

# Ha-Yom Harat Olam: Celebrating the World's Birthday

Sara R. Horowitz

HA-YOM HARAT OLAM! – TODAY THE WORLD was birthed! — we proclaim repeatedly in the Rosh Hashanah service. Today marks the day that we, and all of the world that we inhabit, first came into being.

Such is the consensus of our sages. Rabbi Eliezer is even more specific. He notes that the act of creation began on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Elul (B. ROSH HASHANAH 8a). Rosh Hashanah is thus the anniversary of the sixth day of creation, the birth of humankind. This day Adam and Hava sprang into being, birthed by the Creator herself. Today is not so much the world's birthday as it is *our* world's birthday.

So why, then, a day of prayer and not one of wild celebration? Why inaugurate ten days of solemn introspection, and not a ten-day birthday bash?

Why not something more akin to the Gregorian New Year — a real birthday party, with funny hats, horns, noisemakers; the emblem of a wee baby New Year replacing the aged spent year; a list of resolutions that tie the beginning of a New Year to notions of rebirth — all this, with the perpetual promise of renewal, starting afresh, starting clean and unburdened by a past.

But Judaism has never been big on birthdays, as my colleague Ruby Newman often reminds me. While our secular culture commemorates birthdays of the great and powerful, Judaism marks *yahrzeits*, the anniversaries of deaths. Instead of riotous celebration, our New Year features a liturgy with three central themes: *malkhuyot* (sovereignty), *zikhronot* (memories), and *shofarot* (blasts of the ram's horn). This seems fitting as a birthday meditation, however sober: *malkhuyot* honors our creator (who birthed us), *zikhronot*

highlights remembrances (birthdays as milestones), and *shofarot* evokes horns and noisemakers for carousing.

But there is a tension in the ways that our tradition views Rosh Hashanah. While it is described, on the one hand, as *harat olam*, the world's birth, it is also called *yom ha-din*, the day of judgment. What is the relationship between Rosh Hashanah as birthday commemoration, and Rosh Hashanah as inauguration of solemn assembly?

The name *yom ha-din* suggests that we might see Rosh Hashanah not so much as a birthday celebration, but as a performance review, conducted annually on the date of hire — that is to say, the day we were created. You and the boss go through past year's performance, coming face to face with where it was lackluster and not up to par, and noting with pride the few standout moments. Rather than getting the dreaded pink slip, you hope to be continued on for another year, however tentative and probationary. The job, of course, is life, Jewish life, and the job description is performance of mitzvot, or, in other words, fulfilling your obligations to God, other people, the planet.

This idea of Rosh Hashanah as performance review resonates with the opening mishnah of *Masechet Rosh Hashanah*. The mishnah begins by listing the four new years of the Jewish calendar cycle: Rosh Hashanah, Tu Bishvat, Pesach, and the first of Elul. The one we celebrate as Rosh Hashanah on the first of Tishrei is the world's birthday, considered the New Year for people, animals, and legal contracts.

ארבעה ראשי שנים הם: באחד בניסן ראש השנה למלכים  
ולרגלים באחד באלול ראש השנה למעשר בהמה...באחד  
בתשרי ראש השנה לשנים ולשמיטים וליובלות ולנטיעה  
ולירקות באחד בשבט ראש השנה לאילן כדברי בית שמאי בית  
הלל אומרים בחמשה עשר בו:

There are four New Year days. The first of Nisan is the New Year for kings and for festivals. The first of Elul is the New Year for cattle-tithing....The first of Tishrei is the New Year for years, and for sabbaticals and the jubilee, and also for planting trees and herbs. On the first day of Shevat is the New Year for trees, according to the school of Shammai; but the school of Hillel says it is on the fifteenth [of the month].

