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been harrowing. No matter how great our penitential efforts during the month of Elul, we, too, arrive at each Rosh Hashanah broken by sin and fearful of its consequences. But the only way around is through (Because you have come before me in judgment on this day...). And these midrashim remind us that the purpose of Divine judgment is not to break us, but ultimately, to remake us.

Rabbi Tahalifa's elegant little homily is sealed with a proof from Isaiah 66:22:

”כי כאשר השמים החדשים והארץ החדשה אשר אני עשה
עומדים לפניי נאום-ה' כן יעמד זרעכם ושמכם.”

“Just as the new heavens and the new earth that I will make shall endure before Me,
saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name endure.”

The verse gathers its force from the root עמד, rendered here as “endure.” This biblical term, filtered through a rabbinic sensibility, presents a resounding triple entendre. Not only is there Isaiah's plain sense of “to endure” or remain, but the verse resonates with the liturgical references to *standing* in judgment before God, which the rabbis conflate with *standing* in prayer before God (reciting the עמידה) on Rosh Hashanah. In its midrashic context, then, this verse assures us that by standing annually before God in *prayer* and submitting ourselves to his *judgment*, the generations of Israel will merit to endure by being perpetually *recreated*. We are promised a permanence based not on stasis and perfection, but rather on the dynamism that comes of transgression and subsequent refashioning. On Rosh Hashanah, the God of Israel pledges to make us last by making us new.

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- 1 Dr. Miriam Udel-Lambert is assistant professor of Yiddish language, literature, and culture at Emory University in Atlanta. When not teaching modern Jewish literature, she enjoys studying and teaching classical Jewish texts.
 - 2 See Talmud Yerushalmi Avoda Zara לט, א, where Rabbi Yossi adduces that Rav must have thought the world was created on Rosh Hashanah because of the inclusion in his piyyut the line תחילת מעשיך זה היום.
 - 3 JPS translation.
 - 4 If this sentiment emphasizes God's power in relation to his human creations, then the rabbis are also capable of seeing the inverse, how much God requires human participation for his sanctification. Another *piyyut* appeals to God to take care of his creatures and delight in them... “that you may be sanctified as Lord over all your creatures.”
 - 5 Translation from the Birnbaum *mahzor*.
 - 6 The midrash is redacted in Pesikta de Rab Kahana, piska 23:1 as well as in Leviticus Rabba 29. I cite from the first source.
 - 7 Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 27a.

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והגדת לבתך
Vehigadet Levitekh
And You Shall Tell Your Daughters...

A D'var Torah for Rosh Hashanah

By Miriam Udel-Lambert

Ronda Angel Arking, Editor

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and to publicize the work of outstanding female teachers
of Torah. Through these mailings we would like to
increase the number of divrei Torah written by women.*

Rosh Hashanah: Day of Judgement, Day of (Re-)Creation

By Miriam Udel-Lambert¹

At the beginning of Saul Bellow's novel *Henderson the Rain King*, the addled and intense hero tells of stumbling upon this reassurance in one of his scholarly father's old books: "The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required." As he relates, "This impressed me so deeply that I went around saying it to myself." Characteristically, he continues, "But then I forgot which book it was." This passage, evoking a combination of deep impressions and fuzzy recall for details, puts me in mind of the way we experience the High Holidays. The season is always tumultuous and crowded with religious duties, and made only more so by the mundane tasks that attend religious life (contemplation while frying schnitzel is possible but improbable). Certain liturgical phrases and images sear themselves into our memories with exactitude; other aspects of these sacred days are deeply held but remain vague or inchoate.

The very nature of Rosh Hashanah is surprisingly indeterminate. Any elementary schooler will tell you that the day commemorates Creation ("the world's birthday"), and a middle schooler will probably add that it is a solemn day of judgment when the Jewish people pass before God like a flock of sheep before their shepherd. Known in the Torah as יום תרועה, a day of shofar blasts, the first of Tishrei does not receive its designation as the New Year until the Mishna, where it is presented as but one of four "new years," each with respect to a different agricultural or religious observance. The prayer service for Rosh Hashanah, evolving over centuries, is replete with images that underscore its identity as a Day of Judgment and Divine coronation. The sources for the day as the anniversary of Creation are more obscure. From Rosh Hashanah's mishnaic appellation as ראש השנה לשנים, or the New Year for counting years, we may deduce that the first of Tishrei was the first day of the world's existence (and indeed one talmudic tradition does so²). Nonetheless, the twin themes of Creation and Judgment sit awkwardly cheek by jowl: by what logic are they yoked together in defining the significance of Rosh Hashanah?

The prayers composed for the festival suggest one answer, and the corpus of rabbinic midrash, a very different one. The day's liturgy, mostly silent on the subject of Creation or the New Year, makes a few notable efforts to juxtapose these themes to that of judgment. After each set of shofar blasts that punctuates the three major sections of *musaf* (treating the themes of Kingship, Remembrance, and the Shofar respectively), we find the poem beginning,

“היום הרת עולם היום יעמיד משפט כל יצורי עולמים”

These words are deceptively simple and nearly impossible to translate with both accuracy and economy. Customarily, the line is rendered roughly as follows: "today is the birth of the world, today all of creation stands for judgment." But the phrase הרת עולם uses the root generally associated with conception or pregnancy, not with birth. The author of this *piyyut* (liturgical poem) was evidently concerned to employ a phrase with biblical resonance, so he turned to Jeremiah 20:17. In its original context, this verse couldn't be further from a jubilant proclamation of the world's birth! Instead, it is part of an anguished lament to God over the slings and arrows that are the prophet's lot. As part of a passage beginning, "Accursed be the day that I was born!" he continues in verse 17, "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 (הרת עולם)."³ In biblical Hebrew, עולם refers to eternity, so the phrase הרת עולם means "pregnant eternally." The image is not of birth at all, but rather of gestation continued indefinitely so as to forestall the dawn of a bitter life (how one would pity the woman endowed with that funereal womb!). The rabbinic author of our *piyyut* recontextualizes the very same words: relying on the proximity of conception to birth and on the standard rabbinic definition of עולם as "world," he cleverly recasts the dire הרת עולם as a celebratory image. Thus, "today the world is born."

The second clause is also awkward to render in English. It turns on the *hif'il* (causative) verb יעמיד. Thus, God

will *cause to stand* in judgment all the creatures of the universe. The verb emphasizes God's agency in bringing his creatures to judgment, and the phrase יצורי עולמים (creatures of the universe) underscores humankind as God's creation. There is no term of logical causation used to link the first clause to the second, so their relationship remains ambiguous. In English, we might be tempted to connect them this way: "Today the world was born, so today he stands his creatures for judgment." It is God's prerogative to judge us—to determine our fate—because God made us.⁴ This logic is drawn out further in our declaration to God at the beginning of the *amidah* (individual prayer) recited throughout the holiday:

“עו בידך וגבורה בימינך ושמך נורא על כל מה שבראת”

“The strength is in Your hand and the power in Your right hand,
and Your name is awesome upon all that You created.”

This line closes with an affirmation of God's fearsome power over us, setting the stage for a process of propitiation based on the recognition of God's might and his right, as Creator, to judge. The liturgy is so saturated with the theme of Rosh Hashanah as Judgment Day that even God's role as Creator is subordinated to his role as Judge. Precious little is said in these prayers about the act of Creation itself. What *is* said is tucked away in the exposition of the זכרונות (Remembrance) portion of *musaf*. The *piyyut* constitutes a truly ancient snippet of poetry known in the Talmud and midrash as תקיעתא דרב:

”זה היום תחילת מעשיך זכרון ליום ראשון
כי חק לישראל הוא משפט לאלקי יעקב
ועל המדינות בו יאמר איזו לחרב ואיזו לשלום
איזו לרעב ואיזו לשבע
ובריות בו יפקדו להזכירם לחיים ולמות”

“This day, the anniversary of the first day of Thy creation,
is indeed a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
On it sentence is pronounced upon countries for war or peace,
for famine or abundance.
On this day mortals are recorded for life or death.”⁵

The opening of this *piyyut* suggests that Rosh Hashanah memorializes the beginning of God's Creation, but the second line pivots us smoothly back to the Judgment theme by exploiting the ambiguity of the word משפט. Indeed, the second line quotes Psalms 81:5, where משפט is a rhetorical doubling of the parallel term חק and means “ordinance.” Instead of reading “it is a statute for Israel, and ordinance of the God of Jacob,” the liturgical poet would have us read, “It is a statute for Israel: Judgment [Day] for the God of Jacob.”

