

Rosh Hashana
Pregnancy and the New Year
Maharat Rori Picker Neiss
Class of 2017

I remember when I first found out that I was pregnant with my oldest daughter, Daria.

It was just over four years ago. I had suspected that I might be pregnant, and yet, nothing could have prepared me for that moment when I stood in the bathroom, looking down at the test in my hand, watching those two lines appear. I was immediately hit with an overwhelming mixture of emotion: excitement, fear, trepidation, wonder, more fear, more excitement. They each hit me like a wave. Excitement at this wonderful new chapter that we were beginning in our lives; fear and trepidation at all that we knew could go wrong; wonder for all of the questions for which we still have yet to find answers. What will she be like when she grows up? Will she be happy? Will she feel pain? How will she change the world?

With each child, those emotions have not lessened and those questions have not dissipated.

Now, as I await the birth of my third child, it is no surprise that I find myself thinking a lot about pregnancy and babies these days.

Pregnancy is actually one of our central themes of Rosh Hashanah.

Over the course of the holiday we recount the stories of three women: Sara, Chana, and Rachel, who each yearned to give birth, and we remember the tears that they shed for their children.

Yesterday we heard the story of our matriarch Sara. The rabbis tell us that it was on Rosh Hashana that God remembered Sara and told her that she would conceive and give birth to Yitzchak. This morning we retold the story of Akeidat Yitzchak, of the intended sacrifice of Isaac. The midrash tells us that an angel showed Sara the vision of Avraham holding a knife over Yitzchak as he was bound to the altar, and it was that vision of her only son, the son that she had prayed for and waited for for so long, about to be slaughtered, that killed her. In that very moment before God stopped Avraham from lowering the knife, Sara's soul departed, unable to bear the thought of being in the world without her child.

Yesterday we also heard the story of Chana, a woman so bereft at her inability to have a child that she pleads with God for a son, a prayer so famous that the rabbis learn how to pray from Chana. Chana is so desperate for a child that she makes a promise to God, vowing to give her son in service to God, in a sense, giving up her son, just for a chance to know him.

And today, we remember Rachel, another matriarch. Rachel, who like Chana, was the favorite wife of her husband, and yet was unable to give him a child. Like Sara and Chana, Rachel, too, is ultimately able to conceive a child, and in fact, conceives twice. Yet, she, too, gives her life for her children, dying in the course of childbirth as her second child, Binyamin, is born. In the haftorah we read this morning, we hear Jeremiah telling us of God describing the cries that Rachel sheds in Heaven as she watches her children, the Jewish people, march into exile.

But even more so than the powerful stories of these three women whom we remember on Rosh Hashana, we see the theme of pregnancy and birth so clearly in the liturgy of the day itself.

Six times over the course of this day we repeat the phrase: היום הרת עולם. It is translated in our machzor as “Today is the birthday of the world.” But, in fact, the word הרת means pregnant. Today the world is pregnant.

We recite this phrase each time the shofar is blown.

This day the world is pregnant
 This day stands all the world's creations up in judgement
 stands them as sons or as slaves—
 If as sons, have compassion for us,
 as a father has compassion for his sons.
 And if as slaves, our eyes are raised and fixed on You
 until you show us favor, and bring out our judgement like
 sunlight
 Awesome, Holy

היום הרת עולם
 היום יעמיד במשפט
 כל יצוי עולמים
 אם כבנים אם כעבדים
 אם כבנים חמנו כחם אב על בנים
 ואם כעבדים עינינו ל תליות
 עד שתחננו ותוציא כאור משפטנו
 איום דוש

Upon close study, this is an odd paragraph.

If we read היום הרת עולם as “Today is the birthday of the world,” then perhaps the rest of the paragraph, which talks about standing in judgment, could make sense. Anniversaries are an opportunity to look back and reflect on where we have been and look forward to where we want to go. Often times at jobs, the anniversary of the day we started is when we might have an annual review. We evaluate all that we have done over the year, what has been successful, what has not been successful, where we have achieved our goals, where we have fallen short on our goals, and we think about the goals that we want to set for the coming year.

But if we say היום הרת עולם – Today the world is pregnant, then how does this connect with the rest of the paragraph that speaks about judgement?

The Hasidic master, Rebbe Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, who lived in the 18th century, offers one interpretation. He says that we say on Rosh Hashana, היום הרת עולם – Today the world is pregnant, for it is in the stage of pregnancy that mercy was hidden (he'elem), like a fetus in pregnancy. But now it must be awakened by the shofar, that it should be revealed in actuality.

He takes the word עולם, which means world, and he reads it as העלם hidden.

He says that we live in a world in which mercy is hidden.

In actuality, though, we live in a world in which so much more than mercy is hidden. We live in a world in which God is hidden. And though we believe in God's presence and we seek it in our everyday lives, it is something we have to work hard to find. God does not appear to us through our eyes or speak to us through our ears. God is not discernible to us through our senses.

