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### Unified in this Moment of Re-Creation

The 3<sup>rd</sup> cup of wine in our special Rosh Hashanah seder this evening represents one of my favorite traditions – the idea of Rosh Hashanah as the “birthday of the world.” As we read in our shofar service, *hayom harat olam*: this is the day of the world’s birth.

On the surface, it’s a subtle statement about our fundamental theology. Long before Judaism arrived around 4,000 years ago, there had been many religious systems – each with their own attempt to answer the most essential questions about life: Where did we come from? What happens after we die? What is our purpose? And each early religion had its own creation narrative to explain the world around us. But ours was distinctive.

Previous stories were broadly similar to the ancient Babylonian creation myth, called the *Enuma Elish*. For them, the world began when the great hero Marduk slayed the dragon-diety Tiamat and cut her in half – one part becoming the heavens, the other part becoming the earth. It’s a story with great drama, but one that is completely different than ours. They describe a world that had always been here – because they simply couldn’t imagine anything else.

Our story – our Torah – insists that God created the world from nothingness. “In the beginning ...” You know the story – in fact, just one year ago (I realize it feels MUCH longer than that!) we dedicated a new art installation in our Chapel (by a wonderful Jewish artist named Lynn Rae Lowe, who grew up here at TBE) that portrays the seven days of creation.

Many of you have seen them, but I’m going to put them on the screen now ...



Day 1 – In the beginning ... “Let there be light” ... God separated the light from the darkness.

Day 2 – God created an expanse in the midst of the water ... separating the waters below from the waters above ... God called the expanse Sky.

Day 3 – God collected the waters and called them seas ... and filled the earth with vegetation.

Day 4 – God created the sun, moon, and stars in the sky ... to separate day from night.

Day 5 – God filled the seas with living creatures, and filled the sky with birds ...

Day 6 – God filled the earth with domestic animals and wild animals, and every animal that creeps on the ground ... and God created human beings in the image of God, creating them male and female ... “Be fruitful and multiply” ... and it was very good.

Day 7 – “Then God blessed the 7<sup>th</sup> day and made it holy, and ceased from all the creative work that God had chosen to do.”

That creation narrative is what we are thinking about tonight as we celebrate a new year – according to our tradition, exactly 5781 years since the moment of creation. And buried deep in our ancient texts, there is a detail that may feel small ... but which, to me, adds incredible beauty and insight to this story.

The rabbis asked: when, exactly, are we referring to when we say that the world was created? One the one hand, you could argue that it’s an obvious question – it says so right there in the Torah: “In the beginning.” That’s when the world was created, right?

Others might reasonably say, no, the world wasn’t created until there was a complete world – so it was created at the end of this story.

Maybe it won’t come as a surprise that the rabbis didn’t choose either of those responses. They teach that the moment we celebrate on Rosh Hashanah each year is the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation ... the moment that the first human being was created.

In other words, the entire world had been created – the skies and oceans and mountains, the fish and birds and insects, forests and streams ... but our statement of faith (not of science or history, but faith) is that the birthday of the world took place only when we arrived.

So why is that important?

*Hayom Harat Olam* ... Today is the birthday of the world. Except that Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of our Union for Reform Judaism, recently taught that the word “*harat*” doesn’t actually mean birthday. Literally, it means “conception.” *Hayom Harat Olam* – Today, the world is re-conceived.

There couldn’t be creation until human beings were present. Until we were there to conceive of this world. To imagine it. To hope for it. To yearn, to fear, to strive. To celebrate.

The reason our rabbis teach that the world was created on day six is because the story isn't about the creation of the world at all. It is a story about us. It is a story about all that we have created, all we will continue to create.

A seder is an interesting choice as the primary vehicle for commemorating Jewish life. But surveys are consistent – the Passover seder is the most widely-observed Jewish holiday, even more than the High Holidays. Which, to the Jewish mind, is strange if only because Judaism is a fundamentally community-centered religion – and the Seder is a home-based event. It is done with your family and perhaps close friends, not with the community.

And maybe that is some of its appeal. The 2<sup>nd</sup>-most celebrated holiday is still not Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, it is Chanukah. Another home-based holiday.

Here we sit – in our homes, spread out across the city and beyond. It would be so easy to slide into feeling disconnected, isolated, alone. But know this. Even from here ... I see you. I hear you. I feel your presence. Because on this day of re-conceiving, we are united beyond what we can see or hear or touch.

We are united by the breath of spirit. We are united by the soul of love. We are united by our shared faith in a tradition that has made good moments better, and has made difficult moments more bearable, for thousands of years. Faith in a tradition that will serve us well in this moment, too.

My deepest prayer is that at a time when perhaps more than ever we need the embrace of community ... every one of us will find small ways to pick up the building blocks of that community. A phone call. A wave from the car. An offer to help. An ear to listen. A heart that cares.

When we do, this new year will bless us with goodness and kindness, health and happiness.

Amen!