

Rabbi Holub's talk, ROSH HASHANA 2020

So how are you doing? We've all asked and answered this question a million times, right? And lately very often the answer we hear, and maybe the one we give, is something like, "Well I'm doing okay, except for, you know, uh, the world..."

"The world." In this context that usually means something like: fires, COVID, economic crisis, the upcoming election, the border, climate crisis, and on from there.

These days this place that we call 'the world' for short is not an easy place. It's not so unusual, when someone asks me how I am, or I ask them, instead of saying, "Well I'm doing okay," they, or I, say:, "It's all really hard. I'm having a hard time. Sometimes I can't stop crying. Sometimes I can't sleep at night because I am so worried. Sometimes I despair."

Sometimes I hear, or I say, "When will this end? When will it get better?"

Sometimes I hear, or I say, "I don't know what to do. I don't know what will help."

No one knows. We don't know the future. And we don't know how to drive the future in the direction we want it to go. We probably never have known. But now, that unknowing is so close to the surface: when will my kids be able to go back to school? When will I be able to visit my family? When will I be able to sit at my kitchen table with friends and share a meal? When will I be able to put my hands

on a challah with all of you? Where did our Constitution go? Who can I call to get it all back?

So much unknowing. We are told in Exodus that immediately after the Torah was revealed at Mount Sinai, the people stood at a distance, looking at the lightning and the flames and smoke, hearing the howl of the shofar and the cracks of thunder, dumbfounded and terrified, I am sure. “The people stood from afar — *u-Mosheh nigash el ha-arafel*. “And Moses approached the thick cloud.” (Exodus 20:18)

Thick cloud, arafel, is a special word — it means something like “deep darkness.” Moses approached the deep darkness. The prophet Isaiah, speaking words of hope about Days to Come, says, “For darkness may cover the earth and arafel may cover the nations, but upon you HASHEM will shine.” (60:2)

Rabbi Nachman dives deep into this arafel. He speaks of it as a “hindrance.” “One who is not aware moves away from the hindrance like from the thick cloud, the arafel. But Moses, who represents the middah, the trait, of awareness, approached the deep darkness. He approached the hindrance where God is hidden.”

And Zohar scholar Melila Hellner-Eshed, drashing further on Rabbi Nachman’s drash, says, “One who is aware can find God in the hindrances themselves. Through hindrances one might draw closer to God.” She goes on to say that in our culture, when we come to arafel, we tend to think, “How can we create a bypass to go around it, or blow it up so we can go through it?” Instead, she counsels, “Look at the hindrances. They themselves are imbued with divinity.”

Look, then, we might say, at what we don't know. Look at unknowing itself. Look at no clear future. Look at outcomes that may or may not be what we wish and hope for. Approach that arafel with awareness, with tenderness, with patience.

As I sit looking at the cloud, the boulder, the deep darkness, sitting with my not-knowing, through bouts of frustration and panic, occasionally something begins to loosen a bit in me — some tight place where I thought I was supposed to know things. In particular I thought I was supposed to know how to fix things that are broken. Tikkun olam, right? — repairing the world. I sure don't know how to fix this world. I find an odd little glimmer of comfort sometimes now in saying, "I don't know." "We don't know." "No one knows."

These days of unknowing I find myself craving the night sky. Back before all the recent smoke, when there were stars to be seen on a clear night, I would run outside, out to the road, where the view is bigger, and I would look upward for my beloved Milky Way. When I would catch sight of its faint dustiness spread across the sky, I'd feel a specific kind of bliss that, on reflection, I realize is very connected with my smallness. With the next-nearest star 4-1/2 lightyears away, I am fantastically smaller than a speck of dust, and the duration of my existence infinitesimally shorter than the lifespan of that star. I remember what it felt like to be small — barely reaching my parents' knees. I remember what it felt like to roll down a hill. I remember what it felt like to lie on my back, crabgrass itching the backs of my knees, and look up at the sky. I remember that feeling of wondering and longing and inchoate dread.

Hayom harat olam — today is the birthday of the world. Not ha-olam, THE world, but world. Today is the birthday of world-ness, that greatness within which

we are small. What is olam? I sometimes think that we live in concentric worlds: a world of calendar and chore list, a world of self, family and community, a political world, a world, though I occasionally forget, of earth, creatures, and sky. Somewhere in there is the inner world of dreams and imagination. Or maybe that is a thread that connects worlds to worlds in our little world.

A weird and gorgeous ninth-century midrash, from Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, teaches: *On the first day of creation God produced ten things: the heavens and the earth, Tohu and Bohu, light and darkness, wind and water, the duration of the day and the duration of the night.*

Though the heavens and the earth consist of entirely different elements, they were yet created as a unit, like a pot and its cover. The heavens were fashioned from the light of God's garment, and the earth from the snow under the Divine Throne. Tohu is a green band which encompasses the entire world and dispenses darkness; and Bohu consists of stones in the abyss, the producers of the waters. The light created at the very beginning is not the same as the light emitted by the sun the moon and the stars, which appeared only on the fourth day. The light of the first day was of a sort that would have enabled a human being to see the world at a glance from one end to the other.