I always find it funny when people ask me when the baby is coming. Because I have to tell you, the baby is already here. He isn't just a thought. I can feel him. If you catch me at the right time, you can feel him, too. You can't see him. You can't hold him. But that doesn't mean he isn't very real and very much present in our world.

The same can be said of God. Just because God is hidden does not make God absent.

And yet, we stand here today, struggling to find the words we need to speak with God, trying to focus our minds on that which we cannot fathom. We imagine that we can see that which cannot be seen and hear that which cannot be heard, so that we can somehow find within ourselves the proper kavannah, the proper intention for meaningful prayer before a God who, no matter how fervent our prayer, no matter how desperate our pleas, no matter how intense our need to see, hear, or feel God, always remains behind a curtain.

היום הרת עולם – This day the world is pregnant. Today, the world holds God in its womb. Present, yet unseen. Within, and able to be experienced, yet obstructed. The word womb, רחם, is the same root as the word רחמים, mercy. The world holds God, hidden, amidst mercy.

And why does this verse come after the blowing of the shofar? What is this cry of the shofar? What are these series of sounds that we make before reciting this paragraph? It is the cry of birth. Because our responsibility everyday, but today especially, is to reveal God in the world. We reestablish God's reign over the world.

Although today we mark the anniversary of the day that God first created man, in an ironic twist, today, it is we who birth God into the world. We cannot sit in our chairs and wait for God to reveal Godself in the world. We are not passive participants. We are active partners. We declare to the world, on this day, that the world did not come into existence by accident, but was created by the one true God. We declare to the world, on this day, that God rules over the entire world, and we remind the world, today and every day, that God is manifest in this world, hidden amidst coincidences and luck, accidents and happenstances.

I want to offer one more explanation of this phrase.

היום הרת עולם – This day the world is pregnant. Interestingly, this phrase comes from a passage in Jeremiah. Jeremiah, as we might recall, suffers severely over the course of his life. At one point he says,

Accursed be the day That I was born! Let not the day be blessed
When my mother bore me!
Accursed be the man Who brought my father the news
And said, "A boy Is born to you," And gave him such joy!
Let that man become like the cities Which the Lord overthrew without relenting!
Let him hear shrieks in the morning And battle shouts at noontide—
Because he did not kill me before birth, So that my mother might be my grave,
And her womb big [with me] for all time. Why did I ever issue from the womb,
To see misery and woe, To spend all my days in shame!
(Jeremiah 20:14-18)

In stark contrast to all of the stories that we mentioned earlier of mothers who had wanted so badly, who had prayed so strongly, to see a child born, Jeremiah prays to God that he should never have been born. He asks: "למה זה מרחם יצאתי" – Why did I ever issue forth from the womb?" And he wishes instead: "ורחמה הרת עולם" – His mother's womb should have simply remained pregnant forever."

Here, הרת עולם has a very different meaning than how we understand it in our machzor. הרת עולם does not refer to the birthday of the world, or to the world being pregnant, but to one who is eternally pregnant. לעולם – forever

And so I want to offer to you that היום הרת עולם – Today, we are eternally pregnant. Not in the way that Jeremiah speaks of. Today, we are pregnant not just with God, who is hidden away, within us and within our world, but we are pregnant with potential.

Today we stand on the cusp of everything that the coming year might bring. And that potential is limitless.

You don't need to have stood with a positive pregnancy test in your hand, to know what it means to have birthed something into the world.

And like the day I described four years ago, today we all stand together with excitement, fear, trepidation, and wonder. We don't know what the coming year will bring, and even for those things we might know about, we have no way to predict their ultimate outcome judgement in stand we today, pregnant eternally are we היום הרת עולם, היום יעמיד במשפט-

We stand in judgement for all the potential that we hold within us, as to whether or not that potential will be birthed for good or for bad, for success or for failure, for healing or for illness, for gain or for loss, for joy or for sorrow. All of those possibilities are already within us. They are all real. They are just yet to be realized. They are yet to be birthed.

I want to offer a prayer to all of us here today. May it be in the merit of our prayers today, and in the merit of our efforts to make God actualized in our world, that all of our potential today should be birthed for good, for success, for healing, for gain, for joy. And may we all enjoy a year filled with blessing and new beginnings.

כתיבה וחתימה טובה



Maharat Rori Picker Neiss serves as the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St Louis. Prior to that she was the Director of Programming, Education and Community Engagement at Bais Abraham Congregation, a Modern Orthodox Jewish synagogue in University City, MO. She previously served as Acting Executive Director for Religions for Peace-USA, Program Coordinator for the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, Assistant Director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, and Secretariat for the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, the formal Jewish representative in international, interreligious dialogue. Rori is the co-chair of the North American Interfaith Youth Network of Religions for Peace, a CLAL Rabbis Without Borders fellow, and co-editor of "InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook." She is married to Russel Neiss, a Software Engineer for Sefaria, and they have three children.