**Birthday of the World: Finding Light I - Within**

In the beginning there was only darkness.

And then a great ray of light ended the darkness, and the world was born, the world of a thousand thousand things.

It was filled with light.

Then something unexpected happened, and the light of the world broke into millions and millions of sparks of light.

These sparks fell everywhere. They fell into everyone and everything.

They fell into all the people... They fell into all the animals… They fell into all the plants and all the trees, and into all families.

And they are still there today… hidden in everyone and everything.

That is why you were born and I was born and everyone was born - we were all born because we can each find the spark of life that is hidden in everyone and everything.

One spark at a time.

This story and its interpretation are found in a new book, called, “The Birthday of the World” - Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen’s retelling of a classic Jewish story as she heard it from her grandfather eighty years ago.

There are so many creation stories - ancient ones in the Bible and beyond, tales of heaven and earth, God or gods and the first people, jealousies and conflicts. Since the beginning of time, we humans have been trying to figure out how we got here and what we should be doing with our lives. And we are still wrestling with those questions.

Today, we are inundated with creation stories. Anthropologists and psychologists, economists and politicians, scientists and analysts offer competing narratives about our world and the human condition. In so many accounts, conflict is centered. We may not agree about anything but the idea that our freedom, safety, and sanity depends on defeating those who oppose us.

Yet here we are - inheritors of a foundational Jewish story about finding light in everyone and everything.

Rachel Naomi Remen recalls asking her grandfather, “If the sparks of light are hidden and we cannot see them, how can we find them?”

“Ah! Neh-shuma-leh, said my grandpa,” *Remen writes. “*We can't see them with our eyes. We can only see them with our hearts. Only your heart can see the spark of light that is hidden in everyone and everything.”

On this Rosh Hashanah Day as we celebrate the creation of the world, we are called upon to learn how to discern that hidden light.

Our first challenge is learning to see the light hidden in ourselves.

1. Some people may have trouble believing that there is a spark of light within them because they were told or shown otherwise. The words or actions of a parent or teacher made them feel like a burden or insignificant, bad or unlovable. Perhaps they suffered discrimination on account of their race or gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnic group, physical, mental or other differences.
2. Others may be unable to discern their own light because they are ill or heartbroken, filled with shame over something they did or said, overcome with despair about the state of the world or their own perceived inadequacies.
3. Still others may dismiss this whole notion of finding light in everyone and everything as hopelessly naive, a fairy tale irrelevant to the “real world” - where all are embattled and only the fittest survive.
4. And there are those who are too busy keeping their heads above water to consider how the world works and why they are here.

There are so many reasons why we may feel alienated from our light, from G-d, from each other, including our hurts and skepticism, preoccupations and restlessness. Yet our thoughts and feelings are not fixed; they don’t define us.

The shofar sounds on Rosh Hashanah, calling us to wake up, and engage in a cheshbon hanefesh, a self-examination.

Like me, you may have grown up with an understanding of the High Holidays as a time for harsh self-criticism. In this paradigm, it is as if we hear G-d saying - you better use these ten days to find and fix every mistake you committed in the last year and every character flaw - or else!

Thankfully, there are more compassionate understandings of teshuvah.

1. Interpreting a verse in Deuteronomy, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Halevi Epstein teaches, "Be aware: Your own 'anokhiut,' or selfhood, can be for you a blessing or a curse." Our sense of self can either help us receive and perceive gifts from G-d and share them - or the opposite. Both inflated egos and self-deprecating orientations obscure our true essence.
2. To Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, teshuvah is about self-creation, fashioning a new self, [involving] in the Rav’s words, “The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous “I,” and the creation of a new “I,” possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals …
3. A 20th century Chassidic Master known as the Netivot Shalom highlights the difficulties of rebuilding ourselves – “We put so much energy into building our own inner Mishkan, to merit the Shekhinah/G-d’s Presence dwelling in us–but then, after all this effort we make a mistake and the whole thing comes apart.

When that happens,our job is to turn around, take heart and set out to rebuild our spiritual home. Even if it comes apart again, we must build it once again. … Even if we have done teshuvah over and over, changing and failing, we must not allow our spirits to fall and become despondent. Rather, we must take heart and set out to build ourselves once again. … What we do must always be for the sake of generating inner light, that we never give up on building our inner selves.

1. Finally, a very different approach. No building or renovation required! Rav Kook teaches, “Teshuvah is about rediscovering and re-embracing an always present true, and whole, self.”

During Rosh Hashanah services, we sit and stand, pray and contemplate. The words, melodies and silence of this Yom HaDin, Judgment Day invite us to reflect on where we have been, where we are, and where we are headed - individually and collectively.

Whatever teshuvah approach you take, these Days of Awe are about transformation. Whether we cleanse or repurpose our sins, renovate, rebuild or rediscover our “inner sanctuaries,” on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are challenged to confront our mortality and purpose. Each person - in the words of the Beit Aharon - “is called upon to fulfill his particularity in the world” because “every single person is a new thing in the world. You and no other person like you has ever been in the world.” In other words, you have a unique light and the world needs your light!

We can be encouraged in our efforts to discern and shine our unique light by the Torah’s teaching that human beings are created in G-d’s image - all human beings including us!

No matter how lost or overwhelmed, anxious or ashamed, indifferent or doubtful we may feel, our inherent value is not diminished. We are not alone. We come before G-d as part of a people who are engaged in these loving self-examinations. As we seek our way forward with gratitude for the gift of being alive, this midrash offers hope:

Entrances to holiness are everywhere.

The possibility of ascent is all the time.

Even at unlikely times and through unlikely places.

There is no place on earth without the Presence.

*Numbers Rabba 12:4*

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner comments on this midrash - You do not have to go anywhere to raise yourself. You do not have to become anyone other than yourself to find entrances. You are already there. You are already everything you need to be. Entrances are everywhere and all the time.

For almost 30 years, I have seen members of our Chisuk Emuna family discern and shine their unique lights - often in challenging situations. Like the Biblical Hannah - the subject of our Haftarah this morning - who broke precedent and approached G-d with her personal prayers as she struggled with infertility, like Moses who overcome his initial refusal to accept G-d’s appointment as leader, you have found the strength and courage to overcome setbacks and losses to advocate for yourselves and your families and lead our congregation and community. And as long as we live, the shofar of Rosh Hashanah calls us to discern and shine our unique lights, to do our parts in tikkun olam, repairing the world.

In the midst of a pandemic, at a time of economic uncertainty, political polarization and a devastating war of aggression in Ukraine, it felt important to me to share this creation story with you. Today, we have explored the challenges and opportunities to see and shine the hidden lights within ourselves. Tomorrow - b’ezrat Hashem - we will explore how we find the hidden lights in everyone and everything.

Three final brief teachings: The Kotzker Rebbe succinctly asked, "If I spend my life pretending to be someone else, who will be me?"

"All that a person sees, hears and encounters comes to awaken him," taught Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirech.

Howard Thurman, the civil rights leader, once said,

"Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. ecause what the world needs is people who have come alive."

**How would the world shine if we lived like this?**