Wild, huh? This midrash goes on to describe seven heavens— heaven meaning sky, not the world to come —seven layers of sky above this world — each with its own purpose: one for covering up the light at nighttime, another for holding the planets in place; a third for manufacture of manna, a fourth for the celestial Jerusalem, a fifth for angels to sing praises to God (but only at night, as it is our

job to sing praises during the day!) A sixth heaven is the source of tribulations, and the seventh is a place of only good, blessing, peace, right, justice and mercy.

In the imagination of our ancestors, the night sky was only the first heaven, the lid of the pot that covers the daylight and allows the stars to come out. Above that was much else.

This passage is only one description of the layers of reality — called often *olamot* — worlds. The Tikkunei Zohar speaks of Four Worlds, the *olamot* that extend from infinite Divinity through desire and design to our material world. This is the upside-down tree that we traverse together on Tu B’shevat, with its roots in the furthest world of atzilut, its trunk in beriah, its branches in yetzirah and its fruit right at hand in our world of assiyah.

Rabbi Nachman described this assiyah world, the one we live in day-to-day, as a *gesher tsar meod* — a very narrow bridge — leading to a world which is broad and welcoming and full of peace and plenty.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, of blessed memory, who was a student and teacher of kabbalah as well as the great modern elucidator of Talmud, writes about angels and spirits each with homes in one or another of the Four Worlds.

Rabbi Steinsaltz writes: “If in our world one needs prophetic insight or an opening of faith to distinguish the divine plenty in all its variety of forms and on all its levels, in the higher worlds, everything is more lucid and offers less resistance to the divine plenty...” (13 Petalled Rose p. 21)

When I consider this beautiful idea of divine *shefa*, divine plenty, flowing from world to world, my thoughts go first to the many kindnesses, the many beauties, that occur at the exact same moment as difficulty and harshness. I think of the people we have come to know in this world who bring us inspiration. I have my own list, and I'm sure you do too. I think of those people working under such dire conditions at Sherwood Oaks during the pandemic, students organizing in Mendocino and Fort Bragg and points way beyond to assert that Black Lives matter and that our earth matters, artists and writers whose work I love, comedians, poets. I think of teachers struggling with all their best to teach remotely, or at least to keep their students feeling calm and cared-for. I think of every one of you bringing your own particular goodness and care into the world, each of you a unique manifestation of divine shefa.

And I think beyond the shefa of human goodness to my struggling lemon tree, which is endeavoring against all the odds of my terrible care to make fruit. And I think of my beloved night sky, very much of this world — as much as is COVID and fire and systemic racism.

If one were to take a cross section of this world — just the narrow-bridge part, just the proximate world that we do kind of know, there is an infinity of different things going on at once: beauty and kindness and thriving right alongside illness and destruction. Even our little world, our daily world — is of fractal complexity and intensity.

Even more than I don't know when there will be a COVID vaccine or who will win the election in November, I don't know whether there are really multiple worlds, or celestial inhabitants, or layers of increasing transparency. But I take

heart, somehow, from the fact that throughout the ages our ancestors — no strangers to the same questions we struggle with today: when will this end? What should I do? — they looked up or looked out or looked within and felt that the world is large and full and full of shefa, divine abundance.

If I can find and offer any consolation in this time that we share on the narrow bridge, it is in the courageous imagination of our ancestors that we are small and the world is large. Our ancestors certainly didn't discount historical crisis. They lamented as full-throatedly as they praised. But even at moments when they faced the knife of history they imagined, or dreamed, or perceived and journeyed in an enormous reality — much greater than the rampaging Emperor Charlemagne, who was conquering the disparate tribes of Europe and converting them to Christianity on pain of death even as Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer was being composed, bigger than the pogroms of the time of Rabbi Nachman, bigger than the modern world in which Rabbi Steinsaltz lived until last month.

And they were able to imagine, or dream, or perceive and journey in divine shefa — divine abundance and generosity. It takes some concentration these days to imagine and dream and perceive and journey in a world filled with divine shefa, flowing from the clear and uninhibited upper realms to the world of our difficulties. And simply choosing to imagine ourselves into that generosity doesn't by itself bring refuge to refugees or sequester carbon or equalize the cruel, unequal distribution of earthly wealth and privilege.

But without this larger imagination I think we may be defeated before we even start. If we perceive the world as only small and cruel, it is very hard to wake up and start into doing what repair we do know how to do. These Holy Days and their

words and prayers and images are medicine from our ancestors to enlarge our vision of the world. They invite us to imagine and dream and envision and journey in the largeness of the world, and especially in its generosity and generativity —so that next time we say to someone, “Well, you, know, the world...” it will mean something very different.