

Love is a Cosmic Force
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There are many days when my years of schooling seem to fail me – when all of those graduate courses, papers and stress don't seem to have any bearing on the present work that consumes me. And frankly, no one ever told me. No one ever told me how hard it is...to be a mother [or a father] and to raise a child. Really, it's the greatest conspiracy I've experienced in my 35 years in this world.

But as much as parenting a 2½-year-old challenges me to my core, she's an amazing kid. My daughter Addy is hands-down, no competition, the best teacher I've ever had. She's helped me discover wisdom and talent within myself that I never knew I possessed. She continues to open my eyes to the mystery and miracle of creation. And she's helping me absorb important truths, like, how staying out of the way often leads to the best results.

Of course nothing can really prepare a new parent for their transformed reality. But when I think about my teachers at rabbinical school, many were actually quite invested in my future role as a mother – more than I realized at the time – and the first person who comes to mind is Dr. Eugene Borowitz, the great thinker and teacher for the Reform Movement and beyond who died this past January at age 91. I was lucky to spend a semester studying one-on-one with Dr. Borowitz. I would read aloud the poetry and philosophy of Martin Buber, and Dr. Borowitz would interrupt to interpret with me, and often for me. We were studying the teachings of Buber, but in truth I was learning Borowitz: his way of thinking and being in the world. He shared stories, including one or two about his granddaughter Emily [who happens to be one of our rabbinic interns]. He didn't ask me much about myself, which was fine. What I now understand is that from his perspective, he knew a critical detail about me, his student: He knew I had gotten married a few months earlier, which meant I must have known *something* about love: the transcendent power of love, and the compelling force of relationships.

And since I was married, Dr. Borowitz seemed almost eager to speak about the intimate connection between mother and child that I would hopefully soon know. As an emerging Jewish thinker with an interest in theology, these core experiences of love would be crucial. For Martin Buber teaches, "Feelings dwell in man, but man dwells in his love. This is no metaphor but actuality... Whoever does not know this, know this with his being, does not know love...Love is a cosmic force...Love is responsibility of an I for a You."¹

Love is so much more than a feeling. Love transcends, and transforms us. We may not be able to hold *onto* love, but there's no denying that we're held together by the relationships and responsibilities created *by* love. Here Borowitz gets to the heart of the matter, teaching that our relationships determine our reality. Our relationships with one another help us begin to grasp how we might relate to God. And our relationships compel us to act. This is what it means for us liberal Jews to live in the Covenant in the 21st century – to understand with our being that it's not reason, it's not universal ethics, and it's not even law that propels us to action. Rather, it's the cosmic force of love's relationships [yes, the force of relationships created and shaped by love] that instills our sense of duty, and defines what we *really* must do in the world.

Dr. Borowitz's teaching and thinking all originate in a core question [or as we would say here at Larchmont Temple, a key *koshi*]. He never articulated this question to me; I've only discovered it in his writings. His ideas about being Jewish and being human all begin with this query: What is absolute in our lives? [Or said differently,] What is unconditional? What is our ground of value, which determines our evaluation of everything else that follows?²

Because context is everything, know that Dr. Borowitz positioned himself as a postmodern thinker, responding to the modern ethos that preceded him and elevated as absolute the human mind's ability to reason. However, on this side of WW2 and the Holocaust, it's strikingly clear that reason alone won't save us from ourselves. And given the headlines we face in 2016 with terrorism rampant across the globe, with racial tension spiraling in this country, and with the national election challenging the limits of our democracy, Dr. Borowitz's questions ring true: What *is* absolute in our lives? What do we *know* for sure?

On this day of Rosh Hashanah, with our sacred assembly and the sounding of the shofar, we declare: *Hayom harat olam – Today the world is born anew.*³ A bit more accurate to the Hebrew, we say: On this day the world is *conceived*. So let us journey back to the birth of the world – to the creation story at the beginning of Torah – to reconceive and renew our responses to the eternal call of these questions.

The opening chapters of Torah present at least two different perspectives on the creation of the world: one begins with humanity; the other concludes with humanity. When the process begins with humanity, we learn:

וַיִּצְרָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה

God formed ha-adam - the human - from the dust of the earth – ha-adamah.

וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה׃

*God blew into the nostrils the breath of life, and ha-adam – the human – became a living being.*⁴

This is a beautiful account. It's ethereal yet earthy, providing the biblical evidence that we are nothing but dust and ashes. This verse also affirms that tapping into our breath, our *nishmat chayim*, we tap into the Source of Life.

Now consider the other creation story that concludes with humanity.

Here, on the 6th day, Torah teaches:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ | אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ – *God created ha-adam in the image of God;*

בְּצֵלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ – *in God's image God created [it].*

זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם: – *male and female, God created them.*⁵

In this account, *ha-adam* – the original human – does not come from the earth – the *adamah*. Here *ha-adam* is created in or with God's image. And this being contains both male and female qualities. God creates more than a man on this day; God creates more than a woman. And this being bears more resemblance to God than to you or me. According to Bereshit Rabbah – commentary on creation – the original *adam* was as big as the world, extending from one end of the earth to the other.⁶ So in this way, on the 6th day, God creates humanity – *ha-adam* – the collective noun, the collective possibility. And it is humanity that's created in the image of God.

Now you may have heard before the interpretation that each human is created in the image of God, and this used as evidence for the sanctity of each human life. But what would that really mean? That you look like God? Or that God looks like me? I actually think that reading is a bit misleading, and may miss the point – not only in the original context but also in our context today. For after the Torah text describes how *God creates ha-adam* [the collective] *in God's image* – *b'tzalmo*, a few chapters later we learn: *When Adam* [the individual] *had lived 130 years, he bore a son in his likeness after his image, k'tzalmo.*⁷ Here Torah itself reiterates the point that Adam's son isn't created in the image of God. He's created according to Adam's image. God creates humanity, then parents bear children. Only *ha-adam* – all of humanity together – can bear resemblance to God. Only collectively do we reflect the divine image.