The Gemara elaborates upon the significance of these new year designations. For example, when stating the year of a particular king's reign, each first of Nisan begins a new year. This clarifies the dating of legal and financial documents. A loan or a mortgage, for instance, would be struck or come due in the *n*th year of So and So's reign. Similarly, the first of Nisan begins the cycle of three annual pilgrimage festivals that mark the passage of a complete year. This is relevant to determining whether someone has fulfilled a vow or other obligation in the time stipulated. According to our tradition, a full cycle of festivals, beginning with Pesach, must have passed before one is considered remiss, a grace period instituted by the Talmud.

In a similar manner, we would use Tu Bishvat, the trees' new year, to determine the age of a tree, since the Bible prohibits eating its fruits until the third year. We would use the first of Elul to calculate the total debt owed annually on cattle tithings, basing it on cattle holdings from the first of Elul in one year to the first of Elul in the next.

These four new years, then, essentially serve fiscal, administrative purposes, not spiritual ones. They are akin to the contemporary concepts of calendar year, tax year, and fiscal year, which may or may not coincide but must be maintained consistently.

But Judaism being Judaism, fiscal matters get tied to matters of the spirit. In addition to four new years, our tradition also recognizes four days of judgment. The second mishnah in *Masechet Rosh Hashanah* states:

בארבעה פרקים העולם נידון: בפסח, על התבואה, בעצרת, על פירות האילן. בראש השנה, כל באי עולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון...ובחג, נידונים על המים.

At four periods in each year the world is judged: on Pesach, with respect to the grain; on Shavuot, with respect to the fruit of trees; on New Year's Day all human beings pass before Him as sheep before a shepherd...; and on Sukkot, judgment is given with regard to water.

Taken together, these two *mishnayot* — the one on the new years, and the other on judgment — articulate the two pulls of Rosh Hashanah, as birthday (anniversary of coming into being) and as evaluation (determination of destiny). These two aspects come together liturgically in the *malkhuyot*

section of the liturgy, with the focus on God as creator and sovereign. You might say that the thrust of the liturgy is anti-narcissistic, asking that on your birthday you focus not on yourself, but on your creator, parent, and — by implication — on your charge or mission.

Spiritually speaking, ideas of birth and the marking of birthdays suggest the promise of rebirth. They generally involve rituals that concretize and symbolize the possibility of letting go of things past, in order to recreate the *tabula rasa* we were at our first birth into this world, when we were all promise, all potential.

Indeed, the Gregorian New Year is all about rebirth. It is fitting that it be so. Located in the darkness of winter, it overlays Christian ideas of the death and resurrection of the Christian deity with earlier pagan ideas of death and resurrection in nature. The horns and noisemakers scare away the ghosts, and symbolically reawaken the dead to the promise of new life, the cycle of seasons, the spiritual awakening (as we ourselves hope to be awakened).

On Rosh Hashanah, our rituals, too, entice us with the possibility of rebirth, but immediately complicate it. Rosh Hashanah utilizes many of the universal symbols and rituals associated with rebirth, but gives them a twist that makes clear that this is no simple case of being born again as a *tabula rasa*. For example, water figures importantly in rebirth rituals, linked symbolically both with emergence from amniotic fluid and the separation of waters from land in the creation in Genesis. There is a water ritual performed on Rosh Hashanah, as well. But instead of undergoing a baptismal immersion, we toss our sins into the waters, as we stay dry along the shore. Instead of noisemakers, we have *shofarot*, the blowing of the ram's horn. Blown throughout the preceding month (Elul), the shofar is meant to reawaken our conscience, to point us to God, to proclaim God's sovereignty. The ram's horn is linked with the Akedah, or binding of Isaac as related in Genesis 22, a more ambiguous symbol — signifying not only the potential of life, but also the possibility of death.

Most important, *zikhronot*, remembrance, is central on Rosh Hashanah. The liturgy speaks about God's memory, but also our own memory is invoked. If rebirth entails wiping the slate clean, for a new beginning, a new identity, then memory is its counterpoint. Memory insists that the self we evolve into always remain connected with, in conversation with, beholden to,

and accountable to the self we have been. The slate may be wiped, but never completely clean. Instead, it is like a pentimento, an alteration to a drawing that bears the traces of earlier drafts.

