

“Teach Your Children Well”

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The Torah uses several names for Rosh Hashanah. The New Year, the Day of the Shofar, the Day of Remembrance. Our earliest sages considered the significance of this day and created their own name for it: *Hayom harat olam*. “This is the day of the world’s birth.” Rosh Hashanah is the day the world is reborn. Tonight, as we turn the calendar to a new year, we assert that everything is new, everything is refreshed, as if all of creation begins again on Rosh Hashanah.

In truth the second word in that phrase, *harat*, implies something even more basic and primordial than birth. It is used in the Bible to refer to the conception of life, and in modern Hebrew it forms the basis of the word for pregnancy. Thus we might say, *Hayom harat olam*: “Today the world is conceived.”

This Rosh Hashanah I feel acutely that our world is conceived anew. As many of you know, my wonderful wife Haley is expecting twins imminently. Thus we have spent much of this Jewish year preparing and anticipating; getting ready to meet these two human beings. Naturally, I have been considering what this means for my own life.

I was particularly inspired a beautiful piece by one of my favorite writers, Daniel Mendelsohn, in *The New Yorker* this past spring. Mendelsohn is a classics professor, and he writes about teaching a college course on the *Odyssey*. One of the students, auditing the class, is his 91 year-old father. He writes:

It is not for nothing that, in the original Greek, the first word in the first line of the... epic is *andra*: “man.” The poem begins with the story of Odysseus’ son, a youth in search of his long-lost father. It focusses next on the hero himself... as he struggles to return home, where he will reclaim his identity as father, husband, and king... And, in its final book, [the *Odyssey*] gives us a vision of what a man might look like after his life’s adventures are over: the hero’s elderly father, the last person with whom Odysseus is reunited, now a decrepit recluse who has withdrawn to his orchard, tired of life. The boy, the adult, the ancient: the three ages of man.¹

¹ “A Father’s Final *Odyssey*,” by Daniel Mendelsohn. *The New Yorker*, April 24, 2017.

Perhaps it's because I feel acutely that I am on the brink of new stage that Mendelsohn's description of the Odyssey has stayed with me. "The boy, the adult, the ancient: the three ages of man."

I also realized that the Greek paradigm intersects perfectly with the "ideal" Jewish life span. In Hebrew the most authentic blessing one can share at a birthday party is *Ad me'ah v'esrim* – "May you live to 120!" Why 120? The very last verses of the Torah tell of Moses' death at age 120. But that number, 120, is itself there for a reason.

In the Torah there are three magic numbers, each meant to be read figuratively, not literally. The first magic number is 3 and it stands figuratively for "a little bit." Seven, as in the number of days of the week, means "a medium amount." And 40, as in "it rained for 40 days and 40 nights," or "we wandered for 40 years in the desert," is meant to be read as "a whole lot." So 120 is the multiplication of magic numbers: 40 times 3. It is as if the Torah is saying that Moses, the ideal human, lived the ideal lifespan.

I also turned 40 this year. Thus the first third of my (God willing!) 120 years is now complete. While I am grateful for the "whole lot" of experiences I have gathered through these first 40 years, it is difficult for me to acknowledge that I am no longer a young man. I am on the threshold of a new stage; having turned 40, about to become a father, an adult.

Mendelsohn sums up the Odyssey by writing, "The underlying journey that the poem charts is a man's passage through life, from birth to death... What is the journey like? And how do you tell the story of it?" Each of us has asked these exact questions. What is this journey I am on? What will my story be?

Our sages tell the following parable about how our journey begins:

In utero a person knows all of Torah from beginning to end. We possess all the knowledge in the entire world. Then, as we are born an angel touches us right here, above the upper lip, creating that indentation all human beings have. At that moment we forget everything. And we spend our lifetime rediscovering what we once knew.²

How awesome it is to imagine that our children right now possess all human knowledge and wisdom. Author Dara Horn imagines a grand banquet hall where not-yet-born souls imbibe vintages of history, philosophy, literature and the like.³ You, my children, are about to make the passage into this world. Soon you will be touched on the lip. You will forget everything, and begin a journey of rediscovery.

² BT Niddah 30b

³ Horn, Dara. *The World To Come*.

Your mother and I will have the responsibility of helping you remember what you once knew. As all of you who are already parents know, it's a daunting challenge.

Interestingly, Biblical parents are often terrible role models. Adam and Eve raised the first murderer. Noah got drunk and exposed himself to his children. Abraham proved all too willing to sacrifice his beloved son. Isaac foolishly gave the blessing meant for Esau to Jacob instead. Jacob favored Joseph so heavily that Joseph's brothers turned against him and sold him into slavery. And it only gets worse from there. It's almost as if the Torah presents these parenting nightmares so that those reading will feel a bit better about the job they have done.

And maybe that's why the rabbis of the Talmud saw fit to outline very clear and specific responsibilities for parents; a guide of sorts:

Our sages taught, These are the responsibilities of parents to their children: circumcise them and enter them into the covenant, teach them Torah, teach them a career, and ensure they get married. And some say, teach them to swim.⁴

Circumcision, learning, career, marriage: that pretty much summarizes the first stage of the journey, the stage I myself have now completed. Our sages' wisdom is also a worthy blueprint for what each of us might teach our children.

