

RABBI HILLEL'S SERMON FROM
EREV ROSH HASHANA 5772
Wednesday evening, September 28, 2011

NISHMAT CHAYIM

The world began in chaos.

When God first began to create, it says at the beginning of Genesis, all was *tohu vavohu* – ‘unformed and void’ in the JPS translation, although in the Hebrew it sounds even stronger than that. As in the creation stories of many other ancient cultures, the pre-creation world is depicted as an infinite expanse of dark, deep, unbounded water.

From that starting point, we might think of the whole project of Creation as God seeking to make order out of that primordial chaos.

On the first day of Creation, God's first act in this project was to dispel the darkness. “And God said ‘Let there be light!’” And there was light!

“Somewhere out there right now,” writes modern kabbalist Daniel Matt, “a new star is being born. A clump of matter has attracted gas and dust, grown larger, drawn matter to itself more efficiently, until finally the temperature and pressure within are high enough that hydrogen atoms are jammed together and thermonuclear reactions begin. The star turns on and the surrounding darkness is dispelled: matter turns into light.”

Daniel Matt's description is a reminder that God's command “Let there be light” was not a one-time thing – it is ongoing. Matt says that perhaps 100 solar systems are forming in the universe every second! God's work of dispelling the darkness never ends.

Then, on successive days, God created the lights in the sky, and dry land, putting boundaries on the chaotic waters; God created fish, whales, seaweed and lobsters to populate the seas; giraffes, rats and porcupines, and trees and shrubs to populate the land; hummingbirds, dragonflies, pelicans and vultures to fill the skies; and cockroaches, termites and snails to swarm upon the earth. In God's creation, chaos was becoming order.

All of these, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, must have pleased God – as Abraham Lincoln said about the common man, that must be so, because God made so many of them. But by the afternoon of the sixth day of Creation, God must have sensed that something was missing. The animals already created were creatures of instinct – there was no thinking, reasoning creature that could be God's partner in bringing order out of chaos.

So after everything else was made, God reached down and formed a human-looking lump of clay from the soft mud of a riverbank.

And then God did something that God had not done for all of the rest of Creation. So far, God had created everything through speech: “Let there be...” and there was. But now, we are told, God did more than speak; God blew into the human's nostrils the breath of life - *nishmat chayim* in Hebrew – and the human became a living being.

That Hebrew phrase “*nishmat chayim*” is rich in meaning on many levels. *Neshama*, the normal form of *nishmat*, can mean ‘breath’ as in the usual translation of this phrase. But it can also mean ‘soul,’ or ‘spirit.’ So when God breathed into us the breath of life, God was also breathing our souls into us. The breath of God became *nishmat chayim* – a living spirit within us.

If, as this alternate translation suggests, all human souls come from the breath of God, then it follows that all human beings were created with a special connection to God – the connection of the living spirit that God breathed into us

Another word we could use for that special connection is a covenant. We all have it. It's standard equipment, factory-installed, so to speak.

Presumably, God wanted a special connection with all human beings so that we would help God maintain and increase order in the world. And our tradition recognizes that there was a covenant between God and Adam and Eve, and therefore with all of their descendants, meaning with all of humanity.

But that covenant got off to a bad start: Adam and Eve immediately reintroduced chaos into the world by transgressing the one commandment that God had given them, to not eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And in the next generation, Adam and Eve's first-born, Cain, killed his younger brother Abel.

Chaos already seemed to be running rampant. But that special connection to God, that covenant of seeking order out of chaos, was having some effect: as punishment for his crime, Cain was banished from living on the land as a farmer, and forced into the chaotic life of a wanderer; but eventually he was permitted to settle down, and is credited with starting a new kind of order in the world, as the founder of the first city.

Nevertheless, over the next ten generations, the chaos predominated. God finally ran out of patience, and returned the world to almost complete chaos with the great flood. Afterward, God made a new covenant with Noah, hoping, I suppose, that human beings would now do a better job than they had been, of finding order out of chaos.