The rabbis of the Mishnah further this idea, comparing humans to coins created after the figurative die is cast: When people stamp many coins with a single die, all the coins look one like the other. But when God stamps each person with the die of humanity – the die of the original *adam* – no two are exactly alike.⁸ The mystery of creation is that we all come from the same stuff – call it dust and ashes or *adamah*, call it the die of Adam, call it cells and DNA – but no two of us are exactly alike. We don't look exactly alike, we don't think exactly alike, and Thank God. Human diversity, across all lines, is simultaneously our greatest gift and also our most serious struggle. This has always been the case. Despite or perhaps because of this tension, only our collective diversity is capable of reflecting the divine image – *tzelem elohim*.

Now what exactly do we mean when we say this Hebrew word *tzelem* – ‘the image’ of God? Let me try to clarify with two illustrations. First is the ancient Near Eastern context that gives birth to this phrase. In this ancient time, kings in Egypt and Mesopotamia were often described as ‘in the image’ of a given god. For instance, King Tut’s full name is Tut-ankh-amun, which means “the living image of the god Amun.” So the early verses of Genesis, as biblical scholar Nahum Sarna explains, reveal how our ancestors radically adapted this idea by democratizing it. Now, “all human beings [not just kings] are created ‘in the image of God’; each person bears the stamp of royalty.”⁹

Those ancient kings would also commission monuments, in which the gods were often depicted with or represented by symbols – a sun disk for one, a winged disk for another, and so on. Each symbol is a *tzelem* – an image. So describing humanity as created *b’tzelem elohim*, as the image of God, designates humanity as “the symbol of God’s presence on earth...”¹⁰ Only ha-adam – all of humanity together – can bear witness to God’s presence. Only collectively, as walking icons, can we represent the Source of our lives.

Illustration #2 moves us away from biblical scholarship and toward shoeboxes storing old baby photos...Derived from our key term *tzelem* is the modern Hebrew word *tzi’lum*. *Tzi’lum* means photo, an image that we capture, creating a visual memory. People often ask me, “Who does my daughter Addy look like?!” My stock response has been: “She has Matt’s eyes, but she does kind of look like me...in my baby pictures.” She may not look like me now, but in her I see an old image with new light and life.

Tzelem elohim is an image that’s beyond our grasp yet unifying, projected and refracted through our families. I had been working with this idea in my head, and then one day I witnessed *tzelem elohim* before my eyes, with my whole being. Over the summer, Matt, Addy and I had driven up to see my family in Massachusetts, and our first stop was to swim in my hometown of Newton at Crystal Lake. [Picture Manor Beach as a lake with the Green Line passing by, and you’re there.] I spent a lot of time at Crystal Lake as a young child but hadn’t been back for at least 25 years. This time it was Addy who ran toward the water like she’d been there a dozen times before. We could barely take off her flip-flops in time, as she raced for her grandfather, uncle and cousins already playing in the lake. Once we were all reunited, Addy clung to my father for a ride on his back, my nephew Sam swam into my arms, and what I witnessed was much more than the familiarity of family. The children do share some strong features, but the striking image was the collective one of a family that keeps growing and changing while still projecting a unifying core. There’s no question, that afternoon I looked into Crystal Lake, and saw the light of the Divine refracted all around me. And that hot afternoon, we may have been cooling off in the water, but I was dwelling in love. “Love is a cosmic

force...Love is responsibility of an I for a You.”¹¹

So what is absolute in our lives? Love. Love is a cosmic force that extends beyond my daughter to my nephews, and then keeps going. We’re each nested in concentric circles of relationship, and our inner core directs the whole. Our most particular experiences of love form us, transform us, and then compel us to care for the world. Love gets us out of bed. Love opens our hearts and extends our embrace. Love prevails over differing opinions and failures of communication. Love unites and obligates. Love exhausts and renews. Love creates something out of nothing. For in both Genesis accounts, God creates humanity with loving care and attention. And that’s the only way.

What is absolute? Human dignity. We need to take care of each other. We need to be humane to one another. Only altogether – only as one humanity honoring one another’s uniqueness – can we reflect and represent something larger than ourselves. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches, the reason that Torah forbids us from drawing or depicting God is not because God has no image, but because God has only one image: that of every living, breathing human being.¹²

What is absolute? *Hayom Harat Olam*. Today the world is born anew. God creates humanity, parents give birth to children, and once again we all become caregivers of the world – not caregivers of some, but caregivers of all: immigrant and refugee, Muslim and Jew, transgender, gay and straight, black and white, male and female. In a world becoming increasingly fragmented and fearful, we need to embrace each human in order to truly become humanity. We need to look out and see in this Tent, in the water, and in the world, the light of the Divine refracted all around us. We need to let love take hold of us, so that we can take hold of the world.

On this day of Rosh Hashanah and in the year ahead,
May we recreate our world with Love. Amen.

¹ Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons,

² Borowitz, Eugene, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*, New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991, specifically Ch. 5: “Not Absolutely Absolute.”

³ *Mishkan HaNefesh, Rosh HaShanah*, New York, CCAR Press, 2015, 207.

⁴ Genesis 2:7

⁵ Genesis 1:27

⁶ Bereshit Rabbah, VIII, 1

⁷ Genesis 5:3

⁸ Mishnah Sanhedrin IV, 5

⁹ Sarna, Nahum, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989, 12.

¹⁰ Sarna, 12.

¹¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 66.

¹² Green, Art, *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2003, 27.