

Rabbi Ozer Glickman

# Haftarat for the Second Day Rosh Ha-Shanah: Rosh Ha-Shanah and the Creation of Eternal Time

The modern study of linguistics has taught us that language is not only a vehicle for the expression of ideas, but that it shapes, and is in turn shaped by, them. In the nuances of Biblical Hebrew, we find penetrating insights into the Hebrew mind. The language choices made by the *nevi'im* often reflect subtleties of their worldview.

One phrase coined by Yirmiyahu and enshrined in the daily liturgy is especially laden with meaning. Although known principally for his prophecies of destruction (his very name survives in the word “jeremiad,” a sermon prophesying doom), we encounter the prophet in this *haftarah* as the comforter of Israel, bringing solace and promises of redemption.

מֵרַחֵק יְקוּקָה נִרְאָה לִי וְאַהֲבַת עוֹלָם אֶהְבֵּתִיךָ עַל כֵּן מִשְׁכַּתִּיךָ חִסְדֵּךְ.

In the Jewish Publication Society’s iconic translation:

From afar the Lord appeared unto me. Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with affection have I drawn thee.

Yirmiyahu describes the Divine love as “*ahavat olam*,” translated here as “everlasting love.” It is a phrase that trips lightly off the Hebrew tongue, almost as familiar as the words of the *Shema* which it introduces every evening. However, it is often the most familiar words that are likely to confound when we take the time to ponder them. They cause us to wonder how we have recited them so frequently without grasping their full import.

How does the word “*olam*,” which denotes “world” or “universe,” come to mean eternal? This is an especially compelling question on *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, whose liturgy utilizes the word again and again – “*ha-yom harat olam*” – “today is the day the world was born.” It cannot be that the universe itself always existed. The Rambam devotes a considerable portion of his *Moreh Nevukhim* to challenging Aristotle’s theory of the eternity of the universe, even disputing that Aristotle himself believed in his own proofs. For the Rambam, belief in the eternity of the universe is contradictory to the fundamental tenets of the Torah. So how does “*olam*” come to connote eternity?

Furthermore, one may turn the question on its head and ask how “*olam*” came to signify the physical universe. It appears throughout Scripture in a temporal sense much more than it does in a spatial one. Yirmiyahu describes the gift of *Eretz Yisrael* to the *Avot* as “*le-min ha-olam ve-ad olam*,” i.e., for all of time.<sup>137</sup> Recalling the prophets in Israel who preceded him, Yirmiyahu describes them as being “*min ha-olam*,” i.e., from ancient times.

Even the first word in the verse we highlighted from our *haftarah*, “*mei-rachok*,” translated by the JPS as “from afar,” intends more of a sense of time than of space. Consider Yeshayahu’s prayer:

יְקוּקָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲתָהּ אֲרוֹמְמְךָ אֹדְדָה שְׁמֶךָ כִּי עָשִׂיתָ פְּלֵא עