



Between Creation and Justice

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היום הרת עולם, היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים

Today is the day the universe was conceived, today is the day every creature in the universe stands in judgment.

As the “new year of years,”¹ Rosh Hashanah marks the creation of the world.² It is also the day, according to the Talmud, that all creatures pass before God in judgment.³ The connection of these two themes—creation and judgement—on Rosh Hashanah, tells us something profound about the world and our place in it. These two things must come together because at the heart of our humanity is our capacity to either to exploit and destroy the world and its inhabitants, or to protect nature and support each other. Not since the time of Noah’s flood has the fate and stability of our world—and the link between creation and justice—so clearly rested on human behavior.

While world’s richest countries are the greatest contributors to climate change, the poorest tend to bear the brunt of its impact. As powerful storms and floods become more frequent, it is the homes of the poor that tend to fall first and are slowest to be rebuilt. As droughts parch the earth, the people who depend on the land for their very survival are the first to go hungry. And as our societies persevere in mining, damming, drilling and excavating the remaining pristine land on our planet, the indigenous tribes and poor villages who live on the land are displaced, often without being asked or compensated fairly.

There are Kenyans whose forests have been destroyed by illegal logging, Cambodians whose villages have been flooded by giant dams, rural Haitians whose homes were flattened by a massive earthquake and whose land is now being contaminated by mining...and so many more.

This devastation is the result of our incredible power to alter the world itself.

A striking midrash in Vayikra Rabbah⁴ poignantly shows how the creation of man, and the incredible power that this act of creation represents, leads directly to the need for justice and moral discernment. According to this midrash, the “beginning of God’s work” referenced in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy⁵ is actually the creation of man—not the separation of light from darkness or the creation of dry land,

¹ Rosh Hashanah 2a

² There are (of course) debates about this in the Talmud. In Rosh Hashana 11a Rabbi Yehoshua claims that the world was created in *Nissan* (presumably because in the Torah *Nissan* is called the first month and *Tishrei* is the 7th)

³ Rosh Hashanah 16a. As we taught in a baraita: “All are judged on Rosh Hashana and their judgement is sealed on Yom Kippur, these are the words of R’ Meir.”

⁴ Vayikra Rabbah Parashat Emor, Parasha 29

⁵ ““This is the day, the beginning of Your works, a memorial to the first day.” – Rosh Hashanah Liturgy, Zichronot section.

which come first in the Torah's account of creation. This midrash dates the creation of the world to the 25th of *Elul*, making Rosh Hashanah the anniversary of the creation of humanity itself.

The midrash places humans at the center of creation because we are the creatures who exercise immense power over the natural world, a quality that makes us almost God-like. This anthropocentric notion of creation is reflected in God's charge to humanity in the first creation story. The much vaunted idea that humans are created *b'tzelm Elohim*—in the image of God, is followed directly by the command to fill the earth and subdue it, to have dominion over fish, and eat of the fields and fowl.⁶ In other words, being in God's image means exercising dominion and power.

When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge,⁷ humanity gained the power to become the most dominant and destructive species on the planet. With the ability to use symbolic communication, to think and to know good from evil, we gained the incredible power to build societies, economies, and cities—the bedrock of technological society. Yet, this development was also the key evolutionary leap that created our ability to exploit natural resources, to damage our planet, and to inflict harm on others. The knowledge from this tree has produced both good and evil: miraculous cures and atom bombs, enough food to feed the whole planet and an economic order that keeps power and resources in the hands of the few at the expense of the many.

According to the midrash, it was only when humans actualize their humanity by eating from the tree—and gain this ability to choose to build or to destroy—that God needed to become a judge, bringing the concept of justice into the world. This is why Rosh Hashanah is a day of creation and a day of judgment.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are not only judged by how we treat each other in our families, in our community, in our country. We are also judged by how we have treated our earth, and how our behavior as a society has impacted our fellow humans who also depend on this planet for their survival.

Our relationship to nature and our relationship to others is not separate. Our social and environmental problems are not separate. Environmentalism and social justice are not separate. The magnitude of the problem of climate change and what it represents calls us, at this time, to re-examine the human place in creation and our relationship to the earth and to each other. The consciousness we gained from the tree of knowledge is also what allows us to stand here today in reflection and repentance; to put words to our feelings of injustice. To really face the destruction that we cause, we have to recognize that this tendency is a core part of our humanity.

We then need to work to support those around the world who have been most profoundly affected by the changes wrought on the earth by mankind; people whose poverty has deepened because of droughts or floods induced by global warming; villages submerged by dams built to fuel cities; towns whose water has been poisoned by mines or oil fields. Ironically—and tragically—many of the

⁶ Genesis 1:26-31

⁷ Perhaps the "sin" of Adam and Chava was that they separated from the animals and became human. Shadal makes this suggestion in his comment on Genesis 3:5 where he states that knowing good from evil is the image and likeness of God that is referred to in Genesis 1:26. He explains that when "man knows good and evil and chooses by will and not by instinct, he will be master over all forces, and he will be dominant in his actions." (Shadal on Genesis 3:5)

communities most affected by climate change are those least contributing it, because their lifestyles have little drain on natural resources.

On this Rosh Hashanah, as we celebrate the creation of humanity, we also need to take a sober look at how we humans are using our immense knowledge and power. We cannot eradicate our own exploitive tendencies; they are built in to the very image of divinity that serves as our inheritance. We can, however, support those who are fighting to preserve the very creation that we were made to inhabit.

