

## **Rosh HaShanah morning, 5772**

### **Rabbi Brian Field**

The Torah story we're about to hear is one of the most challenging, provocative, upsetting stories in the whole of Torah, perhaps in the whole of literature. For those of us who have heard it all of our lives, maybe we're so used to it, that it doesn't seem that problematic anymore. Or maybe we've just accepted it as part of the tradition, one of those parts that you just resign yourselves to. But it's certainly not what you rush to share about when someone asks you what you love about Judaism.

For those of us who haven't become inured to it, who are hearing it anew, or who wonder if they could ever take it seriously, this story presents a challenge. And that, I think, is the point. Because sometimes life presents us with challenges so arresting, so shattering that they change everything.

This morning I want to talk to you about God.

I would expect that many of us who believe in God subscribe to at least some of the following beliefs: the following beliefs: That God is all-powerful – omnipotent, that God is all-knowing – omniscient: that God is always there – omnipresent; and that God is all good – beneficent. But these beliefs put together raise an intractable problem: If God is all powerful, all knowing, and always there, and God is all good, why do good people suffer, how can innocent children suffer?

Many years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book, When Bad Things Happen to Good People. His book was a response to the life and death of his son, who died, painfully, at age 14 from progeria, a rare aging disease.

Another rabbi, a contemporary of mine, is Brad Shavit Artson. He is the director of the Rabbinical School at American Jewish University in Los Angeles. When he learned that his son was autistic, he went through a huge spiritual crisis. And, like Rabbi Kushner, he came out on the other side, with a complete re-evaluation about what he believed about God.

I believe the story we're about to read in the Torah is a similar kind of story, a similar kind of re-evaluation: Where Abraham entered into the experience with one kind of belief and at the end of the story had a completely different understanding of God.

I'm not going to use our time together this morning to dig apart the Torah story in depth. Because that digging was **Abraham's** journey, not necessarily ours. But I do want to use it as an encouragement to ask anew the question that I believe it poses: "What do we do if we discover that everything that we have believed about God is wrong?" Do we stop believing? Do we enter into a prolonged place of not knowing? Do we just walk away from the question? Or do we go deep into it, with faith that we will come out the other side?

I love the ideas that Rabbis Kushner and Artson discovered for themselves. These ideas attract me and inform how I work as a rabbi. This morning I want to share them with you.

There is a belief that we have about creation, *creatio ex nihilo*, "creation from nothing," which we think is based on the Bible, but it's not. It's derived from Aristotle and it's part of what makes belief in God's goodness so difficult for so many.

What the Torah actually says is:

when God began creating heaven and earth,  
there was *tohu va-vohu* (chaos) and the *ruach*  
(wind/breath/spirit) of God was vibrating over  
the face of *tehom*, the deep, God said, "Let  
there be light," and there was light.

So, according to the Torah, at the instant God began creating, *tohu va-vohu* was already existent, and the *ruach* of God flutters over the *tehom* (which had to be there already for the spirit of God to be able to flutter over it)!

The simple meaning of the first lines of Genesis is that there is pre-existent darkness and chaos. God's creative act is not the special effect of making something from nothing, but of converting chaos into cosmos, randomness into order. *Tohu va-vohu* and *tehom*, chaos & formlessness, have always existed. They continue to threaten the physical and moral order that we've created so far. God is still bringing the chaos into cosmos. In my reading, that's the Torah's view of Divine creativity.

Now let's talk about power for a minute. One of the traditional beliefs about God that I mentioned is that God is omnipotent, all-powerful. But when we think about God's power, I believe that most of us almost reflexively understand that we're talking about coercive power, power over, power that forces. We are conditioned to think about God's power as coercive, I suspect, because when we think about human strength and force, we also think of coercive power - warriors, despots, pharaohs, führers, and terrorists.

But when you really think about it, it turns out throughout history that coercion might yield power in the short term, long-term power is not coercive. The most transformative power is **persuasive**. In your own life, has it been coercion that has had the biggest impact on your life. Think about how you have been transformed by a great mentor, a really inspiring teacher or parent, or partner - people who broadened your vision, encouraged you, and made it possible for you to do something you never thought possible. They didn't force you: they invited you to be yourself, lured you to exceed your prior limitations. The truly transformative stories in the Bible are filled with examples of God using not coercive, but persuasive power to enlist our participation in creating a worthy, covenanted future.

