

## The work of the rest of our lives

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*Hayom harat* olam. Today the world was created. So much so that some Reform congregations replace the traditional Torah readings about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, with Genesis chapter 1, the creation story. The themes of creation and of God as Sovereign and Judge over the entire world flow seamlessly one into the other. As Creator, God is naturally the One empowered to rule over creation and to judge it. And conversely, by judging creation and finding it worthy, God sustains and recreates the world anew each day, as we say in the first blessing before Shma, *hamechadesh betuvo bechol yom tamid ma'aseh bereshit*—“each day, in divine goodness, God renews the work of creation.”

God uses three main tools in doing so: Divine speech—“Let there be light.” Acts of organizing—water here, land here; sun, moon, and stars to distinguish days, months, and years; different kinds of animals in their appropriate habitats. And moral judgment—“God saw that it was good.”

These modes of creation are especially remarkable when viewed against the backdrop of other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories, where the gods create the world largely through sexual reproduction and violence. In the Babylonian creation story, the *Enuma Elish*, for instance, Tiamat is the name of the primordial sea monster-mother-dragon. Her son Marduk, who becomes the chief god, kills Tiamat and creates the heaven and earth out of the two halves of her body.

But this sort of violence, and Tiamat herself, hover just below the surface of our biblical text. “*V’ha’aretz hayta tohu vavohu, v’choshech al p’nei tehom.*” The earth was void and unformed, with darkness over the deep. Bible scholars and linguists assert that *tehom*, right there in the Torah’s second verse, is a cognate of Tiamat. According to this view, the ancient Israelites incorporated the Tiamat-Marduk myth, because it was too powerful to ignore, while also asserting that our God was much more powerful than the Babylonians’. Marduk needed trickery and a bow and arrow to overcome his powerful mother Tiamat, but for Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey, she becomes a depersonalized force of nature to be subdued with a word.

Even if this historical view of the Torah is not your cup of tea, if you believe in the Torah as literal word-for-word divine revelation, there are plenty of hints of this cosmic struggle in other parts of the Bible. Psalm 74:13-14 says to God,

it was You who drove back the sea with Your might,  
who smashed the heads of the monsters [*taninim*] in the waters;  
it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan.

Perhaps more familiarly, there is Psalm 104, the Psalm for Rosh Chodesh, which starts off with a poetic replay of the Genesis 1 creation story. Verses 5-7 tell us:

[God] established the earth on its foundations,  
so that it shall never totter.

You made *tehom* cover it as a garment;  
the waters stood above the mountains.

They fled at Your blast,  
rushed away at the sound of Your thunder,

And, just to show this isn’t just some quirk of Psalms, take the end of Job. In chapter 38:8-11, God reminds Job that God set limits for the sea. In chapter 40, verses 25ff, God makes clear that only God can master the mighty Leviathan.

*Tehom, Tanin, Livyatan...* these are mythic ocean creatures, personified forces of chaos. Our tradition tries to suppress it, but there are unmistakable echoes here of a primordial battle between God and chaos.

*Hamechadesh betuvo b'chol yom tamid ma'aseh bereshit.* God renews each day this work of creation, reestablishing the dominance of order over chaos.

Maimonides, with his concept of an unchanging, incorporeal, ever-perfect philosopher's God, would be appalled by what I've just been telling you. He would say the Psalms and Job are all allegory. But the Kabbalists had a different take. They made room, in their complex and multifaceted understanding of God, for both a perfect unchanging divinity and a divinity that needs our help to keep the world in working order. Mitzvot—right behavior in alignment with divine will and purpose—charge up the battery of divine action, so to speak, to keep chaos at bay.

I have a classmate from rabbinical school, Hal Schevitz, who once told us that this is how he understands theodicy, which is the problem of how bad things can happen in a world governed by a good God. Hal is now the associate rabbi of a large Reconstructionist congregation in Indianapolis, and we haven't been in touch in years, but this memory stuck with me. He believes—or he did twelve years ago—that those forces of chaos still lurk beneath the surface of God's order, probing and prodding for a way to burst forth. When they do, an individual dies in a car accident, or drought breaks out and starves millions, until God is able to put chaos back in its place and slam the door.

