



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

ROSH HASHANA 5772 • 2011

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 29-30, 2011
Rosh Hashana Day 2

Trembling World



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5772 Enter the Heart”*

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Today the World is Born
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ABSTRACT

One of the most powerful Rosh Hashana prayers captures the essence of our times: *Hayom harat olam* – “Today the world trembles.”

Arab Spring. The economy. The weather. Israel – wherever you turn, the past year was a tumultuous one, filled with upheavals, surprises and changes, unlike any year in recent history. *Volatility* is the word that defines this historic year. The world was turned upside down. The world shook and trembled.

But is that all the prayer – *hayom harat olam* – is trying to tell us? Certainly, we don’t need to be reminded that the world is trembling. So there must be something far deeper here.

Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the world and humanity, the day that determines the destiny of the entire world. What will this New Year bring? And above all, what does Rosh Hashana teach us about our turbulent times? Is there anything we can do to calm our nerves and find peace?

When we are faced with tremors, and our institutions are crumbling around us, Rosh Hashana teaches us that the old system is dying to give way to a new, better one. The entire world is undergoing rebirth, and so are we.

And tapping into this energy of renewal is the secret to navigating our way even in the most trying of experiences, not the least of which is our trembling world.

1. Birthday of the World

Shana Tova! And happy birthday...

Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the world and humanity, the day that determines the destiny of the entire world. So, as a New Year begins, let us review the past year and the lessons learned in order to prepare for the upcoming year.

It was a tumultuous year – a year filled with many upheavals, surprises and changes, unlike any year in recent history.

In anything, *volatility* is the word that defines this historic year. The world was turned upside down. The world shook and trembled.

One of the most powerful Rosh Hashana prayers captures the essence of our times: *Hayom harat olam* – “Today the world trembles.”

Yes indeed. Wherever we turn, we see the world trembling today.

2. And God Remembered Sarah

Let’s look at some of the events of the past year.

To begin with – the Arab Spring.

In dramatic succession, popular uprisings have toppled long-reigning dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya ... even as dictators in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain are losing their grip on power.

Amid these momentous events, scholars, journalists and politicians are scrambling to explain how these revolutions came about after years of political stagnation and dashed attempts at reform.

Next, the economy.

Well, there isn’t much to say except that the only thing certain is that everything is uncertain. No one knows what is going on and what will be. We can’t even agree to disagree about the deficit running into the trillions.

It's like the story of a mathematician, accountant and economist who all apply for the same job.

The interviewer calls in the mathematician and asks "What do two plus two equal?" The mathematician replies "Four." The interviewer asks "Four, exactly?" The mathematician looks at the interviewer incredulously and says, "Yes, four, exactly."

Then the interviewer calls in the accountant and asks the same question "What do two plus two equal?" The accountant says "On average, four ... give or take ten percent, but on average, four."

Then the interviewer calls in the economist and poses the same question "What do two plus two equal?" The economist gets up, locks the door, closes the shade, sits down next to the interviewer and whispers, "What do you want it to equal?"

Even the weather - notoriously unpredictable - has been more unpredictable this year than ever. From a rare earthquake and hurricane striking the American East Coast, to the largest fires ever seen raging across Texas and California, from flooding and mudslides in Brazil (and other places) to a major earthquake-induced tsunami in Japan, and the resulting damage and leakage of its nuclear reactors.

On the Jewish front - both in Israel and abroad - we have had a very difficult year. With the fall of the Egyptian regime of President Mubarak and the new changes to the Middle East leadership, Israel's fragile position has gotten even more fragile. The flotilla incident and Turkey's posturing has added to the pressure on Israel. And now, we are in midst of a major confrontation at the UN between the Palestinians and Israel, between the US and the entire world.

On a more personal level, the brutal murder of Leiby Kletzky has shaken us all and has helped fuel the most recent crusade against child molestation and abuse in our communities.

3. Beyond Trembling

Yes, the world has trembled. But is that all the prayer – *hayom harat olam* – is trying to tell us? Certainly, we don't need a reminder that the world is trembling. We know. So there must be something far deeper here.

When Chou En-Lai, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China, was asked by Western journalists to assess the impact of the American and French Revolutions, he quipped, "It's too early to tell."

If that's true for the ancient Chinese civilization (dating to 1500 BCE) how much more so for the Jewish people – the oldest nation on earth (beginning with Abraham in 1800 BCE).

Both individually and collectively we Jews have seen the worst and the best of history. We have faced the abyss more times than anyone can count. We have suffered like no one else has. We have been massacred, oppressed, tortured, expelled, thrust out from country to country for several millennia.

No nation has experienced as much *volatility* as we have, through every age and virtually every empire of the last 3,000 years – be it Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Syrian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, or Soviet.

And – the most amazing thing of it all – we are here to tell about it.

As Jews we have much to teach the world about volatility, upheaval, crises – and above all, how not just to survive it, but thrive in the process!

We have the unique ability to see the bird's eye view and put events in perspectives, rather than being overwhelmed by adopting the myopic vision of here and now.

