

## Today I am Creating...

1st Day Rosh Hashanah 5770/2009

Rabbi Sarah Graff

My 4-year-old daughter, Eliana, asked me a great question the other day.

What is the story of Rosh Hashanah?

That's a reasonable question, I thought to myself. Jewish holidays have stories behind them - Passover, Chanukah, Purim, Shavuot.

But what do we talk about for Rosh Hashanah? Apples and honey. Round challahs. Going to synagogue. Hearing the Shofar. Traditions, but no story.

There is a story for Rosh Hashanah though. A profound story. It's the story of Creation.

According to the Rabbis, Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of Creation. Hayom Harat Olam, we proclaim, today in musaf, "Today the world was called into being." "Today the world is born."

It's not exactly "the world" that was called into being today though. It's people! According to Jewish tradition (midrash Pesikta Rabati), the first day of Creation was actually the 25th of Elul. Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the 6th day of Creation, the day that God created man.

So today is really our birthday. The day that we entered the picture, for better or for worse. Our charge, the Torah insists, is that it be for the better. Unlike all of the other creations (the sun, the moon, plants and animals), "God creates us B'tzelem Elokim," in the image of God! God gives us tremendous power, and also, responsibility.

"Pru, Ur'vu, u'mil'u et ha'aretz," says God. "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, v'kivshuha, and master it." The next chapter adds, l'ovda ul'shomra. Work the land, and protect it (Gen 2:15).

There's also a further command to human beings - not stated as explicitly in the Torah text, but understood from this story forever after in Jewish tradition. **The command to be creators ourselves**, to continue what God

started. This is the responsibility that comes from being made in God's image. This is the responsibility that I want to reflect on today.

Surprisingly, the rabbis find our role in the Torah's introduction of Shabbat. (Gen. 2:1-3)

*Vayechulu hashamayim v'ha'aretz v'chol tzeva'am...  
... asher bara elokim la'asot.*

God finished the work that God had been doing  
and rested from all the work that God had done  
God blessed the 7th day and made it holy  
for on it God rested from all the work "*asher bara elokim la'asot.*"

Most translations gloss over the strange change in verb form from *asah* to *la'asot*, simply writing again "all the work that God had done." There is an extra infinitive dangling off the end of the verse though. "Asher bara elokim **la'asot.**" Literally, it's "all the work God created **to do.**"

Ibn Ezra and Radak, 2 famous commentators, latch on to this extra verb and read in the role of people in God's plan.

The work of Creation was not finished on the 7th day, they insist. Rather, God created the basic structures of the world, and then made us to carry on the task. God rested on the 7th day, but not because all work was done. From thereon God would have a role to play and people would have a role to play - in all the work that remained *la'asot*.

This is a radical teaching about the nature of God's creation, and quite fundamental to Jewish thought. **Creation is purposely unfinished.** And our task, as human beings, is to continue the job. To utilize the divine gift of being made in God's image, and to spend our lives improving on the world we've inherited, being God's partners in **creating, for the good.**

There's a story in the Talmud that takes this idea even further. Rabbi Akiva insists to the Roman Tyrant Rufus that man's creations are even more beautiful than God's. To prove his point, he brings before the General ears of grain and delicately braided challot, stalks of flax and ornate garments. "Are not the challot and garments more beautiful?" he argues.

God gave us a universe of raw materials, says our tradition. Our role is to take those raw materials and create even better things.

So what have we been creating with the resources God has given us - our minds, our bodies, our money, our time?

I decided to pose this question to a number of people in advance of today, to see what I might learn.

I sent out an email to family and friends in a variety of life stages, and I asked them: "What have you been creating this year?"

(Second) "Looking back over your lifetime, what are the creations in which you take most pride or feel most satisfaction?"

And looking forward, "What do you hope to create in the year ahead?"

Here is some of what I heard.

