

Dena Glasgow  
Rosh Hashanah Sermon  
Congregation Betenu  
September 19, 2020

Shana Tova.

I begin with THE MOOSE. Yes, this is the nickname of my family's minivan.

I love my van. While my friends have exchanged their minivans for smaller cars as their kids get older, I am more attached than ever. The Moose comes in handy no matter the season. It delivers couches to our children's apartments and corn stalks for our sukkah. Most often though, the Moose carries bikes in its spacious open back. And, on the occasions when we have passengers in the back seat, no problem — we also have three bike racks on the roof of our car. And, if we hit capacity on our roof, we throw on a rear bike rack to add another five bikes for a total load of eight people and eight bikes. This summer, on our most recent road trip from Northwestern Connecticut to New Jersey, we were a little light — with only two bikes on top and two bikes on the back.

But that didn't mean there wasn't any trouble. Driving on a beautiful country road, all was well until we started seeing signs for one of Connecticut's famous covered bridges. We wondered — exactly how high is a covered bridge? Will it fit our car with bikes on top of it? And what about those other bridges that we may be encountering on our trip to New Jersey? After all, aren't parkways designed for cars only? Would we be able to make it through?

Thus began a harrowing journey to New Jersey. Having estimated the height of our car with bikes as approximately 9.5 feet, we were on high alert — assessing the height of each bridge before daring to pass under it. We would make it through one bridge, breathe a sigh of relief and then anxiety would build before the next. On a few occasions, we had to quickly veer off the parkway and find another way when the covered bridge was too low. We were never so relieved to arrive safely at our destination.

I share this story because these days, we are all on such a nerve-racking road trip. Living through a pandemic, obstacles abound in ever-changing ways. Children are in school one day and then home the next. Young people are off to college— but then not. Vacations are on, and then off. Simchas — celebrations-- are cancelled, then rescheduled, and then cancelled again. Feelings of intense isolation come and go — and likely we all fear what winter may bring. For some of us, the pandemic has brought job loss and economic insecurity. There are those among us who have lost loved ones and then been denied the comfort of human touch. And we all worry who will succumb to the illness next.

But unlike my anxiety-filled drive to New Jersey that I knew would come to an end, we do not yet know when we will be able to let our guard down — when this craziness will be over. And the word seems to get harder day by day: the pandemic, the wildfires, the state of our politics.

How then are we supposed to experience Rosh Hashanah this year?

In trying to answer this question, I found myself drawn to one of the most famous lines of liturgical poetry in the Rosh Hashanah service. *Hayom Harat Olam*. Today the world is born. This phrase is more accurately translated as “Today the world is pregnant.” or “Today the world is expectant.”

Amazingly, this seemingly positive statement was coined by no other than Jeremiah, nicknamed the doom-and-gloom prophet. Not surprisingly, then, when Jeremiah says it, it doesn’t mean “the world is expectant” but rather “it is better not to be born.” In one of his many bouts of depression, Jeremiah laments “Let not the day be blessed when my mother bore me!” He then imagines, rather grotesquely, that his mother should have died while he was still in her womb — leaving her “*harat olam*” — “big for all time” — “pregnant forever” (Jeremiah 20:17)

And so it seems that the author of our liturgical poem took Jeremiah’s negative image but turned it entirely on its head. Jeremiah wanted to stop the birth process and give up on life while our liturgical prayer insists that no matter how hard life may be, we must never give up on its possibility. We must always hold out for the possibility of rebirth and renewal.

As if to further block out Jeremiah’s famous negativity, the haftarah portion that we read today quotes Jeremiah in a more hopeful state. Here, Jeremiah states that while life may look grim, it will come out right if we don’t give up on hope. He then credits Rachel, one of the four Jewish matriarchs, for this happy ending.

Some of you may remember Rachel as the barren wife of Jacob. So tormented was she that she was unable to recognize even moments of joy. Rachel’s first spoken words in the Torah are “Give me children or I will die!” — but when she finally has a child, she does not rejoice but instead names her newborn “Joseph” meaning may God “add to me another son.” Rachel’s discontent extends to her moment of death when, on her deathbed after the birth of her second child, she names her much-desired second son, “Ben Oni” -- “son of my sorrow.”

And so, 1500 years later, Jeremiah re-envisioned Rachel. With a few emendations for clarity, this is what Jeremiah sees:

A cry is heard in Ramah, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children who have been exiled. But God says to her: Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from shedding tears; for there is reward for your labor — Your children shall return from the enemy’s land. And there is hope for your future.

Here, in the tug of war between “I give up” and “there is yet hope,” the latter wins out. In this vision, Jeremiah transforms the perpetually dissatisfied Rachel into Mother of Hope. In much the same way that “*the world is born*” in our prayerbook is a radical reworking of Jeremiah’s grotesque image of his dead mother “pregnant forever,” Rachel as mother of hope is a radical reworking of Rachel’s actual life. Rachel’s perpetual sense of lack— as well as her keen awareness

of how the world should be— become admirable qualities. We learn from Rachel that our cries of protest, of discontent, actually make a difference. They represent hope and sustain us in our work towards a better future.

And this is the message of Rosh Hashanah that makes sense to me this year. No matter how much pessimism we may carry, no matter how easy it is for fear to overtake us, we must hold onto hope and the possibility of renewal. No less than the matriarch Rachel — who herself died in childbirth — is saying that we cannot give up. *HaYom Harat Olam*. Today the world is born. Today we once again go through the birth canal.

Just as the knowledge that I was getting closer to my destination kept me going on my harrowing trip to New Jersey, it is our ability to hold onto hope today that will give us strength to proceed. Taking inspiration from the inconsolable Rachel, we must not accept the world as it is — but demand more, always believing in the promise of redemption. *Hayom Harat Olam*. Today the world is born. We will yet make it through the birth canal. No less than the matriarch Rachel is rooting for us.

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