And that brings us to the lessons of Rosh Hashana.

4. Lessons of Rosh Hashana

Hayom harat olam – “Today the world trembles.”

The word *harat* has another meaning besides trembling. It means giving birth. Today the world is born.

Rosh Hashana teaches us that we are always being reborn. And we are, therefore, not victims of the past and of life circumstances – not matter how harsh.

The holy Ari, the 16th century mystic – considered to be the greatest Kabbalist in history – poetically expresses it this way:

On the eve of Rosh Hashana, all things revert to their primordial state. The inner will ascends and is retracted into the divine essence; the worlds are in a state of sleep and are sustained only by the outer will. The service of humanity on Rosh Hashana is to rebuild the divine attribute of sovereignty (*malchut*) and reawaken the divine desire [to reign over us] ... with the sounding of the *shofar*.¹

And the Tanya puts it this way:

Every year there descends and radiates a new and renewed light which has never yet shone. For the light of every year withdraws to its source in the essence of the *Ein Sof* (“Endless Light”) on the eve of Rosh Hashana ... Afterwards, by means of the sounding of the *shofar* and by means of the prayers, a new and superior light is elicited ... a new and more sublime light that has never yet shone since the beginning of the world. Its manifestation, however, depends on the actions of those below, and on their merits and penitence during the Ten Days of *Teshuvah*.²

¹ Pri Eitz Chaim, *Shaar Rosh Hashana*, ch. 1. *Shaar HaKavanot, D'rushei Rosh Hashana. Siddur Arizal. See Likkutei Torah Netzavim 51b.*

² *Tanya Igeret HaKodesh* ch. 14.

5. The Implications

The implications of this are enormous. It means that no matter what happened during the past year – regardless of all the trembling turmoil and chaos – everything comes to standstill on the eve of Rosh Hashana.

As the sun sets that day, the universe goes into a comatose state. A slumber descends on all existence, everything comes to a stand-still in cosmic silence, in apprehension of its contract being renewed.

And then...

And then a new, unprecedented energy enters into our lives and into our world!

Every Rosh Hashana the world is born anew. Yes, that means that you and I, and everyone here and across the globe, were just re-born with new energy, new hope, new possibilities. And that gives us the power to overcome any shifts, no matter how seismic.

This is the meaning a birthing. And of re-birth.

Volatility is very much part of the rules of nature that govern our universe. Add to that the trembling world in which we live in today – and our situation may look very precarious.

Yet, on Rosh Hashana (the day of trembling, the day of re-birth) we are recreated, renewed. And as such the trembling of yesterday gives way to the birthing of today and tomorrow.

6. Two Meanings

But don't these two meanings of *harat* – tremble and birth – contradict each other?

Actually, they are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, no birth can happen without a trembling that precedes it. To bring in the new the old must crumble.

Witness the birth of a new child. It always follows the contractions which open new channels that allow the newborn to enter this world.

Every form of growth, every worthy achievement, every creative burst is always preceded by the tremors of the past – by shedding old skin to allow for new skin. A seed needs to deteriorate in the ground – to lose its entire identity – in order for a beautiful sapling to spring forth.

So when we are faced with tremors, and our institutions are crumbling around us, Rosh Hashana reminds us that the old system is dying to give way to a new, better one.

7. Navigating Through the Unknown

Now, you are probably thinking that all this sound right philosophically, but what does it mean practically? How does one navigate through the unknowns and challenges of these uncertain times?

So let me ask you: How did the Jews manage to overcome all adversity and make it here today, despite all odds?

Rosh Hashana provides us with the answer to that question as well – in the form of a method that is both simple and powerful.

In addition to global rebirth, Rosh Hashana engenders personal rebirth. It is the birthday of the human race – the day when Adam and Eve, first man and woman, were created. In effect, it is the birthday of each one of us.

And therein lies the secret to navigating our way even in the most trying of experiences.

We can only be shaken up when we don't have strong footing. Psychologically, this means that when we doesn't feel secure and confident inside, we are very vulnerable to the forces around us.

Nietzsche said, "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." On Rosh Hashana we renew our contract with our "why" – with our essential purpose and our indispensable contribution to life. This in turn allows us to bear any "how."

Rosh Hashana re-charges our self-esteem. For, on this day, humanity was born – not just the body but the soul. On this day we were originally

empowered by the divine breath which turned us from a lump of clay into a “Divine Image.” And on this day, we have the power to return to our source in God ... to our divine selves, which are always – no matter the volatility of the moment – invincible.

Like a true birthday, Rosh Hashana calls upon each of us to recommit to our “why” – to our unique mission. Give birth today to a new idea. Initiate something new today to help another. Resolve today to bring a new light into your life – commit to begin or participate in a new study group, volunteer for a good cause, host a Shabbat dinner once a month in your home.

Do something new to serve others. Give birth. And in turn this commitment will serve as an anchor to help us through even the most volatile of times.

Today the world trembles, but today the world is also born.

Amen.