

“Hayom Harat Olam” – Pregnant with Eternity

By David Seidenberg

Dear Rebbeim -- This d'var Torah is written to be “modular” – you can use individual sections, and you can even change the order of the sections. It is equally meant to be used as a whole sermon. Please explore what use would be the best for you.

Shalom & shanah tovah, David

1) We hear the shofar and call out, ‘Hayom Harat Olam’!

“Today is the birthday of the world; Today the world is born”

So says the liturgy according to most readings. And this birthday is not just one of celebration: “Today the world stands in judgment.” These two motifs alone should give us pause today to consider what we are doing to the planet, to how we can restore the balance of the atmosphere, the balance of the waters and the air, of the forests and plains, the ocean and the continents.

But let’s look more closely at these words, to see what they can teach us.

‘Harah’ means pregnancy, conception or gestation. Not birth, but the process which leads up to birth. ‘Olam’ can mean world, but if we wanted to say “the conception of the world,” we would say “harat ha-olam.” ‘Olam’ really means eternity, from the root that means “hidden,” or more precisely, the infinite that is hidden, that is, beyond our limited perception.

If we wanted to say “the birth of the world” we would say “leidat ha’olam.” ‘Harat Olam’ means very literally, “pregnant with eternity”, or “eternally pregnant.” Today is pregnant with eternity.

2) “Today is pregnant with eternity.” What deeper evocation could one find of this wondrous and miraculous creation than “eternally pregnant,” always bringing forth new lives, new creatures, even new species? Always dynamic, growing; balanced not like a pillar on its foundation, but like a gyroscope, turning and turning. What higher praise of the Creator than, “How wondrously diverse, how limitless, how changing are your works! Mah rabu ma’asekhah Adonai”? You show us the infinite in the finite, the world in a grain of sand, a child’s grasp, a caterpillar’s transformation, a leaf unfolding. What greater potential in this moment, than for it to be “pregnant with insights, with hopes, as great as eternity”? It is as unbounded as the hidden potential of every gestation and every birth—or, in the archaic sense of ‘great’ as pregnant, it is “great with eternity!”

3) Today we honor the still small voice that comes after the sound of the shofar, the moment when we can hear the echo and potential of this eternity, of this infinite creativity. Every time we hear the shofar blasting, again and again and again, we respond: “Hayom Harat Olam!”

This moment, this day, this year, this world, gives us a new chance to pause and reflect on what Kabbalah calls the “or ein sof,” the infinite light which filled the beginning of creation with lovingkindness. This light shines in the radiance of this earth, the womb of all life, which is

eternally pregnant, and which constantly brings forth life. (Tanya, Igeret Hakodesh 20) Every time we hear the shofar, it gives us a moment where we can, if we choose, reflect on what we are doing to this earth, our home and our womb.

4) Today, even as we stand here, we are changing the quality of that radiant light as we change the atmosphere, as we change the conditions of life on this planet. We are putting back into the atmosphere the carbon that millions and millions of years and billions of billions of creatures removed and stored in the earth, and we are doing it faster than we can realize. We are changing the air we breathe, the winds that drive the rains, the blanket that holds the warmth of the sun long enough for us to survive from one day to the next, the blanket that allows us to be alive, thriving, nurtured and nourished. By holding in more and more energy, that blanket causes the earth's climate to become more and more chaotic, more unstable. The global climate crisis is not a problem of poisons and pollutions. It's not a problem of a degree or two. It's a problem of balance.

5) Jeremiah says, "Vat'hi li imi kivri v'rachmah harat olam. Let my mother be my grave and her womb be pregnant eternally." (20:17) This is the source of the expression "harat olam." On a very personal level, this verse is an expression of Jeremiah's profound grief and desperation; and for mothers who have lost a pregnancy, it may well ring with as great a grief. In Job, however, the womb is our planet, as in, "yam b'gicho meirechem yeitzei; when the sea gushed forth from the womb." (38:8) Jeremiah's lament, applied to the earth, becomes one of the truest and most loving sentences in the Tanakh. This earth is a mother to us and it is our grave; it is eternally pregnant, and from our deaths will come new life and new lives. When we hear the shofar and call out, "Hayom harat olam!" may we find hope, may we find courage, may we find blessing, in this moment filled with birth and death, pregnant with eternity.

6) Listen further to our words after the shofar: "Hayom ya'amid bamishpat." The phrase ya'amid bamishpat comes from Proverbs: "Melekh b'mishpat ya'amid aretz. A king through justice makes the earth stand." (29:4) Today, this day, should bring justice, this day teaches us justice. Without justice, the creatures of all the worlds y'tzurei olamim, even the earth itself, cannot stand and endure.

Ecologically, justice means many things, including balance, as in: "Samti mishpat l'kav utz'dakah l'mishkelet. I set justice with a plumb line and righteousness with a balance." (Isa. 28:17) If we want to be agents of positive change, we can help stand the world upright through acts of justice, fairness and balance. There are so many levels to this mishpat, between us and God, between fellow human beings, within ourselves. And one of those levels is justice and balance between us and the earth, and between us and our fellow species.

Balance means every person, every species, and every place has enough of what it needs for life to thrive. Balance means that our relationship with the earth is dynamic and sustainable, that we are not consuming future generations to take for ourselves. Each of us helps to establish balance, not just when you see someone in need, but in this moment, hayom, today and every day, in every act and gesture, every choice, in what you eat and wear, how you dwell in your house, in how you travel to work and how you return home.

7) The requirement of the shofar is that it must be curved, spiral, like a ram's horn, and not straight like an antelope's horn. It teaches us to turn back towards what is right, to return from the precipice. And it reminds us of the spiral of life, the spiral dance that leads to this earth, these species, this

humanity, and on to whatever comes after us. Listen: we are not the end of this dance, nor the beginning, but an essential link in a chain that goes from creation to redemption. Listen and hear the still small voice after the storm wind, the silence of the heart after our ears are filled with the trumpeting of the ram's horn. What do you hear about where you are on that spiral, in this world; what do you hear about what role you want to play and who you want to become?

8) "Hayom harat olam." Today is pregnant with eternity. Today births new intentions, conceives new possibilities. Today is our day, today we are alive on this planet, "Chayim kulchem hayom." Today our choices will gestate the future, for our children, and for the children of every species upon the earth.

"Hayom t'amtzeinu." Today you will find courage. "Hayom t'varcheinu." Today you will be blessed. "Hayom ticht'veinu l'chayim tovim." Today you will be inscribed to live.

"Hayom im b'kolo tishma'u." Today, if you will listen to the Voice.

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