

Dahlia Shaham

For a few months now, I've known this moment was coming – that at some point during Rosh Hashana services I will be invited to the Bimah to give a Drasha, to say something substantial, engaging, but not too long, and not too philosophic, about this moment, of a new beginning, and the traditions that have brought us here together. I've had time to think, and prepare, figure out what I wanted to say, and how to say it - yet last night, late last night, I was still writing, and deleting, still unclear about the message and how to convey it.

Maybe it's because I am very excited, I feel very fortunate to be given this honor, this opportunity, that came out of nowhere, in a phone call from Libby about 9 months ago, and then gradually turned from a possibility, to a plan, to a detailed schedule, to a reality, bringing me to this moment on the first day of the new year – and I want to get it right, to do it well, and there are infinite ideas and words to choose from, and I just don't know what will be the best way to go about it.

Or maybe it's because what I want to talk about is precisely the uncertainty, vagueness, vulnerability that are inherent to anything we do for the first time. There is always the chance that it will be complete flop. But here goes.

היום הרת עולם

We recited during the shofar service and established that the accurate translation of this phrase is that this is the day on which the world is conceived. Not born, conceived. This distinction might not seem that important, but I thought it was worth to point out, especially given the Torah and Haftarah readings of today.

“ותהר ותלד שרה” – Sarah conceived and gave birth

“ותהר חנה ותלד בן” – Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son.

Why is conception significant in these two stories? And why do we read them on Rosh Hashanah?

Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, President of the Hebrew College in Boston, offers three reasons, three attributes that explain why we make the distinction between conception and birth, particularly on this day.

First – **Longing**. The emphasis on conception reminds us that both Sarah and Hannah were barren for a very long time. Longing has made them vulnerable. Longing for something – to rephrase Paul Simon – is like a window in your heart through which the wind keeps blowing. Shutting that window means giving up. For something new to happen, we must take the risk of wanting it.

The second reason – **Expecting**. Conception may begin in a single moment, but it is always a process, an elaborate process of gestation. whether in the physical sense of live beings, or in the mental or spiritual sense of ideas, dreams, ambitions. To become a reality, anything that is conceived must gestate, develop, transform. We must expect – wait, anticipate. It is hard to escape our expectations, our assumptions and thoughts about what this new creation will be.

When I was pregnant with Nouri, two or three months before he was born, a friend asked me if I've been imagining what he would be like. “Not really” I answered. “Well, you should imagine while you still can”, she said, “once he is out you won't be able to imagine he could have been anything else.”

Like the nine moons of pregnancy, nine days separate Rosh Hashanah from Yom Kippur – this is the gestation period, our time to imagine all that this year can be, before the last blow of the Shofar in Ne'ila sends it off on its journey. What year are you expecting?

The third reason, third attribute of conception brought by Rabbi Cohen Anisfeld is **inter-connectedness**. By noticing the discourse of conception, we are reminded that “we each begin our lives as part of another person”.

[A few years ago, I saw a meme on Facebook – an illustration of twin embryos engaged in a dialogue: “Do you believe in life after birth?” – “no, there is nothing beyond this world.” – “You don't believe in mother either?” – “Of course not – have you ever seen mother?”.]

When we pray for רחמים for mercy, for compassion, we speak to this notion of complete immersion, of being one with creation, all gaps between us and our loved ones bridged.

Being within the world that is being conceived, at this point in time also speaks to the notion of awe – יראה - from which the word נוראים comes from – days of awe. We are in awe of that which we cannot see or perceive. It is a good state to be in – much better than the alternative of assuming that we know what is to become.

But it is not a state in which we, or our new year's ideas, resolutions, wishes, can stay forever. Eventually we must emerge.

And if we are fortunate and conception is successful, something comes to life, becomes a reality – just like a baby, and from there on it's pure bliss. Easy.

Right?

