

Rosh Hashanah Eve, 5779 / 2018
Pleasantville Community Synagogue

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For My Sake the World Was Created

It was said of Reb Simcha Bunem, a 18th century Hasidic rebbe, that he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. One was inscribed with the saying from the Talmud: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*, “for my sake the world was created.” On the other he wrote a phrase from our father Avraham in the Torah: *V’anokhi afar v’efer*, “I am but dust and ashes.” He would take out and read each slip of paper as necessary for the moment.

Each year on the Days of Awe I look for an over-arching theme to that is speaking to me this year, and I hope to you as well: something both timeless and timely. Two years ago, it was “In the Image,” about how each human being carries the image of the divine within them. Last year we explored in depth a saying of Hillel, “If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”

This year, 5779, I would like to focus on those two favorite sayings of Rabbi Simcha Bunem, to hold them in balance like the scales of the month of Tishrei: “For my sake the world was created,” and “I am but dust and ashes.” In the foyer you will find wooden coins inscribed with the two sayings, one on each side. They were commissioned by Rabbi David Zaslav, who with his wife Debra was our guest at PCS this spring. (And fun fact: the wooden coins were made in my hometown of San Antonio). Please take one as a reminder to help you contemplate the themes of the season.

On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate the creation of the world—OUR world. Our sages understood this as the day that the first human being was created. So tonight and tomorrow I will focus on Rabbi Bunem’s first favorite saying, “For my sake the world was created,” and we will explore both the magnificent possibility and the awesome responsibility inherent in that.

On Tuesday, the second day of Rosh Hashanah we will have a short study and discussion of the original texts behind the two sides of the coin, where each comes from and what they mean to us personally.

Then on Yom Kippur, a day in which we symbolically enact our own death and rebirth, it feels appropriate to focus on the saying in the Rebbe's other pocket, "I am but dust and ashes." Kol Nidrei will explore the nature of true humility in an age of hubris, and Yom Kippur morning will invite us to bring meaning to our transitory lives by helping others. At that time I will be joined by congregants who will offer us some very concrete ways that we can do so.

So tonight: for my sake and your sake the world was created! This is no a mere slogan. Indeed, if a miracle can be defined as something that is so against the odds as to be almost impossible, then you are clearly a miracle. Or to put it another way, you have already won the lottery. And much more.

To win Powerball, you have a 1 in 175 million chance. But that's *bubkes*.

In order for you to have been born, your parents had to meet, your two sets of grandparents, your four sets of great-grandparents, and all of their respective ancestors from the dawn of humanity. At each crucial encounter, the exact right ancestor had to be conceived that would lead eventually to you. Doing the math, scientists have come up with the **the probability of your being born as one in $10^{2,685,000}$**

As a comparison, the approximate number of atoms in the known universe is 10^{80} !

To describe that in more colorful terms, one scientist said it's the same probability of 2.5 million people getting together — about the population of San Diego — each to play a game of dice with *trillion-sided dice*. They each roll their trillion sided dice — and they all come up the exact same number — say, 550,343,279,001. And that's you.

Or for another analogy, from Dr. Ali Binazir:

Imagine there was one life preserver thrown somewhere in one of the earth's oceans and that there is exactly one turtle in all of these

oceans, swimming underwater somewhere. The probability that you exist today as you is the same as that turtle sticking its head out of the water — in the middle of that life preserver. On one try.

But go back further, to the astonishing fact that we have human life on our planet at all. At least one astrophysicist has estimated that there are 700 quintillion (a 7 followed by 20 zeroes) planets out in the universe, and so far we know of only one that has the exact right location, deep geological and astronomical history, and nearly 4 billion years of biological development to support intelligent life. *Then* consider all of the human ancestors who led to you. Whether you choose to believe that your birth was the result of divine will, awesome mystery, or just incalculable luck, a whole universe since the dawn of time has unfolded to make you and me and this moment possible. And every moment that we live.

To quote poet Mary Oliver: Now, “tell me what you will do with your one wild and precious life.”

Author EB White, an outstanding son of Westchester, once quipped, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan my day.” In Jewish tradition, the two go hand in hand. True, we put an emphasis on improving the world, but we also know that it’s a mitzvah to enjoy the world and if we refuse to truly enjoy it we won’t value sharing it with others either. We might end up like the proverbial rich man who subsists self-righteously on bread and water, and therefore thinks that the poor can live on stones.

According to the Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin, we will one day be called to account for the legitimate and kosher pleasures that we refused to enjoy with thanks to God. We were given this wonderful world, this garden of Eden in the vastness of space, enjoy, to share, and to appreciate with wonder. To me, the Messianic age is not somewhere in the far future but in each moment that we live with fullness and joy. To bring the World that is Coming is to enlarge that experience, to grow

our circle, and share the goodness of life with another person and another and another.

For there is another perspective on the miracle of your life, and that is a religious one. According to this perspective, whatever it took to get you here was God's a way of bringing a soul, a bit of the divine consciousness, into this world to fulfill its unique mission. To paraphrase Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the day you were born was the day that God decided that the world was incomplete without you. The people you touch, the mitzvot you do, the things you create, are your gifts back to the world. Or to paraphrase my teacher, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, your soul, on a journey of lifetimes, has been deployed to this time and place, here and now, to contribute in ways that only you can.

A friend of mine, Marva Lee Weigelt wrote: "I arrived on the planet with invisible gifts waiting to be given to the world. So did you. We need what you have to offer . . .

“The song of the earth needs ALL our voices, whether or not we think we can sing. I wonder how you will you give your gifts to the world today. No matter where you offer them, or how shyly or nervously, the whole will accept and magnify your part, though you do not hear a single word of appreciation. The next sunrise or rain shower or whisper of breeze through leaves, these are thank you cards to you. Thank you. We need you. Thank you for ...being here just as you are...”
And thank you for becoming all that you were intended to be.

Today is the birthday of the world. Today we celebrate the creation of humanity, a unique and precious life. Your life. Over these Days of Awe, may we take ample time to marvel, to appreciate, and to embrace this world created for our sake. And from that place of wonder to care and share and bless others with our gifts and lives.

Amen.