Over the past several years I have been called upon to adjudicate applications for several sets of grants and fellowships, primarily in relationship to the study of the Holocaust. Most often, there is consensus among evaluators about what constitutes a good research project. However, one particular topic causes a wide chasm of disagreement among members of the granting committees: forgiveness. The divide falls generally along religious lines. For example, a Christian theologian, a good, gentle and principled man with whom I have often worked, gives such projects top ratings. Jewish evaluators, by contrast, tend to put such projects at the bottom of their rankings, regarding them with suspicion. At first blush, one might think that this difference in judgment affirms conventions of Western culture about the two religions: Judaism, with its vengeful God, the God of Law; Christianity, with its gentle God, the God of Mercy. But it does not. The question of forgiveness, is far more complex, as we will see.

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The discourse in Western culture — even academic or civic culture — about forgiveness reflects Christian ideas of forgiveness as the ultimate imperative, a sacred act of *imitatio dei*. Like grace, one receives forgiveness not because of anything one has done — indeed, one is powerless to call forgiveness upon oneself — but because it has been lovingly and unconditionally bestowed upon the undeserving. Ideas circulating in popular psychology reflect this valorization of forgiveness: to “move on” from some damaging or traumatic event, you need to “forgive” someone who has wronged you, otherwise you remain stuck in your anger, in your trauma, in your wounding. You must forgive yourself for wrongs you’ve done, so you are not mired in your

past, so you do not remain captive to the self you once were, but free yourself to become the self you can become. You cannot forgive others until you forgive yourself; you cannot forgive yourself until you forgive others. Forgiveness becomes a kind of rebirth. Like being born again, for both the forgiver and the one forgiven, it becomes a way of wiping the slate clean.

My Christian colleagues are moved by research projects with forgiveness at the center, according to them, almost reflexively, a measure of profundity and importance. My Jewish colleagues and I, on the other hand, ask: Who is forgiving whom? On what basis? Is the forgiveness merited? Was it sincerely sought? Is it even desirable? Is it always good to forgive or to be forgiven? For my Christian colleagues, forgiveness is an ultimate and absolute good. For my Jewish colleagues, it is a cipher, to be probed, taken apart, and examined from all angles, before possibly being incorporated and admitted.

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As Jews, we see forgiveness not as a manifestation of divine grace, but as the culmination of a struggle, the end point of difficult inner work that results in behavioral change and gestures of restitution. Forgiveness as an imperative, bestowed without being earned or even sought, may strike us as superficial, rather than life-changing. Our tradition links forgiveness with process, with repentance. Jewish practice is to seek the forgiveness, prior to Yom Kippur, of someone we have wronged, acknowledging and attempting to compensate for any damage done. If need be, we are enjoined to keep coming back to the person wronged, to convince him of the sincerity of our contrition, and our resolution to change. Only then does our tradition stipulate forgiveness as an absolute imperative. As such, forgiveness is the product of a relationship between the one wronged and the one who did wrong.

The Jewish concept of forgiveness differs from the Christian ideal of turning the other cheek. Like the Christian ideal, ours, too, presents a model of *imitatio dei*. But the Jewish paradigm of forgiveness is not a unilateral move that flows from the one to the other, unsought or undeserved. Absent a relationship — that is, without the negotiation of regret and acknowledgement of

wrong, without the interaction of the two parties — forgiveness is not an innate good. And, indeed, why should it be? A unilateral and non-dialogic forgiveness may serve to keep one party above the other. Rather, to use the common psychological parlance, we might allow for the possibility of “moving on” without forgiving. There is, after all, a rightness to calling deliberate hurtfulness, abuse, or evil by name. And surely one can remember a hurt without being obsessed with it.

