

Rosh Hashana (day) 5782
Hayom Harat Olam
Rabbi Betsy Forester

When I sat down to prepare for today early in August, I must say I felt angry. At Beth Israel Center we had come to the realization that we could not be together in our sanctuary. After over a year of doing everything we were told to do and much more, it was so disappointing. The prospect of heading into another season of anxiety as Covid cases increase with the Delta variant and we worry about other strains, made my whole body clench up.

So I opened my email and clicked on CNN's top stories. Not good! Hundreds of kids were hospitalized for Covid. Global warming is near the upper limit of reaching a point of no return. We're killing our planet. More and more to read about how deeply entrenched racism is in our country. More to absorb about antisemitism. More to confront in the ongoing dramas in the West Bank, Gaza and Israeli society. The resurgence of Taliban power. Abortion rights under threat. Genocide. More. Our world is quite broken. Can we bear another year of uncertainty and loss?

I looked out my window. The coneflowers on my balcony were loving the sun. And oh! There was a hummingbird! Under a perfect, blue sky, a lush denseness of green swayed in a gentle breeze. Vegetables were ready for picking in the terrace garden below. I have a loving partner. My kids are well. Members of the shul are going kayaking tomorrow. They're meeting at farmers markets. Good beer and ice cream are right down the street, and I just got off a great call with the good people helping us combat racism. Long-needed culture change is taking shape. We're setting up a tent in our parking lot. Rabbi Diamond is coming. Life is good. I feel blessed to live in this world.

Hayom harat olam. Today the world stands in a moment of expectancy before birth. Here we sit, at the nexus of all that is cruel, closed off, painful, and crumbling, and all that is loving, creative, good, and exuberant. And that is exactly right. That is what this day is fundamentally about, has always been about: How do we live in the space between "for me the world was created" and "I am but dust and ashes?" How do we live in a world that is so filled with potential and so broken?

Rosh Hashanah always arrives when it seems like so much of the natural world where we live is starting to lose its exuberance before going dormant. I think we have something powerful to learn from this impending dormancy. Because all of the glorious and luscious flora that makes this town one of the best places to spend a summer is not dying, although it looks that way. In fact, everything around us is beginning to create itself anew. And so are we.

Over the past, heartbreaking year, I have been asking myself a question: are we buried under our stresses and disappointments, or are we planted? I have thought a lot about what it means to say, as we do in our daily prayers, *hamichadesh b'tuvo b'chol yom tamid ma'asei b'reishit*--each and every day, God renews Creation. What can that possibly mean for us in our current situation? I believe it means what it always meant: Each moment is birthing the next. Dormancy generates rebloom. From distance we seek closeness. From deprivation we create. I assert that even when we feel buried, we are planted. The question is, how do we live into the symbolic meaning of this day and find the capacity to renew our lives, when it feels like in many ways we are barely treading water?

When Scott and I were on a hike near Devils Lake last summer, I picked up a large seed pod that had dropped from a thick and tall, flowering plant. I was surprised by how hard its outer layer was. It wasn't a shell, like an acorn's. It was not brown and dry. It was green and edible-looking. But it was so hard. I wondered how it could possibly soften enough in the ground to release its seeds. Judging by the surrounding flora, it seemed reasonable to assume it had a good chance of figuring out how to do that--how to soften in order to grow. That seed pod is the image I want to work from.

Already I can feel your defenses going up. Really, at this difficult time, the Rabbi is asking us to take our cue from a seed pod? Let me say that I share the wish to be in control. I, too, fear returning to a situation of prolonged anxiety and I don't know where I will find the resources to bear the losses that may yet come. What I do know is that we will not survive by refusing to see or hear what we do not like or cannot fix, and we will not thrive by toughing it out. So yes, I am here to say that we should take our cue from the natural world, and do what all living things are designed to do: to see ourselves as planted, not buried. And I am suggesting that we find our strength by taking a softer approach in the very places where we are more inclined to be tough.

Our tradition has a lot to say about this. I'd like to share just a bit.

In the Talmud in Sanhedrin (106b) the rabbis ask what God really wants from us--*Mai rachmana liba ba'ei*? It comes down to three things: *Shimittah*, *Yovel*, and *Ribit*.

Shmittah is the law by which agricultural fields are left fallow every seven years. In fact, this very year is a *Shmittah* year. The word itself means “to let go” or “relax your grip.” Imagine that you are a farmer and you have to leave your fields fallow for a year and rely on whatever God provides. That is a huge emotional ask. *Yovel* is the jubilee year, every half century, when all debts were cancelled and land returned to its ancestral holdings. *Ribbit* refers to the laws against charging interest. We are expected to lend out of the goodness of our hearts, with no guarantee that we’ll get it back, and to let go of any return on the investment. That’s a lot of softening. That’s a lot of letting go.