This memory of Hal and his theory of chaos was triggered for me late last fall, after the midterm elections, by a comment that our own Saul Austerlitz made. We were standing at the corner of Church and Ocean one afternoon, waiting for the school bus as we've done together for years, and he said something to the effect of: "This is the work of the rest of our lives."

He was talking about getting involved in politics: volunteering for the candidates who share our values, getting involved in local organizing movements, doing everything we can to participate in the democratic process to achieve the results we want.

Here it is, 2023, an off-year for elections, and I initially thought I might not have to give a political sermon for once. Perhaps I could take a break, speak about something different, and come back to social issues next year.

And then Saul articulated for me something I guess I'd known for a while but was having trouble accepting. There is no off year.

Let me be really clear here, for those of you squirming uncomfortably, hearing that kind of talk from the bimah on Rosh Hashanah. I'm not here to tell you which party or which candidate to vote for. I'm saying, whatever your values or preferences or allegiance are, there are candidates out there, up and down the ballot, that need you every year. There are organizing campaigns that know they won't win an election this cycle but are doing the work anyway, talking to voters and candidates, building power slowly, because they know they have to lose a few times before they can win decisively.

"This is the work of the rest of our lives" turns out to be a pretty decent translation of *Hamechadesh b'tuvo b'chol yom tamid ma'aseh bereshit.*

Until 2016, there was a sort of complacency in many corners of the American body politic. It was articulated by political philosopher Francis Fukuyama in his infamous 1992 book *The End*

*of History and the Last Man*—basically, that liberal democracy is the end-stage of human social evolution, and we had arrived in the Promised Land. Barack Obama's election seemed to confirm it.

If only it were true.

It's now become abundantly clear that democracy in the United States is much more fragile than we thought. Human rights in this country—which have never been as widely spread or as robust as they should be—are more fragile and susceptible than we thought they were. We can't afford to take them for granted. The human forces of chaos are constantly on the move, seeking places to break through and dominate us. When we fight them, we can't guarantee victory, but we win more than we lose. And when we don't show up, we lose for sure.

So this is not a battle cry. It is not an exhortation to leave it all on the field and go home exhausted but content. (Don't worry, you'll likely hear that from me next year, in some form or other.) It's a call for something quieter, more long-term: a reorientation, a new idea of what normal means. This is the work of the rest of our lives. *Hamechadesh betuvo b'chol yom tamid ma'aseh bereshit.*

The same tools that God uses in creation are available to us. Words—The words we say when we phone-bank, when we knock on doors and speak with potential voters, when we call our representatives, when we even run for office ourselves. Organizing—whether that is done with databases, with house meetings, with sorting placards and lawn signs into piles. Moral judgment, without which none of it is possible.

When we use those tools, we can start to reclaim politics from elites who seem far away and unreachable. It's easy to feel like politics is really big: Millions of dollars spent, thousands of professional consultants and campaigners, giant corporations and media conglomerates having their say. It's easy to feel small. What can I, one little person do?

But this is fundamentally how politics happens. Two dads talking at a bus stop. A group of concerned carpooling to Pennsylvania. Ties that bind us together.

And that brings me back to our Torah readings for today and tomorrow. As much as I love Genesis 1—it sends shivers down my back every year when we read it on Simchat Torah morning—the traditional readings put much more juice in my battery for Rosh Hashanah. When we read about creation, we're not in the picture. We're spectators, watching God work in ways that we can't truly fathom. We come along at the very end, when the world is ready, to take our place as rulers. That's not how we learn to transform the world. In the battle for civilization, spectators lose.

But reading about Sarah and Abraham casting Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert, about Abraham's treaty with Avimelech, about the binding of Isaac—these put us in the driver's seat. How do families negotiate conflict? How do neighbors make agreements to share resources? How do faith and trust guide us through hard times? And, yes, how do people let each other down bitterly and poison their closest relationships potentially beyond repair? These inspire us. These offer us models to follow or avoid. These show us how our actions have consequences.

So, Shanah tovah. 2023 is not an off year. It's an on year, like every year for the rest of our lives. Just as God renews the work of creation every day, so too must we put forth our energies every day, every month, every year, to participate in creating the world that we want to live in and want to bequeath to our descendants.