A midrash⁶ positing a very different kind of relationship between Creation and Judgment picks up precisely with this liturgical fragment. Whereas the Babylonian Talmud cites Eliezer, a rabbi from the tannatic period, as saying that the world was created in Tishrei,⁷ our midrash attributes to him the position that Creation actually began on the 25th of Elul, so that the *sixth day* of Creation would have fallen out on Rosh Hashanah. Oddly enough, the midrash adduces the *piyyut* cited above (תקיעתא דרב) as proof for this claim, emphasizing that this day is “a memorial of” the primordial first day—i.e., not the day itself. Thus the holiday commemorates not the formation of the cosmos from out of the void, but rather the creation of humanity:

“נמצאת אומר בראש השנה נברא אדם הראשון.”

You must conclude that on Rosh Hashanah, primordial man was created.

If the Day of Judgment coincides with the dawn of humankind, that would suggest that embedded in the very creation of humanity is the creation of sin. The midrash illustrates this point with an hour-by-hour account of

Adam's first day:

”בשעה ראשונה עלה במחשבה, בשנייה נמלך במלאכי השרת, בשלישית כינס עפרו
ברביעית גיבלו, בחמישית ריקמו, בשישית העמידו גולם על רגליו
בשביעית זרק בו נשמה, בשמינית הכניסו לגן עדן, בתשיעית ציוהו,
בעשירית עבר על ציוהו, באחת עשרה נידון, בשתים עשרה יצה בדימוס מלפני הקב“ב.“

“In the first hour, the idea [for Adam] arose; in the second, He consulted the ministering angels; in the third, He gathered the dust; in the fourth, He kneaded it; in the fifth, He wove it; in the sixth, He stood the form on its feet; in the seventh, He cast a soul into him; in the eighth, He brought him into the Garden of Eden; in the ninth, He commanded him [regarding the tree of knowledge]; in the tenth, he transgressed against His commandment; in the eleventh, he was judged; and in the twelfth, he went out with pardon from before God.”

This sequence is remarkable both in its form and its content. Its steady, staccato rhythm underscores the inevitability of sin as part of the very emergence of humanity into existence. But if sin is inexorable, so too is pardon. Judgment is presented here not with the kind of shivering, nail-biting suspense that haunts us as we pronounce the High Holy Day prayers, but rather as a fluently functioning mechanism for setting the world to rights after the rupture of transgression. So automatic is the sin-judgment-pardon sequence in this midrash that the text runs counter to the usual rabbinic exhortations to introspection and repentance as the conditions of forgiveness.

What does this midrash add to our understanding of the relationship between Creation and Judgment? Simply the idea that sin—and the attendant potential for forgiveness—are kneaded into the very dough and woven into the very fabric of humanity. Whereas the liturgy emphasizes that God has the right to judge us because God made us, this text stresses that God's act of creating us—with our innate liability to transgress—necessitated God's judging and pardoning us. The midrash concludes forcefully:

”אמר לו הקב“ה, אדם, זה סימן לבניך כשם שנכנסת לפני בדין ביום הזה ויצאתה בדמוס,
כך עתידין בניך להיות נכנסין לפני בדין ביום הזה ויוצאין בדימוס.“

“God said to him, “Adam, this is a sign for your descendants:
just as you came before me in judgment on this day and went forth with pardon, so too your
descendants will come before me in judgment on this very day and go forth with pardon.”

As Henderson would have it, the forgiveness of sin is perpetual (annual at any rate), and—at least according to this rather idiosyncratic rabbinic text—righteousness first is not required.

The midrash has not quite exhausted the topic of Divine pardon. After digressing to other topics related to Rosh Hashanah, the editor gives the last word to Rav Tahalifa, who extracts the noblest lesson from the most technical detail. He observes that while the verb generally used with respect to the various festival sacrifices is והקרבתם (you shall bring), the verb applied to the offering for Rosh Hashanah is ועשיתם (you shall make). God reasons as follows:

”מכיון שנכנסתם לפני ביום הזה ויצאתם בדמוס, מעלה אני עליכם כאילו
היום נעשיתם, כאילו היום בראתי אתכם ברייה חדשה.“

Because you have come before me in judgment on this day and gone forth with a pardon,
I credit you as if you as if you had been (re)made on this very day, as if today
I created you as a new creation.

Ultimately, the rabbis fuse the day's twin themes into one: by virtue of being judged and pardoned, we are recreated. Although the midrashic text emphasizes the effortlessness of the cycle of sin, judgment, and pardon for Adam, surely his hour of accounting, actually quaking in the Garden before the presence of God, must have