

Rabbi Hannah L. Goldstein  
Temple Sinai Washington D.C.  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783  
“Pregnant with Possibility”

***Hayom harat olam, Today the world was conceived.***

On New Year’s Eve, in 2016, there was a “Watch Night” service at Metropolitan AME down on M Street. Activists and faith leaders gathered, as our country tried to make sense of the convulsion of hate that accompanied the election. At the service, Valerie Kaur, a Sikh activist, lawyer and filmmaker, stood small and powerful in the pulpit as she addressed the assembled. She concluded her remarks by posing a question...

What if? What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? ...

What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Because if we don’t push we will die. If we don’t push our nation will die. Tonight we will breathe. Tomorrow we will labor– in love– through love and your revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children.<sup>1</sup>

Kaur’s words: A new year’s message about love and labor, the juxtaposition of tomb and womb, the intersection of death and life. The mix of fear and pain and potential that accompanies new life- that is the story of Rosh Hashanah. It’s just not the story that we always choose to tell.

Each New Year, we enthusiastically sing *Avinu Malkeinu, our father our king*, but tonight, I want to talk about the mothers, and about the people who are the creators of life.

[A quick note about language: our traditional texts tend to operate in a gender binary, and Hebrew is a gendered language. When I refer to traditional Jewish law and Biblical stories, sometimes, I will refer to women and use she/her pronouns. But whenever possible, I will use language this is inclusive and recognizes that pregnant people can also be trans-men, and people who identify as gender non-binary.]

Okay...back to the creators. On Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish new year, our sacred texts are all about mothers and children. We read about Hannah and Sarah and Hagar, Biblical women struggling with infertility, yearning for children. We read about the binding of Isaac, and Sarah’s conspicuous absence. We focus on the perpetuation of our people, about the creative power of women. About the love and heartbreak and fear that accompanies raising children. About the mysterious, painful struggles that accompany childbirth. It is a holiday about longing, and despair, and hope. We tell the stories of the *creators* of our people.

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Kaur, Watch Night Service, 12/31/2016.  Valerie Kaur @ Watch Night Service 20161231

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As we come to the shofar service, the climax of the Rosh Hashanah service, we will read a piyut- a liturgical poem- each time the shofar is sounded. *Hayom Harat Olam*. In our machzor, it's translated as "this is the day of the world's birth." The translation doesn't really do it justice- some translate it as "today the world was conceived" or "today the world was born." I've always been intrigued by this line- but not until this year did I appreciate the passive voice-ness of the translation. *Who* was pregnant with this world? *Who* labored for this world?

It's a phrase reminiscent of a text from Jeremiah<sup>2</sup>, who, after a rough day on the job as a prophet, fantasized about never having been born. He imagined that his mother might be "big with child" for all time and he might have remained in the womb forever.

*Hayom harat olam* is a positive inversion of this idea- a kind of perpetual pregnancy, but one in which there is endless creative potential.

**Today the world is conceived.** Today is a day of pregnancy and possibility. What a radical notion for the holiest time of the year: God appears in our text, pregnant with the world.

As we turn the page on the year that saw the overturning of Roe v Wade, these texts call out to us. They remind us of the holiness, the divinity, of pregnant bodies. Since 2016, I have more closely studied the traditional Jewish legal approach to reproductive health and rights. And what I have learned has provoked in me a combination of pride and alienation.

First the pride- the war over reproductive freedom is being waged on a religious battlefield. Jewish voices have provided a check on a particular strain of conservative christian ideology that speaks in the name of religion. In a rare moment of near unity, Jewish organizations across the religious spectrum have spoken out in favor of legal and safe access to abortion care. Jews do not all agree on when and how and who should make the decision about ending a pregnancy, but there are instances when abortion is required by Jewish law.<sup>3</sup> There are lawsuits that have been filed by rabbis challenging restrictive abortion laws as an infringement of their freedom of religion.<sup>4</sup> This is a fight where our voices, as Jews, matter. I am proud to speak out, as a rabbi, for reproductive freedom.

But the Jewish texts that we cite to make these arguments are painfully disconnected from the life and humanity of the pregnant person that they concern. Callous and unfeeling, we fight patriarchy with patriarchy. Our foundational text about when life begins is a text from Exodus that is primarily concerned with legal damages. It explains that if men are fighting, and a woman is killed, then the person who killed her must be put to death. If she

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 20:17

<sup>3</sup> This episode of the podcast, "The Joy of Text," provides a helpful window into a halachic orientation to abortion: <https://thejoyoftext.libsyn.com/halacha-and-abortion-dina-shalev-on-family-planning>

<sup>4</sup> Here's a bit more about one of the cases:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2022/09/01/florida-pastor-rabbi-abortion-lawsuit/>

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is injured causing her to have a miscarriage, then he must pay a fine to her husband. This teaches us that life in the womb has a different, lesser status than a person who exists in the world.<sup>5</sup> This is important. It is a completely different reading of Biblical text than those who believe that life begins at conception. And, in this text, there is no mention of the humanity of the mother, or her injury, or her sadness, or her pain. It is cavalier about the life of the mother as well as the potential life of the fetus. There is no discussion about what it means to lose a pregnancy, or how it feels or what the *woman* might be owed.