Why would those be the three things a sacred life demands of us? Because we cannot be in control of ourselves with clear vision and intact ethics when we are wound tightly. When we are tightly wrapped we have tunnel vision. When we are soft we can see and hear. We can exercise the compassion our world desperately needs. We can receive the compassion we desperately need. In letting go of our fisthold on what we wish were true but is not, we can rediscover what we truly need to thrive, and strive toward the light--both within and in the world we recommit to co-creating. Let the seed pod soften. Let seeds of new growth take root in a leap of faith that says life is good and we are here not only to survive but to thrive. No one thrives with a clenched fist.

The Talmud in Bava Metzia (49a) gives us another angle on this subject. The sages ask about the Torah’s command to weigh and measure produce honestly (Lev. 19:36). Why, they ask, does the Torah stipulate for a large measure, called an “eiphah,” and for a smaller subset of that measure, called a “hin?” If the hin is part of the eiphah, why mention it? Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Y’hudah gives a surprising answer. Now, he could have said, “morality extends to the smallest details,” but instead he reads a totally different lesson from this commandment. The word “hin” also means “yes,” and “behold,” and “how.” Rabbi Yose says that the lesson is that we are to be as honest, open, and curious with our “yes” as with our “no.” Think about how that applies to our lives. It is so much easier not to see beyond our own needs and to say “no” to new possibilities or requests. Walking in the world with an honest, open, curious, and affirming disposition toward the challenges we encounter requires a fundamentally fertile inclination (Bava Metzia 49a).

Our job, if we are able, is to offer this world a wholehearted, open and curious “yes.” We are the people that has always--from Biblical times to this moment--discovered seeds of new growth in brokenness. Our sages in the Talmud ask what became of the first tablets that Moshe smashed. They teach: “*luchot ve’shivrei luchot munachim ba’aron.*” The [new, unbroken] tablets and the fragments of the [broken] tablets were placed [together] in the ark (Berachot 8b). We would have thought that the fragments would be buried, just as we bury a Sefer Torah or any sacred text. But no, the broken tablets are

“planted,” if you will, in the *Aron* that the people carry in their midst. Today, we have a chance to plant ourselves with renewed intention--because we believe that what we do with our lives matters profoundly, not only to us and those closest to us, but even to complete strangers.

In Tractate Taanit (20b), Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Shimon teaches that a person should always be soft like a reed and not be stiff like a cedar. Due to its gentle qualities, the reed merited that a quill is taken from it to write Torah scrolls, t'fillin, and *mezuzot*.

And what do we do with *our* softness? The prophet Michah talks about what happens when we live from the place where we are vulnerable. “What does God want from humanity?” he asks, and answers: that we live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly in God’s presence (Micah 6:8). We are asked to live from the place where we are vulnerable--the place of “yes,” and “how,” that profoundly soft place where we hear exactly how we are called to birth our humanity into the world, and the place from which we create a world of justice.

Psychologists call this process “Acceptance and commitment.” Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) helps people learn to slow down and become present to how we are living in our reality, to cultivate patience and the ability to make intentional choices. Some use a mantra, like “be here now, or “Don’t just do something; stand there!” In the pause, we reconnect with our values. And we learn that to be alive is to experience not only joy but also sadness, not only blossoming but also letting go and re-seeding.

During the coming year, we will study Mussar, a Jewish practice that will give us opportunities to nurture the character traits we need to thrive. We will explore ways to offer one another space to be held in grief at life’s saddest moments. We will take the next steps in combating racism. We will have more open conversations about what’s happening in Israel and the occupied territories. We will find new ways to welcome and support interfaith families in our kahal. We will confront what it means for us to live on land from which native populations were displaced. We will enhance our efforts to combat climate change by “greening” our weekly Kiddush. That’s a lot! We have big plans. I hope you will join us in these life-giving actions. All of them will demand softening into “yes” and “how.”

No matter what each of us hopes to achieve this year, individually or communally, one thing is clear: sending new roots into the earth and sprouting fresh growth upward requires that we make ourselves vulnerable. It is an act of courage to choose softness

in a harsh world. Living into that kind of courage will give us the strength we need to bring more justice and mercy to a world in dire need of them, and to ourselves.

We can be frustrated and angry and supple and soft at the same time, when we understand that we are planted in this world as surely as eternal life is planted in us--*chayei olam nata b'tocheinu*. Living through uncertainty is not new to us. We have always found our way by believing that the life planted within us is sacred, and we are designed to be instruments for good. That belief opens our hearts to the possibility of hope. We affirm that hope in our daily prayers in the words:

"ברוך הוא א-לוקנו שבראנו לכבודו...
וחיי עולם בתוכינו. הוא יפתך לבנו בתורתו..."

Praised is our God who created us for Divine glory...who planted within us the seeds of eternity. May God open our hearts to Torah, inspiring us to love, revere, and wholeheartedly to serve the Good. With our hearts thus open to God's teachings we shall not labor in vain.

Hayom harat olam. May our harvest be abundant in joy and goodness, new hope, and blessing.

