

Erev Rosh haShanah 5776: Yom HaZikharon – What Memory Means on Rosh haShanah  
*Based on a teaching by my Teacher and friend R. Sharon Cohen Anisfeld*

Let's start with the basics: this is a confusing holiday with many different names and meanings. I am going to go over some of these names and meanings and settle on something I hope will help you connect to the grandeur of this season of *Yamim Norahim*, Awesome Days.

The clearest meaning of this day is a direct translation of *Rosh haShanah* "Head of the Year" Jewish New Years! That's a good place to start. One of the main themes of *Rosh haShanah* is "New Beginnings." As we just read, and will read again in the Shofarot section of Musaf:

*Tiku b'khodesh shofar, bKehseh l'Yom khagaynu* (Psalms 81:4-5)

"Sound the shofar on the new moon when (the moon) is hidden."

This is the only Jewish holiday that begins when the moon is hidden – at the beginning of the month (Bavli RH 8a) meaning we are now in the dark and the little sliver of moon that set just a few minutes after the sun tonight, will grow and grow until it is full on the first night of Sukkot – two weeks from now.

*Like* other holidays, *Rosh haShanah* commemorates an important event. Passover commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, Shavuot – receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai. *Yom Kippur*, the day when Moses came down the mountain with the second set of tablets and the people were forgiven for the sin of the golden calf. And *Rosh haShanah* is the anniversary of .... the sixth day of creation - the creation of the human being. This also makes *Rosh haShanah* distinct in being the only commemoration in the Jewish calendar of a universal event, something that was not specific to the Jewish people. In that sense *Rosh haShanah* is the most universalistic holiday in the calendar.

This theme of new beginnings is also a theme of pregnancy, literal and metaphoric. Our *Torah* and *Haftarah* readings tomorrow are both stories of women: Sarah and Hannah, who struggle desperately with the challenge of becoming pregnant. Except for Leah, *all* of the matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, struggled to become pregnant. According to a midrash [R. Eliezar Bavli R"H 11a] all three conceived on *Rosh haShanah*. In the liturgy tomorrow and Tuesday we say three times *haYom Harat Olam* "Today the world is conceived" alluding back to the pregnant possibilities created by the beginning of humanity.

While the commemoration of the sixth day of creation makes *Rosh haShanah* universal, there is a very particular rabbinic vision of that sixth day of creation. Reading the second chapter of Genesis, there is not a clear sense of duration, of how long the first humans live in the garden before they transgress the rule – (the ONE rule!) and are kicked out. In the midrash however, everything happens on that first day. Gd's decision to create humanity, consultations with the angels (who by the way think it's a terrible idea), the physical

formation of *Adam* and breathing life into that form, placing *Adam* in the garden, dividing *Adam* into two parts, male and female, giving instructions about not eating from the tree, the violation of that one simple rule, punishment and forgiveness all occur on that sixth day of creation, the first *Rosh haShanah*. (Lev Raba 29;1)

Over and over the words we say during this time of year assert that this is a pregnant moment, full of possibility, when we can affect what will be in the coming year. This theme of birth and possibility is linked to another theme: judgment. The renewal and potential for rebirth is because of a profound reckoning with the threat of punishment for our misdeeds, and the promise of forgiveness. Life hangs in the balance because we are being judged, and if we make it through, it is as if we are reborn into new possibilities. *haYom Harat Olam* "Today the world is conceived." The prayer continues: *haYom ya'amid b'mishpat col yitsuray olamim* "Today all creatures are made to stand in judgment." Indeed another name for *Rosh haShanah* is *Yom haDin*, the day of judgment. So we have beginnings *and* endings.

Balancing the theme of birth and new beginnings; the theme of judgment is about death and endings. As we will chant tomorrow "on *Rosh haShanah* it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die" and then we hear an elaboration on *all* the ways that might happen. Birth and potential on the one hand and judgment and death on the other – *Rosh haShanah* is the festival that focuses on the bit picture, both beginnings and endings. So this new beginning is like the way people might adopt a second birthday when they are finally free from a disease or other danger. Or, another way to think of it, we are tried, convicted and sentenced, and then pardoned and released. The release is a new beginning but it's a new beginning with a history.

I will talk more about beginnings tomorrow, and endings on Yom Kippur. This evening I want to focus on what's in between; the common messy middle where we spend most of our time. That does *Rosh haShanah* say about that? The middle in this case, the thing that mediates between new beginning and the finality of judgment is *teshuvah*, "turning and returning" – a particular kind of repentance and reconciliation. *Teshuvah* is a collective effort to help us "fix our business" with those we might have wronged. This means *recognition*, *acknowledgement*, and *change* so we will never repeat that mistake again.

This takes work, attention and accounting. The first step is reviewing relationships over the year, going over past deeds and asking the questions: "Where have I sinned? or "missed the mark" made mistakes? and not lived up to my hopes and expectations? All that requires memory. And this brings us to the theme of *remembering*. *Rosh haShanah* is also called *Yom haZikaron* – The day of Re-remembering, re-collecting and re-calling. Between our beginnings and endings we try to remember and figure out what we've done and how we can do better.