In the Jewish tradition, the covenant with Noah centered on seven pretty basic commandments: human beings were prohibited from committing idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, and eating the limb of a living animal; and were commanded to create a legal system, to provide for a way of settling disputes other than by personal violence. Since all human beings are descendants of Noah, these seven commandments are incumbent upon all of humanity. In the Jewish tradition, the righteous of all the nations have a place in the world to come; and the test of that righteousness for non-Jews is for them to follow those seven Noahide commandments.

But after another ten generations, we human beings were still contributing more to chaos than to creation. God might have considered once again returning the world to chaos; but God had promised us, through Noah, not to do that again. So God had to look for another solution.

That new solution was to make a separate covenant, a special relationship, with one family, that eventually grew into a people. According to our tradition, that special covenant was made with Abraham, reaffirmed with Jacob, and then renewed with all the Jewish People, through Moses at Mount Sinai.

God's thinking must have been that the covenant of only seven general commandments that God made with all of humanity hadn't worked out too well. So God was now going to try giving one group of humanity – Israel – a much more detailed set of 613 commandments, with the hope that, by following those commandments, we would set an example for everyone else.

It might not seem like it, but, in a way, our special covenant has had **some** success: we have managed to spread at least the **idea** of special group covenants with God, and the responsibilities that go with them, to billions of people beyond our own group, through Christianity and Islam. Of course, some Christians and Muslims – for that matter, some Jews – don't seem to be using those special group covenants to bring about order from the chaos in the world. But some people in each group **are**.

And – hey – it's only been about 3500 years since Sinai! In cosmic terms, that's barely a blink! We need to be patient. As our sages of blessed memory reminded us in the Mishna: yes,

the work is great, and the Boss is insistent; even so, we are not expected to complete the work in **our** lifetimes; but neither are we free to desist from it. If each of us would only do what little we can, each of us in our own little corner of the world, those little bits would add up very quickly to a significant change from chaos to order.

That's really the question inherent in our theme for this year: how do you covenant? Or even before **that** question: **do** you covenant? Is it making a difference in our lives that we are walking around with the breath of God in us? Are we doing our best to live up to the expectations that must come with such a special burden?

About two and half weeks ago, we buried in our cemetery some prayer books and other ritual objects that are no longer usable. This is a practice that is known in Hebrew as *k'vurat shemot*, literally 'burial of names,' because we are required to lovingly and respectfully bury anything that has the four-Hebrew-letter Name of God in it.

Our *neshama*, our soul, our living spirit, comes from the breath of God, as we saw earlier. Is God's breath, God's spirit, any less deserving of respect than God's Name?

And if we **are** living in such a way as to be respectful of God's breath, God's spirit, within us, we should recognize that the covenant is not only between God and all human beings; it is also a special relationship between all human beings and each other. Because we are all descendants of HaAdam, the first human being, who received God's breath, we each received our souls at the same time, in the same way. We are each of us carrying around with us the breath and spirit of God.

Think about it this way: each time we breathe out, we are sending some of the essence of God that is in us out into the world. And each time we breathe in, we are taking some of that God-stuff back into us – and not just our own God-stuff, but little bits of the God-stuff that everyone else has been breathing out into the world. That God-stuff, then, is the content of the covenant that binds all human beings to each other, and all human beings to God.

It has been said that we, and everything around us, is made of the same atoms and elements that stars are made of. As Daniel Matt tells us in the quote with which I began, stars are being formed all the time, lighting the universe in answer to God's first commandment – "Let there be light!"

Can we do less? Shouldn't we be taking the God-stuff, the star-stuff, that is in us, and lighting up the world with it in response to that commandment of "Let there be light!"? Shouldn't we be using it to make order out of the chaos that fills the world?

As we begin this High Holy Day season this evening, as we look around the world at all the darkness that seems to surround us, we may wonder what we can possibly accomplish against it.

But God's commandment to "Let there be light" has not expired. It is still in force. It is the content of the covenant! It is up to us to light a candle, rather than curse the world's darkness. The mindless star-stuff that Daniel Matt described for us fulfills God's commandment. At this hour of remembrance of the Creation of the world, we – in our mindfulness – can do at least as much.

May this be a new year for all of us filled with light and hope and joy that we are privileged to share our God-stuff with each other, and with a world that is sorely in need of it.
Shana Tova.