[Preamble: There's a little audience participation in this dvar Torah. I need you to say three Hebrew words at the appropriate time. I'll teach them to you now. Repeat after me: *Mah. Yafeh. Ha'olam*. OK, now you're ready.]

I see trees of green, red roses too. I see them bloom, for me and you, and I think to myself: what a wonderful world. Va'omer l'atzmi: mah yafeh ha'olam!

What a wonderful world. It is so good to be together, here at Betenu, and to be connected to remote participants who would not otherwise be able to join in. To share this holiday in community is really special. What a wonderful world indeed.

Our High Holiday prayer book sometimes calls Rosh Hashanah the birthday of the world, *hayom harat olam*. The Sfat Emet, an 18th century Hasidic master, wrote, "The people of Israel must celebrate Rosh Hashanah because the world is renewed."

I don't know about you, but I love birthdays! It's not just because I really appreciate a good cupcake (although I definitely do) but also because I appreciate the chance to talk to friends and family from near and far; to bring my year into focus; to reflect on how fortunate I am to live the life I live. On my birthday, even more than at other times, I really notice what a wonderful world this is.

So, how is Rosh Hashanah the birthday of the world? Let's look at those three things, those birthday characteristics, one by one. First, connecting with people we care about. Well, here we are! Despite all the limitations of covid and other challenges, we are able to celebrate together, whether in the room or on zoom. After the past few years, it's easy to recognize the minor miracle that this is. I for one, hope I never take it for granted again, how meaningful it is to be *together* to mark the holidays.

How about birthday characteristic #2: bringing the past year into focus. The short answer is yes, of course! This is the season of *teshuvah* (return): the time in the Jewish calendar when we look at the past year and ask ourselves the hard questions. Have I lived up to my values? How have I approached the various roles I inhabit: child / parent / friend / partner / student / teacher / and so on? Have I been the kind of child / parent / friend / partner / student / teacher / and so on that I wanted to be? Have I shown up for the people who needed me? Have I done my work for the causes that matter to me? Have I only **talked** about giving *tzedakah* and doing volunteer work and treading more lightly on the planet, or have I actually done what I said I would do? Have I told the people who matter to me how much I love them? Have I shown them?

But *teshuvah* is not only behavioral. It is also about returning to values and ideas that are important to us, that we may have drifted away from in the rush of our busy lives. It's about returning to a sense of ourselves that we recognize. The tides of life can pull us in directions we

don't intend, without our even realizing it, until we look up and notice that we're not where we thought we were. While I plan to say more about the behavior aspect of *teshuvah* next week, today I am thinking of this subtler side, the way we can lose track of the values that lead us to a wholesome life. This kind of losing track doesn't necessarily look like "sin" as we might picture it, but it does erode our sense of self. So asking ourselves what our values really are is important; it's sorta like tuning our instruments, or returning to our factory settings.

Which brings me to the third item on the birthday checklist: locating and expressing gratitude for the life we live. For me, this is where the image of the world as a newborn really comes alive, so to speak. Think about babies, actual babies. The sense of wonder and awe that they bring to everything they encounter is a spiritual teaching in itself. Though my sons are teenagers now (and Gideon is probably not going to like this sentence very much), I can still picture both him and Akiva as babies, their eyes wide with amazement at the whole entire world. (They were adorable!) And, when I let them, they were my teachers, showing me about being present with the moment, and about feeling deeply satisfied with exactly where and when and who I was. Their entire beings were aligned with their surroundings and, as long as their basic needs were being met, they exuded wonder and contentment.

So… does Rosh Hashanah bring us into that space of awe and reverence? Obviously I think the answer is yes or I wouldn't have built my talk on this particular metaphor. But I think and hope that you also can see the ways in which being together, reciting our tradition's ancient words, hearing Howard sing melodies that evoke both individual and communal history can bring about a feeling of gratitude and awe.

What *distinguishes* the gratitude and awe of Rosh Hashanah, though, is its moral dimension. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20th century scholar, writer, and activist, wrote: "Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin. Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious [person's] attitude toward history and nature." By Heschel's lights, when we become indifferent to the marvels of this world, we become indifferent to God. On the other hand, tuning into a sense of wonderment opens the channel that connects us to the Divine. When we see—*really see*—God's wonders, we perhaps see more of God.

People who say the traditional morning prayers say on a daily basis:

הַמְחַדֵּשׁ בְּטוּבוֹ בְּכָל־יוֹם תָּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית

calling God "the One who every single day renews the works of creation in goodness." On this 5783rd birthday of the world, I want to pause to consider just how profound those words are. As Betsy chanted just a few minutes ago, God creates the plants and animals in such a way that, left

undisturbed, they are self-perpetuating. Our world is designed to continue and flourish and blossom, season after season, century after century.

Yet lately I have also been reflecting on another aspect of God's renewal of the works of creation. As Sara chanted, God's starting point is somewhat inauspicious. The Torah tells us:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ׃
וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם׃

At the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ and darkness covered the face of the depth, and the spirit of God shimmered over the face of the waters.

That phrase תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ—variously translated as, "unformed and void," or "welter and waste," or "confusion and chaos," or "unformed and desolate," suggests an unsettling, mysterious setting, all dark and damp. The landscape, if you can even call it that, feels watery and hopeless. And yet from this, God creates a magnificent world, day by day adding onto the list of extraordinary phenomena. The Torah says it is made in six days; the prayer book adds that it is remade every day, rain or shine.

In a world wearied by pandemic, war, social upheavals, and long-brewing injustices, it is a source of great hope to consider this divine capacity. That God can start from confusion and chaos and renew a wonderful world each day tells us something about the nature of rebuilding. Even when we ourselves are in confusion and chaos, when we feel reduced to watery, hopeless nothingness, we can always begin cleaning up the mess and starting again. Setting things in their places and turning the lights back on.

So my blessing for you, here in the room and joining from faraway, is that whatever welter and waste you may be facing, that you can face it with a little more ease by seeing yourself, formed from dust and starlight in the image of God, sweeping up the mess and starting afresh, and seeing the world, this wonderful world, as the gift that it is, waiting to be opened.

Shanah tovah umetukah—may this be a year of goodness and sweetness.