The Torah and Haftarah readings for Rosh Hashanah manifest an ambiguous attitude towards forgiveness (which is often withheld): Sarah towards Hagar and her son; Isaac, whom we never see with Abraham after the Akedah until he buries his father in the cave; Hannah, who, even amid the joy of a long awaited son, cannot forgive the (real or imagined) taunts of the other, more fertile wife. And, although during the ten days that begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur, we yearn for and plead for, forgiveness, the brand of forgiveness that is tendered does not wipe the slate completely clean.

In a debate in the Talmud about just how God’s mercy is achieved on the High Holidays, the school of Hillel utilizes the metaphor of the balance — the celestial scale of justice on which one side are placed a person’s merits, and the other side, his sins. Beit Hillel says: “He who is full of compassion will incline the scale of justice to the side of mercy.” The Gemara wonders about the mechanics of this loading of the scales. Just how does God make one side outweigh the other, in contradiction to the actual weight of deeds? According to R. Eliezer, God leans down, as it were, on the side of the scale that contains our virtues, so they become weightier. By contrast, R. Jose b. Hanina imagines God lightening the weight of sins by removing some from that other side of the balance. Raba notes, however, that this removal is not complete or definitive. Rather, “the sin itself is not blotted out, so that if one be found in later times with more sins (than virtues), the sin not blotted out will be added to the later ones...” (B. ROSH HASHANAH 17a) Thus, the sin removed lingers in a kind of limbo state, both absent and present, forgiven but only provisionally, and subject to recall and reinstatement.

This concrete way of imagining God’s mercy — bestowed but with a potential expiry — resonates with what we know of human experience, memory, and relations. Every person, every family, every relationship, every community has a past. This past defines it, makes it who or what it is. Our

forgivenesses are both asked for and tendered on a human plane, in human time and space, with our memories intact, rather than on some abstract and impossible plane where all is wiped clean. Between the birthing of the world — *harat olam* — (which is also our birth as humanity) and the final day of judgment — *yom ha-din* — is the span of human life, and the compendium of the experiences that make us human, that make us capable of genuine compassion.

Raba adds an exception to the general rule that sins removed from the scales of justice may be restored at a later date: when a person responds compassionately to someone who has wronged him, he defers for an indefinite period the restitution of his own sins to the heavenly balance. If we act with compassion, we are treated with compassion.

My purpose here is not to argue against forgiveness, but to cast it differently. Let us uncouple compassion from forgiveness, if only momentarily. Contemporary culture links them tightly, treating them either as synonymous (to be compassionate is to forgive) or as causality (we are compassionate, and so we inevitably forgive). I wish to distinguish between a concept of forgiveness that erases the past and one that insists upon it. Raba's metaphor enables us to imagine something in between, something paradoxical: a memory that is both erased and not erased, both absent and present, vanished but waiting in the wings. Casting it in this way emphasizes a certain tentativeness to forgiveness, both human and divine.

If compassion is not identical to forgiveness, what is it? It entails an acknowledgement of the complexity of the other. We can feel for the other, we can feel *with* the other, even those we may not forgive. There is a humble knowingness inherent to this — something about ourselves, as well as about others. The “forgiven” sin that may or may not remain so, that may or may not return to the celestial balance, is like the past that may be overcome but at the same time remains with us. Rosh Hashanah plays with the motif of rebirth: we cast off our sins into water, but at the same time we carry our past with us. Rather than the image of the *tabula rasa*, the slate wiped clean at the moment of rebirth, there remains always a residue, a trace — or at least a trace of a trace — of who one was, where one has been, what one has done — whose ultimate fading or reinscription remains endlessly undetermined and deferred during our lifetime. Every moment, then, is fraught. Every moment is potentially a crossroads.

We share a birthday with all humanity, with all creation. Born together, we carry forth our separate and our collective pasts. May our shared birthday help us find paths towards inner, communal, and global understanding, compassion, and peace.



**SARA R. HOROWITZ** is the co-editor of *Kerem*, the author of *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction*, and co-editor of *Encounters with Appelfeld*. She is Director of the Centre for Jewish Studies at York University, where she teaches literature.