One way to do this is to support organizations like American Jewish World Service, which supports grassroots groups in the developing world that are protecting vulnerable people from the ravages of climate change and other threats to the natural world they depend on. They are educating communities about their rights, stopping illegal land grabs, and empowering local people to insist that they have the right to be consulted on how their land and resources are used. Many of these groups are also teaching communities about the sustainable use of natural resources like forests, farmland and lakes; and the negative impacts of climate change and how to combat them.

For these people, defending climate justice is not just an aspiration, it is a matter of life and death. As we enter this new year, may we all, and all of humanity, be judged for the good. May our actions protect our world and leave it better than we found it, and allow all people to be inscribed in the book of life.

More About AJWS's climate justice and natural resource rights work:

Visit our [World Environmental Day photo essay](#) to find stories of grassroots groups around the world doing remarkable work to protect their land and our planet. We encourage you to add or adapt any of this material for your own teaching and sermons.

SOURCES

HaYom Harat Olam (Piyut said during Musaf of Rosh Hashanah)

Today is the conception* of the world
Today all the creations in the universe stand in judgment,
Either as children or as servants
If as children, have mercy on us as a father has mercy on his children.
If as servants, our eyes turn to you expectantly. Send out the light of your judgment, awesome and holy one.

היום הרת עולם
היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים
אם כבנים, אם כעבדים
אם כבנים, רחמנו כרחם אב על בני
ואם כעבדים, עינינו לך תלויות, עד שתחננו
ותוציא לאור משפטנו
איום, קדוש

* *harat* literally means "conception," but is often translated as "birth" in this context.

Vayikra Rabbah, Parashat Emor, Parasha 29

In the seventh month on the first of them month," (Leviticus 23:24). "Forever Adonai your word stands in the Heavens," (Psalms 119:89).

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: On the twenty-fifth of Elul the world was created. It was brought in the name of Rav Kahana in the name of Rabbi Eliezer that taught during the [shofar] blowing of Rav, "This is the day, the beginning of Your works, a memorial to the first day. 'For that is a statute for Israel, a judgment of the God of Jacob,' (Psalms 81:5). And about the nations about them it is said, 'Which to sword and which for peace; which for famine and which for satisfaction.' And on it He focuses on the people and remembers them for life or death."

You find that the first man was created the day of Rosh Hashanah. The first hour the thought was conceived. The second He consulted with the ministering angels. The third He formed the dirt. The fourth He sewed the parts. The fifth He gave him form. The sixth He blew breath into him. The seventh He stood him on his feet. The eighth He brought him into the Garden of Eden. The ninth He commanded him. The tenth he transgressed on His commandments. The eleventh He judged him. The twelfth He gave him a pardon.

The Holy One, blessed be He said to Adam, "Behold you are a sign to your children. Just as you came before Me in judgment and I gave you a pardon, so too your children come before Me in judgment and I give them a pardon."

When? On Rosh Hashanah, in the seventh month, of the first of the month.

בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ" הַה"ד (תהלים) " קיט, פט) "לְעוֹלָם ה' דְּבָרְךָ נֶצֶב בַּשָּׁמַיִם"

תני בשם רבי אליעזר בכ"ה באלול נברא העולם ואתיא דרב כההיא דתני ר"א דתנינן בתקיעתא דרב זה היום תחלת מעשיך זכרון ליום ראשון כי חוק לישראל הוא וגוי ועל המדינות בו יאמר איזו לחרב ואיזו לשלום איזו לרעב ואיזו לשובע ובריות בו יפקדו להזכירם לחיים ולמות"

נמצאת אתה אומר ביום ר"ה בשעה ראשונה עלה במחשבה בשניה נתייעץ עם מלאכי השרת בשלישי כנס עפרו ברביעי גבלו בחמישי רקמו בששי עשאו גולם בשביעי נפח בו נשמה בשמיני הכניסו לגן בתשיעי נצטוה בעשירי עבר באחד עשר נידון בשנים עשר יצא בדימוס

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לאדם זה סימן לבניך כשם שעמדת לפני בדין היום הזה ויצאת בדימוס כך עתידין בניך לעמוד לפני בדין ביום זה ויוצאין לפני בדימוס

אימתי? בחדש השביעי באחד לחדש

Genesis 1:26 - 28

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ: וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשְׁתָּהּ וּרְדוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיַּי הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

Genesis 3:4-5

And the serpent said to the woman, "You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad."

וַיֹּאמֶר הַנָּחָשׁ אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה לֵאמֹת תָּמֹתוֹן: כִּי לֹדֵעַ
אֱלֹהִים כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכַלְכֶם מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִפְקָחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם
וְהִייתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע:

Shadal (Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto, 1800 – 1865) on Genesis 3:5

Ki Yodeah: but [God] know, however every "ki" before us is not but (rashbam). And the meaning: It is not forbidden for you to eat it, except in order that you will not be like him. And from this is a small piece of evidence that knowing good and evil is the image and likeness of God. And this strengthens my interpretation of "image of God," that [when] man knows good and evil and chooses by will and not by instinct, he will be master over all forces, and he will be dominant in his actions and not be sunk in them.

כי יודע: אבל יודע, וכן כל כי שלפניו לא ענינו
אבל (רשב"ם), והטעם לא אסר לכם אכילתו,
אלא כדי שלא תהיו כמוהו, ומכאן קצת ראיה
כי ידיעת טוב ורע היא היא צלם אלהים
ודמותו, והיא חיזוק לפירושי על צלם אלהים,
כי היות האדם יודע טוב ורע ובוחר ברצון ולא
בטבע, והיותו בעל הכוחות כולם ושליט
במעשיו ולא מוטבע בהם