The Torah does not present parenthood as the bright happy blissful image we see (and maybe project) in public or on social media. Sarah experiences frustration, shame and jealousy, and takes it out in cruel vengeance. Hagar experiences fear and despair and abandons her son. Avraham, with the trip he'll be taking Isaac on tomorrow, hardly deserves the "parent of the year" award. Yet, Hagar and Yishma'el were saved by a well, and Isaac saved by an angel and a ram and we are still here telling their stories.

Life is messy, painful and complicated – and yet we choose it. As we emerge into this new year, with all our good intentions, we may make terrible mistakes and bad decisions. We may have already made some of those – but we are still here. Even after we are born, מידת הרחמים -the quality of wombness, of compassion – is available to us, if we summon the strength to express what we long for, to expect and wait, and to reach out and deeply connect to our fellow human beings.

[[היום הרת עולם]]

The phrase is a quote from the prophet Jeremiah – where he speaks not of Rosh Hashanah, but of the days of his own birth, wishing his mother would have stayed pregnant forever, that he would have never been born. In its original context, this phrase marks the lowest depth of despair.

The rabbis transformed it altogether, using the same words to mean the opposite: Today the world is conceived, and therefore must be born. We might not be able to stay in that realm of boundless imagination, our choice may seem limited by our physicality, by our history – but it is still infinite compare to that which has never been born.

We are of this world. Being continuously conceived and reborn, at every moment, in every year, being given a new chance to become ourselves.]]

In the words of the poet Leah Goldberg:

Teach me, my god,

To pray and to bless

The secret of a decaying leaf

The gleam of a ripe fruit

This fact that I am free

To see, to feel, to breathe, to know, to yearn, to fail.

Teach my lips a song of blessing and of praise

As you renew your time, each morning and night,

So that my days do not seem to be all the same,

So that my day does not become a habit.

May our days be renewed as we renew ourselves, may this year be conceived with compassion.

## Dahlia Shaham: Kol Nidrei Drash

On September 26, 1983 – almost exactly 35 years ago – Colonel Stanislav Petrov arrived at his night shift in the secret bunker outside Moscow that monitored the Soviet Union's early-warning satellite system. A short time after midnight an alarm went off, reporting that ballistic nuclear missiles were making their way from the United States to the Soviet Union. This is how Petrov described the moment:

“There was absolute quiet. Suddenly an alarm was sounded and at the command station the word “launch” was lit.” The protocol obliged him to immediately report the warning to the Soviet missile launch center, which would in turn launch ballistic nuclear missiles at various targets in the United States.

But Petrov had a gut feeling that the alarm was false and decided to take the risk of disobedience and to save the world by doing the right thing, which in this case was nothing. And thus, by a one man's choice to abstain from action, the world was spared a nuclear holocaust.

It is absurd and unnerving to realize how much destruction potential humanity has created and the immense power that technology can place in the hands, really at the finger tips, of a single person.

It is even stranger to find that this notion is not altogether new. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century הרמב"ם, Maimonides wrote (Warning! Non-gender-neutral language ahead):

“It is, therefore, necessary for every man to behold himself throughout the whole year as being evenly balanced between innocence and guilt, and look upon the entire world as if evenly balanced between innocence and guilt; thus, if he commits one sin, he will overbalance himself and the whole world to the side of guilt, and be a cause of its destruction; but if he perform one duty, behold, he will overbalance himself and the whole world to the side of virtue, and bring about his own and everyone's salvation.”

Maimonides may have meant this as a metaphor, but Petrov's story makes the idea so real and irrefutable – that our actions, our decisions can change the entire world, for better or worse; that we are all connected to one another, reliant on one another. The world in which Maimonides made this observation was much less interconnected than the one we live in today, with the transportation and communication networks that link this entire globe.

In our daily lives we practice sovereignty, we value independence. Every single day we determine our own reality by an endless series of decisions: what to wear, when to go, where to go, how to go, what to say, how to say it, what to eat, what to buy, who to meet, who to call, who to text, we control the volume, amount, height, weight of various things – objects, sounds, tastes, people. Even our most trivial decisions (soy or regular milk? Blue or Orange sweater? Go swimming or jogging?) depend on the actions of numerous other people and may affect our lives and the lives of others in unforeseen yet substantial ways – Let alone the decisions we make as parents, children, care-takers, colleagues, employers, service providers.