The first response to my email solicitation came from a dear friend and fellow member of Kol Emeth. When I noticed the time stamp on her email of 2:44am, I assumed she must have been up with a crying baby, or else planning one of her classes to teach at Stanford. But apparently, that was not the case. She was up... sewing. My friend began her email with a simple statement, "This year I learned to use a sewing machine."

She reflected upon the satisfaction she finds in creating something she can see. She shared how learning to sew has made her think differently about each piece of clothing she puts on - the recognition that someone, somewhere in the world, made it. Someone grew the raw materials. Someone produced the cloth. Someone made the clothing. Even if machines did most of it, someone invented the machines, someone designed the clothing, someone ran the machines and created each item of clothing that you and I are wearing today.

Beyond that, she talked about her joy in creating something with a purpose.

Two days later, my friend showed up at our door, unannounced, with a surprise for Eliana. The surprise was a princess dress, something Eliana had only dreamed of. In truth, it was a leotard my friend had bought at Target, but now with long flowing pink and blue fabrics sewn onto it. You have no idea how much joy has been created with this dress. The princess dances, the imaginative play. Rabbi Akiva would be proud, I think. What beauty we humans can add to the world with the simple works of our hands!

Part of the beauty, at least in this case though, is in the giving of the creation. Even Eliana knows the truth of this. My daughter is a prolific artist. Every day she produces 5-10 new drawings, filling our house with papers that cannot be thrown away, but that she forgets about within minutes of making. When we direct her to draw a picture for someone else, however - to make a card for someone who's sick, or a birthday present for a grandparent, that she does not forget. She relishes the sense of purpose, the idea that her creation will mean something to someone else, and she remembers these creations long after they are gone.

Perhaps you have had this experience as well. The satisfaction of making a homemade meal for someone in mourning, or delivering a care package to someone who's sick. Our Chesed committee does this almost daily for people within our congregation, and we need more volunteers. There are flyers in the entranceway that tell you more about the different ways you can get involved. Some are larger commitments, most are quite small. It's a simple, tangible way to create and really make a difference to another person.

At the same time, we humans have the ability to create things that can impact **a lot** of people. Here in Silicon Valley this belief is just part of the culture. We live in a land of inventors - scientists and engineers - people who actually see themselves as creators, capable of making stuff that can change the world. I didn't really know such people before I moved to this area. Now I am married to one, and I find it quite fascinating.

My husband Scott knows how to do things I cannot fathom how to do - write code, build his own computer, and teach a computer how to learn and get smarter. He relates to God through his own experience of himself as a creator. He sympathizes with the frustration God must feel when God sees

us doing the wrong thing or stuck in a bad pattern. And he also imagines the joy God must feel when we do right, when we learn, when we do what we were made to do and help God perfect the world.

Scott currently works at Yahoo in a job he was attracted to because of the sheer quantity of people his creations might reach, hundreds of millions of users, I'm told. He struggles though, as I imagine many of us do, with his own sense of purpose. Is this really what God created him to do?

We discuss it frequently - his talents, his passions, his dream of creating an intelligent machine, his other dream of being a stay-at-home dad and creating in other ways.

I think about my parents and their life choices - balancing work and family, creating in their jobs and creating in our home. Somehow, in the midst of that struggle, my parents also created... a school. When I was 6 and my brothers were younger, they joined with 10 other families in our small Jewish community outside Chicago, and created a Jewish Day School, where none had existed before. The school was tiny, it was terribly in debt, and it closed after only 8 years. But it undoubtedly changed my life.

It gave me a foundation in Hebrew and Judaism. It also gave me a sense of how important Judaism was to my parents, neither of whom had gone to day school themselves. The school was our family project, day-in and day-out. We brainstormed fundraisers at the dinner table, celebrated together its successes, and mourned together its demise. It's a creation that no longer exists as a building, as an institution. But it lives on in our memories. And it lives on in its students, this one now your rabbi.