Circumcise them and enter them into the covenant... You, my children, are blessed to enter into this world with the most precious of inheritances. You are Jewish. You will be the next link in our people's unique story of strength and resilience. And may you live our unique mission to be a light to the nations. *Baruch atah Adonai, oter yisrael b'tifarah*. Blessed are You, God, who crowns Israel with glory.

Teach them Torah... From the beginning our people has wrestled with the question of what it means to live a good life. May you come to love our vast and deep heritage as I do. May you drink from the deep wisdom of our sources. And may you contribute in your own ways to the boundless ingenuity of our people. *Baruch atah Adonai, hamelamed Torah l'amo Yisrael*. Blessed are You, God, who teaches us Torah every day.

Teach them a career... Simply put, life is too short to get up in the morning and go to a job you don't love. I have been fortunate to find a passion that inspires and fulfills me. I wish for you the same, and more. *Baruch atah Adonai, she'otcha levadcha b'yirah na'avod*. Blessed are You, God, whom we serve with awe.

Ensure they get married... I pray that you will find a partner who fulfills you and who makes your life better. Someone like your mother, who brings the 7th wedding blessing to life: joy and gladness, friendship and companionship, comfort and peace. As I tell

⁴ BT Kiddushin 29a

engaged couples as we prepare for their wedding, creating a good marriage may be among the most challenging things that human beings do. But it is also surely the most worthwhile and fulfilling journey of our lives. *Baruch atah Adonai, mesameach chatan v'chalah*. Blessed are you, God, who enables bride and groom to rejoice together.

And some say, teach them to swim... There is lengthy debate about the purpose of this instruction. Surely on a list of such significant milestones, the rabbis cannot be speaking simply of swimming lessons. Tonight I posit that they are saying, teach your children to be adventurous. To expand their boundaries. To take risks. To get uncomfortable. You, my little ones, are children of privilege. You'll be born into the same bubble in which I've spent too much of my life. Great Neck to Manhattan to Scarsdale to Short Hills to Westport. Not exactly Odysseus, am I? I've played it safe. But you, my children, go! Don't just visit the rest of the world, inhabit it. Learn the vast range and breadth of humanity. Your life will be more rich and worthwhile for it. *Baruch atah Adonai, she-asani betzelem elohim*. Blessed are You, God, who made each human being in your image.

I return to Daniel Mendelsohn again: "The underlying journey that [the Odyssey] charts is a man's passage through life, from birth to death... What is the journey like? And how do you tell the story of it?"

As I pass from youth to adulthood I wonder, how will you tell my story. I say *you* because I have observed that at funerals, if the deceased lived a full life span, it is rarely his or her contemporaries – spouses, friends, colleagues – who deliver the most important eulogies. It is surely the children who define the story of the deceased, mostly for what the deceased taught and the example they set.

David Brooks has written about the distinction between "resume virtues" and "eulogy virtues."⁵ Friends, ultimately I will not be remembered for what I do on this bima. Anything I may accomplish as your rabbi will never be as important as what I teach these two. One day when I am gone, you, my dear soon-to-be-born children, will speak of the journey of my life. You will tell my story. You will determine how I am remembered into history. And I wonder, what will you say?

If I had to write my own story tonight, as I stand on the verge of a new stage, it would be a litany of my own failures. Whatever impact on the world I intended to have has been pitifully small. I wanted to do so much, to change our society, so that you might inherit a better world than the one I did. I grew up in a time when anti-Semitism was a relic of history, when terror only happened far away, when Israel seemed on the verge of peace. We have irreparably damaged our planet. Racism, we have realized, is not only alive and well but institutionalized in myriad ways. We are violent instead of peaceful, divided rather than unified, judgmental instead of open-hearted. Some of us have far

⁵ "The Moral Bucket List," by David Brooks. *The New York Times*, April 11, 2015.

more than we could ever need, while many more have far too little of what they need to thrive. This is not at all the world I would have wanted you to inherit.

I pray, my dear children, that one day, when you rise to eulogize me, you will have in mind the words of Rabbi Tarfon in Pirkei Avot.

The day is short. There is so much to do. The workers are tired and distracted. But the reward is so very great. And the Master of the House is waiting. It is not up to you to complete the work, but neither are you free to absent yourself from it.⁶

My children, I will be content if I can teach you the core of what I believe. Our time on this earth is short, so we better make the most of it. Our world is far from perfect, but there is there is much we can do about it. We have many responsibilities and obligations, but we cannot let them distract us.

This is the God I believe in: a God who waits – patiently and compassionately, but with expectation and with high standards – for human beings to act. God gave us the capacity to choose at every moment between action and lassitude, between good and evil. God encourages and nudges and gently prods us toward goodness. Because God knows we need the help.

I have come to acknowledge – reluctantly – that I will not be able to complete the work. But I hope you will say that at the very least I did not absent myself from it.

Hayom harat olam, “Today the world is reborn.” This New Year is pregnant with possibility. New journeys are about to begin for the two of you, and for each of us. May your journey be as blessed as mine has been. May it be a journey of wonder, hope, and awe.

Ken yehi ratzon. May it be so.

⁶ Pirkei Avot 2:15-16