

Birthday of the World

There are two stories we tell on Rosh Hashanah – two stories that sum up much of what we struggle during the rest of the year.

The first is our own personal story – the year we have had as individuals, different for each of us, and the year that we have had as our extended family, the Jewish community. The Book of Genesis, from where our first Torah reading comes is all about family life, mostly highly dysfunctional, and every Rosh Hashanah we read this dark story of a father, Abraham, who thinks God is testing him by asking him to kill his son, the long journey they take together without apparently consulting Isaac's mother, who it is said, dies of shock that her husband could do such a thing, and whose cries we hear echoed in the shofar blasts. Rosh Hashanah is when we look back at our own lives, our own places of darkness, and look at what we have done wrong and how we could do better.

But there is another narrative. Rosh Hashanah is also the birthday of the world – the whole world, not just the Jewish world. Yom Harat Ha'Olam – the Day the World is Born. Rosh Hashanah stands for the day the world burst into being out of nothing, the anniversary of the Big Bang, and it represents its continuous renewal. It is completely universal – a celebration of everything and everyone.

So we have the universal and we have the particular, and we constantly balance the two. Everyone is always walking a tightrope between our identities as part of the world and part of our family, but it is a particular tension in the Jewish tradition – this push and pull between our need to look after our own and our need to pursue justice out in the world.

It has felt particularly acute this year, the year in which newspapers were full of headlines about anti-semitism and there was even a debate in Parliament with Jewish MPs reading out accounts of the online abuse they have received. It makes us feel defensive and it's hardly surprising. It is hard to believe that scarcely seventy years after the Second World War, in living memory of those who lost family members in the Holocaust or arrived here as refugees, we have people on the far left of the Labour Party voicing racist comments against Jews. We are, justifiably, deeply sensitive when it comes to anti-semitism.

But I also think it's important not to engage in hyperbole. I do not think we are going back to the 1930s. I do not think, as some have suggested, that we should be packing our bags and working out where else we should live. Nor do I think now is the time turn our backs on the outside world and retreat within.

There's an Israeli expression, some of you will know, *davka*. It comes from the Talmud actually, and means, precisely because of this.

Precisely because we are living in an era where anti-semitism still exists, davka, we need to take a step back and see who else is also being discriminated against. Because this is not happening in a vacuum.

Extremes of all kinds are on the rise all over the world, from Eastern Europe to America, and it is vital to make alliances with other minority groups who are also suffering discrimination. Anti-semitism may be on the rise, but so is Islamophobia. I quote Lord Sacks, who's been in the news recently, from his book, Future Tense.

“Jews are not the only people who face prejudice and hate. So do the other groups and we must stand with them if we are to expect them to stand with us. We share a covenant of fate and human solidarity”.

2,000 years earlier Rabbi Hillel made a similar point – If I am only for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself then what am I? And if not now, then when?

This tension between the universal, being a light to the nations, pursuing justice, looking out for the stranger, and the particular,

keeping our Torah, looking after our families, keeping our own flame lit, is embedded in Judaism. The mediaeval French scholar Rashi famously asks why the Torah begins with the creation of the world and not with the first Jewish laws. One of the answers to this question is that the God we are in relationship with is the God of the entire universe, so we begin by remembering that. In the Talmud it says we were descended from one person, Adam, so that nobody could say my ancestor is better than yours. The God of the Universe is transcendent and abstract.

But there is also the more intimate God of Exodus who hears the cry of the Israelites in Egypt and liberates them, finally at Mount Sinai choosing this one people to be in a relationship with. Our God, the God of the Jews.

The High Holy Days, beginning today and ending at the end of Yom Kippur takes us on a journey. Today we acknowledge the universality of the creation of the world, and the idea that the whole universe is being judged. But we end Yom Kippur by each of us, as individuals, pleading for another year of life and promising, as part of the Jewish people, to do better next year. We acknowledge that we part of humanity and at the same time we are each of us responsible for our own souls.

There is however a text that stretches between the two poles of being part of the wider world and looking after ourselves. It's our second Torah reading in which Moses retells the story of standing at Sinai. He says – you stand today all of you – heads of your tribes, elders, officers and the stranger in your camp, from those who cut wood and those who draw water. Not only with you do I make this covenant today with those who are here, but with those who are not here today. Who are those who are not here today?

It is talking about all future generations. It's talking about us. And it shifts between the second person plural and the second person singular, because we stand in community, we stand as part of the world, and we stand alone. And we are all included, we were all there including the stranger in the camp, and not just those there but those who were not born yet. We are all in this together, all our stories, all our multiple identities – the parts of ourselves that care about ourselves, our families, our community, and the parts of ourselves that care about the rest of the world.

In a moment we will start our Torah service, when we will read this text of revelation – and then we enter the heart of the day. It's fine to come late on Rosh Hashanah morning but if you leave early you miss what Rosh Hashanah is all about. We acknowledge the universality of life and death and in the untaneh tokef prayer, we

contemplate our mortality. If I am only for myself, who will be for me. And if I am only for myself, then what am I. And if not now, then when. Untaneh Tokef addresses the last of those three statements – if not now, then when, because our life is limited and we never know how much time is left.

And then we do three sets of shofar blows – for the present, the past and the future. We stand poised between the infinitely large and the infinitely small, gazing out at the universe and gazing within at our own selves.

If our Judaism is not a tool to become profoundly human, if it is not our entryway into humanity, into all of creation, then we are not fulfilling its legacy. The universalism of our common humanity and the particularity of our identity are not polar opposites nor antagonists. They enhance each other. We negotiate between them every day of our lives. May we find a way to defend our own community while working with others to fulfil our obligations of tikkun olam, of repairing the world, and leaving it a better place than when we found it. Ken yehi ratzon.