In the ensuing talmudic texts and legal codes, we get all kinds of examples of situations in which someone might end a pregnancy, texts about the status of the fetus, about protecting the life of the pregnant person over the life of the fetus...but none of these traditional texts are about the agency of the pregnant person. None of them are about personal autonomy or trusting a pregnant person to decide what happens to their body. They are texts by men, often answering difficult legal questions with the same detachment that they write about eating Kosher food or when you can shake the lulav. So while I am proud to be part of a tradition that offers a religious alternative to the conservative religious voices that are encroaching on our freedom and autonomy, the Jewish texts that we often cite have nothing to do with freedom and autonomy.<sup>6</sup>

But I believe we can talk about life, and birth, and potential and power in a different way. Rosh Hashanah provides us with a template to celebrate and marvel at the complexity, and divinity of birth and new beginnings.

***Hayom harat olam. Today the world is conceived.***

Our tradition has generally avoided this metaphor. The Torah and the text that followed were written to deliberately distance our tradition from Pagan ideas of God's fertility and sexuality.<sup>7</sup> But we have lots of metaphors for God. We see God doing all kinds of other human things: being a king, sitting on a throne, writing in a book, loving us, judging us, welcoming us home. If God can do all of these other things, why can't God be a creator of life in a recognizable way. Why can't we embrace such a familiar, essential metaphor for God: pregnant, nauseated and hormonal, nervous and excited, scared and filled with hope.

Why does it matter? Why should we bother to uncover this dimension of our tradition? Because we are living at a scary and dangerous time. When the lives of pregnant people are at risk, when healthcare is being withheld for fear of litigation, when people are dying because their ability to be creators of life is being weaponized against them in the name of religion.

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 21:22-25

<sup>6</sup> Here's a source sheet with some of the foundational reproductive health and rights texts assembled by the amazing Rabbi Danya Rutenberg of National Council of Jewish Women <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/234926?lang=bi>

<sup>7</sup>"Hayom Harat Olam: One Small Liturgical Text, One Giant Trove of Interpretation." Gordon Tucker.

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We need to be clear eyed about our faith, about our texts. About the stories we tell, and the stories we omit. We have thousands of years of scholarship, our tradition read through the eyes of men, and in the stretch of history, women's voices, transvoices, non-binary voices, are just beginning to teach and interpret our tradition. I believe these metaphors matter because when we believe that power is always male, when we believe that God is always male, it makes it easier to discount the lives of women, the lives of anyone who is not male. Rosh Hashanah is a holiday about judgment, about fear and fate. But it's also a holiday about fertility and creating life, those ideas have been here all along.

I don't know how to make sense of a country in 2022, in 5783, where your life can hang in the balance because of your ability to bear children. What does it mean to enter this new year having lost our right to make decisions about our bodies and our healthcare? Let us not be so naive as to think that this is new. There are many in our country who lost the right to make decisions about their bodies a long time ago. Our country has a long and ugly history of dehumanizing indigenous bodies, black bodies, trans-bodies, immigrants' bodies. Perhaps the shock and the sorrow are simply an admission of privilege.

But what is happening in America right now is the latest chapter in an ongoing emergency. And now is the time – to breathe, and then we all have to push.

***Today the world is conceived. Hayom harat olam***

Here in our little corner of the universe, I want to believe that there is another way, to believe in the potential of the womb and this season of eternal creation. I want to reclaim the Divine mother, and I want to invite you to join me. I want us to tell the story of the new year not just as a tale of a judgey king sitting on a throne, but as a pregnant Goddess urging us forward, cheering us on, strengthening us for the difficult road ahead. I want to tell the stories of matriarchs struggling and longing, parenting and making mistakes. I want to tell the story of a day that is pregnant with possibility, when we gather for rituals that are very old, and imagine a world that is brand new. Tonight is the night of beginning, it's the night when we start to breathe and then, push. ***Hayom Harat Olam***, today the world is conceived. Together, we can create something new, and sacred, and beautiful. Together we can bring something holy into existence.

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#### **Final Thoughts:**

-Thanks to Emma Goldstein, Josh Friedman and Rabbi Jen Gubitz for their very helpful editing.

-To learn more about the Davis Center at Temple Sinai's work on Reproductive Health and Rights, check out our website: [daviscenter.org](http://daviscenter.org)

-Though they weren't directly referenced in the sermon, I was also inspired by *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* edited by Tamar Biala, *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement* by Joyce Antler, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House* by Audre Lorde, and *See No Stranger* by Valerie Kaur.

-Thanks to "Jewish Women's Clergy Group," a Facebook group for...women clergy. I shared my topic and several generous women shared their work.