So here are two ideas: (1) creation, Divine creation is **not** the transformation of nothing into something, but the steady conversion of chaos into cosmos, randomness into order. (2) And this happens, not through coercive power, power over, but through persuasion, encouragement, love.

And that takes us to a new way of relating to God.

It's called Process Thought, which was first articulated by Oliver North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and John Cobb, among others. According to Process Thought, everything is in the process of becoming, and everything is in the midst of change and growth. It is God who provides the grounds for our creativity, our becoming more connected, more just, more compassionate.

Here's what Rabbi Artson, the father of the autistic child, wrote:

"Instead of looking up to God to be the all powerful bully in the sky, the one who can create exceptions to the rule, Process Thought pictures God as the very exemplar of the rules - the One who makes it possible for us to surpass ourselves, the One who inspires us to ever new levels of love and creativity. Instead of looking for God in magic, I look for God in my son's refusal to let himself be defined or limited by his autism. I see God in my resilient and courageous wife's refusal to abandon our son to a marginal existence. I see God's persistent lure in people in the community who look past the autistic label and embrace Jacob . Working with, in, and through creation is the arena for God's unique amazing persuasive power."

Rabbi Artson continues: "Tanks can knock walls down, but there isn't an army in the world that can give my son the capacity to sit through a class for an hour and a half. That transformation requires the resilient, determined, persuasive love of God, manifest not as the exception to the rules of physics and biology, not in the suspension of Jacob's autism, but as the way the very universe is tilted towards interrelationship, complexity, and creativity. God doesn't work from outside creation - intervening from afar. God bubbles up from within, working in us, through us, and with us. "

Rabbi Artson asks us to reflect on the fact that the universe operates according to unchanging physical laws. If you or I were to do the same thing over and over and over again without change, wouldn't the result be the same each time? Yet here we have this universe of ours with the same unchanging laws for 14 billion years, and, surprise - new and increasingly complex forms and beings and events continue to emerge. You have got to ask yourself - why? What is the source of that emerging novelty and increasing complexity in existence, what is the source of growth, of relationship, of the possibility for and our ability to love, reach, and help each other?

Rabbi Artson doesn't believe that God gave his son autism, or could have stopped it. Rabbi Kushner doesn't believe that God gave his son progeria or could have stopped it. Personally, I don't believe that God caused the Holocaust or any other horror or atrocity or could have prevented them. *Tohu va-vohu* is always present. Creation is an activity that contains the chaos, pushes it back, invites order where there was none. The *tehom* is always bubbling chaos, and God is steadily extending cosmos. But the *tohu va-vohu* remains real. The *tehom* continues to threaten, bubbling over in crisis and tragedy alike. And we particularly feel that today.

And what is God? As I'm coming to see it, God is the resilient force luring us to rise to the best choices and asking us to covenant as partners in the continuing creation of an ever-evolving world. That's what it means to be created in God's image: that we are given the God-like ability to create, to innovate, to perform deeds of loving kindness and acts of justice. And God's persuasive love is resilient enough to see us through.

What better way to wrap up these thoughts today but with an old tale about the wind and the sun arguing about who is stronger. Turns out this tale is a Process story. Listen:

The wind says, "I'll show you that I'm stronger. I'm going to get those people to remove their jackets." But the more the wind blew to force their jackets off, the more the people clutched their jackets tight. The Sun said, "You're trying the wrong kind of strength. Watch." And the sun simply radiated light. And as the sun's beams beckoned, the people loosened up their jackets. Eventually the sun's light was so beautiful and so intoxicating that they chose to take their jackets off, because they wanted to. A God of invitational power is actually the God I can experience and believe in.

I don't believe in the up there/out there bully in the sky. I believe in a God who is creating, out of chaos, a universe in which I, and you and the rest of creation, are invited to co-create cosmos, connection, justice and love. Each of us already knows in our hearts what our best choices are at this moment. Yet, even now, we remain free to demur, free to indulge our anger, our pettiness, our horniness, our hunger, our exhaustion - whatever it is that makes us deviate from the mitzvah that awaits, and our truest, best selves, the *image of God* within. But God loves us with an *ahavat olam*, an unlimited love. God bids us to make the best choice and gives us the capacity to make it. "See," says God, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your children may live."

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