This moment in the middle, between the wonderful potential of beginnings and the anxiety of judgment and endings, is analogous to that same moment in the Garden on the first *Rosh haShanah*. Our first ancestors have eaten from the tree of knowledge and are hiding. Gd calls out: *AyEka*h – “where are you?” Here’s a general principle: When Gd or an angel asks a question, it is not to learn something but to teach. *That* moment is *this* moment: *AyEka*h – “where are you?” To answer that question, we need to pay attention and remember.

The epicenter of the *Yom haZikharon* – “The Day of Remembrance” aspect of *Rosh haShanah* is in the special section of *Zikhronot* “Remembrances” that are part of the *Musaf* service late tomorrow morning.

Just to remind you what happens; there are three of these special sections: *Makhuyot* “Kingship”, *Zikhronot* “Remembrances” and *Shofarot* “Sound of the Shofar.” Each section begins with a *piyyut* a sung liturgical poem and then an introduction to the theme followed by three sets of three biblical verses, first from Torah, then psalms and then prophets, followed by a final culminating blessing. Then a series of Shofar calls and then we sing *HaYom Harat Olam haYom ya’amid b’mishpat* – *today the world is conceived today the world is made to stand in judgment*.

*Teshuvah* certainly requires *our* remembering. In making *teshuvah* one is required to understand and articulate what happened and take responsibility. In fact, there are six times in the Torah we are specifically commanded to remember something – Shabbat, the Exodus from Egypt, Sinai revelation, etc [Amelek, desert rebellion, Miriam being stricken] however, none of these appear in *Zikhronot*. The liturgy does not describe *our* remembering, but the abstract idea of Gd remembering.

The first three selections in *Zikhronot*, from the *Torah*, refer to Gd remembering Noah, the animals and the earth during the flood (after the flood Gd makes a covenant with Noah) and then the next two are two instances of Gd remembering the covenant with Avraham, Isaac and Jacob. But it is not just the Torah verses. All of this section is focused on the mutual expectations and relationship between humanity and Gd, the Creator, the Unifying Consciousness of the Cosmos – however you conceive of it. The key to the meaning of the theme of remembering is the *khatimah*, the culmination of the blessing the Blessed are you Adonai, *Zakhor haBrit*. Gd is “the One who remembers the covenant.” In other words, Gd is remembering the relationship.

So if Gd is remembering the covenant, I think it begs the question, what are *we* remembering? *We* are also supposed to be focused on the big picture: How do we want to be in the world? and Where are we in our relationships?

This is *Yom haZikharon* when Gd is recalling us. We are being re-called. I mean that in two ways. re-called in the way the midrash says that “Every day a voice goes out from Sinai” meaning every day revelation and transformation are possible. There is some debate about what that voice is saying, perhaps, as the *Zohar* says it is calling: “Make teshuvah you mischievous children!” (Jeremiah 3:22) or as my teacher Art Green suggests it is still asking the question: *Ayekah* - Where are you?

The Day of Remembrance means we are being “re-called” to a higher purpose, and we have, again, another opportunity to respond to that call. AND, a second meaning of being “recalled” that requires more humility: We are “recalled” in the way cars are recalled - because of a potentially harmful deficiency requiring repair. You, are being recalled.

Are we fully present in our relationships with family and friends? With the natural world? With creation? Of course not! Most of us are there in flashes, in fits and starts we can wake up and remember what deep connection feels like.

I talked to a friend whose daughter is 14 years old and his head is spinning with all the changes she is going through and the challenge of connecting with her. There was some incident involving her cell phone which was then confiscated for 24 hours and he said “it was like we got our daughter back” It was a dramatic case of “Oh, I remember you. I like you!” That we often experience with those with whom we are in relationship (and even with ourselves) if we can just carve out some quiet and pay attention.

Gd is re-calling us to awareness of deep connection and living purposefully with awareness of past and future, of beginnings and endings. This sentiment and plea for our attention is expressed in a challenging verse from Ecclesiastes. I will refer back to this verse tomorrow and on *Yom Kippur*. It begins with the phrase: *Zakhor et Borehka* “Remember your Creator”:

Kohelet 12:1 Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no delight in them.”

Remember your Creator. Attend to the big picture in your life and how you want to be in this world before a crisis, before you are shaken. Remember your creator, *Zakhor et Borehka*.

On this is *Yom haZikharon*, “Day of Remembering”, I hope you will take some time to reconnect. I hope you will take some time to reflect on the idea of Gd *re-calling* us, and the advice to “Remember your Creator” and think about how we want to be in this world and how we want to be in our relationships in the broadest possible context, aware of beginnings and endings.

May you have the awareness of being re-called and meet the challenge in this messy middle is to wake up again to your sacred potential.

*Shanah tovah u'Mitukah tikatayvu!*

May you do whatever you can to sign up for a good and sweet year.