endowed us with ingenuity, with creativity, with resilience and with the ability to look towards the future. It's up to us to figure out what to do with these characteristics. As we enter this ten-day period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when we are meant to reflect upon the past year, I would urge you to consider your possibilities, think creatively about what your future holds, and plot a fresh course for the new year.

May we all find a way to make sense of the chaos, to see things differently, and to visualize a better world for ourselves, for our community, for our planet.

*Ken yehi ratzon.* So may this be God's will.