The Yom Kippur traditions set forth by the rabbis, 1500-2000 years ago, ask us to let go of all that decision-making power – to make no choice that has material ramifications. To step outside the karmatic cycle of cause and effect, and to **observe** – to observe, in every sense of the word:

To **observe** as in to watch.

When we take our fingers off the various “launch” buttons, our hands off the various wheels and control panels of our life – we are left with silence. It could be the same silence that surrounded Petrov in that moment of truth, a silence in which we can hear our thoughts, and maybe see the blinking light of a finger resting on a red button. It is a space within time that allows us to contemplate the results of our actions – and their potential.

To **observe** as in to notice: take stock of the mental load that we are carrying with us. In exactly half a year we will be invited to do the same in the material realm, cleaning up for Pesach, searching in the darkest corners of our homes for חמץ – any remnants of leavened grain. Yom Kippur invites us to do the same within our mental, emotional home – divert our gaze inwards, open the drawers and cabinets of our mind, and see if anything has

been fermenting there. חַמֵץ is of the word חָמוץ – sour. Our mental חַמֵץ are the thoughts that make us sad or angry, the memories that make us cringe, the unfulfilled dreams and plans that expired.

To **observe** is also to make an observation, to define and name these afflictions that we notice. By doing so, we are making a distinction, differentiating these afflictions from ourselves. I am not my חַטָּאִים, my transgressions, my mistakes and the seemingly endless cycles of cause and effect that they produce. I am the soul that wishes to separate from them, to be forgiven, so that I can break the cycle and continue on a better path.

In Leviticus 23 which lays the foundation to יוֹם הַכִּיפּוּרִים the Torah commands: וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם practically translated as “you shall practice self-denial”, but literally translated as : “you shall afflict your souls”. But can also be read, in slightly different punctuation – וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם – you shall respond to your souls. By denying ourselves material comfort, we are able to observe the afflictions of our soul and respond to them, engage in dialogue.

And speaking of Torah – to **observe** is also to obey. Not the easiest part for me, particularly when obeying has just meant repeatedly chanting Avinu Malkenu –addressing the divine in masculine authoritative features, that I find more disturbing than comforting. Yet I will do it again, tomorrow morning, and evening, and hopefully, god willing, in the next and many more years to come. There are more gender-inclusive expressions of spirituality that I can engage in, but choosing to obey this form is another way of surrendering my perceived sovereignty, letting these ancient words wash over me, flow through my mind while I observe their effect.

It is also a way of acknowledging that my choices are affected by others that preceded me, and are affecting others, who are present here with me – and others who are not. I find the notion of continuing a lineage, of engaging in this same practice on the same day together with millions of other people around the world – deeply moving.

This is something I wish to **observe**, as in to keep – to sustain these unseen threads that connect us. This goes back to recognizing the various ways in which we are connected – not just to the people we know in our lives, but to the people who share our beliefs and heritage, as well as to people we’ve never heard of and never met, but saved our lives one day, 35 years ago when they decided to abstain from action.

The Mishnah teaches that “anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is considered to have saved an entire world.” (Sanhedrin 4:5)

At any point in time, our lives are at the hands of others, and at the same time we hold the lives of others in our hands. Take this day to observe the ways in which we observe each other, and one another. Stanislav Petrov died on last year, May 19<sup>th</sup> 2017, at the age of 77. We can think of him and of the countless people like him who have anonymously made choices that have sustained lives and saved worlds, before passing away – as we recite the Kaddish in a minute.

And before we rise to recite the Aleinu Leshabeach – “it is ours to praise”– here is an alternative reading of it, by poet Marcia Falk, that speaks to precisely this notion, the sacred nature of our choices:

*It is ours to praise the beauty of the world even as we discern the torn world*

*And out of the torn we make whole again.*

*May we live with promise in creation's lap,  
redemption budding in our hands.*