Many of the people who responded to my email talked about creating institutions - synagogues, camps, businesses, schools. Some lamented the folding of their institutions, the failure of their work. I wrote them back, with all sincerity, never underestimate the impact of your creation.

This brings me to my final story - the story of a fellow congregant, Lew Aronson, who died just 3 weeks ago. Lew was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma, a kind of blood cancer, 9 years ago, at age 36. A father of 4 small children (at the time) and an apparently brilliant engineer, he poured

himself into researching this relatively uncommon disease. What he found was that there was no cure for Multiple Myeloma. His life expectancy was 2-3 years, and research money on the disease was scattered over many different slow-moving projects.

While undergoing a stem-cell transplant in 2001, Lew decided a different approach was required. He managed to pull together a group of donors and then a group of world experts in his disease, and founded a new organization, the Myeloma Research Fund. Their goal: to pick the 2 or 3 best people working on treatment, and give them enough money to really do something.

Well, Lew, and his living-room-based organization, did succeed in doing something. In part because of the drugs his grantees developed, Lew was able to live for 9 years with this disease.

He and his organization created more than drugs though. They created hope - for thousands of people. Today when people get a diagnosis of Multiple Myeloma, they're given a different picture of what lies ahead - new therapies, a longer life expectancy, and new optimism about the progress being made.

They also created time - time that Lew got to spend with Jenny his wife, and Nina, Heidi, Tommy and Joey, his kids. When Lew was diagnosed, Tommy and Joey were 3 1/2. Now, they are 12 1/2, with 9 more years of memories of being with their dad.

I think about Lew, as I ask myself this sermon's question - What do you want to create?

There are many things I want to create - in the shul, in my rabbinate. And, as I speak, there is, God-willing, a new life being created inside my body.

What will my kids say of me, when they think back on their childhoods? - I wonder. My mom had a lot of meetings? My mom did important things with her life? What I hope they will say is my mom was there for us.

My goal for the new year is to create more memories with my family. Closer relationships with my kids. More time for my husband.

I know how easy it is to forget my goal, so I've made myself a reminder - I know this will come as a shock to you - a card. "Today I am creating...." I reserve the right to vary how I complete the sentence from one day to the next. There are still other things I want to create. Next week, for example, I really hope to create a Yom Kippur sermon.

The point of the card though is to remind us of the bigger picture - that our job, as human beings, is to be creating.

Some of our creations should be tangible, I think. Whether it's a new piece of software, a meal for a friend, or a simple card for someone who's sick, there is value in creating things we can see and feel and use in this world in the here and now.

And, I would argue that some of our creations should be intangible - relationships, memories, stories, healing, hope.

It seems unrealistic to focus only on 1 thing. But unhealthy to expect to create everything - the family and the professional masterpiece and the world-changing organization - all at once.

Luckily, not even God is expected to do this. God's model of creation is one thing at a time. One day plants. One day animals. And a regular day for rest and reflection.

So that brings us to today - Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat. Our day too for rest and reflection. I invite you to reflect upon the questions I posed back at the beginning of my sermon.

What have you been creating this year?

Looking back over your lifetime, what are the creations in which you take most pride or feel most satisfaction?

And looking forward, "What do you hope to create in the year ahead?"

In the words of Pirkei Avot, "it's not our job to finish the task, *lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor*, but neither are we free to desist from it."

Our job is to use our God-given gifts and to engage in the world around us - to do, "la'asot," and to create.

In a moment we'll pass out the cards, my gift to you this birthday of our creation. Our charge is to look at it fill in the blank. Today I am creating....

A school, a machine, a challah, a princess dress.

A cure for cancer, a source of hope.

A relationship, a team, a family, a memory.

Maybe just a simple gesture of kindness.

The possibilities are wide open. This is the gift of being human.

Thank You God for creating us, to help You create.

Happy Birthday to all of us.

And a creation-filled new year.

Shana Tova.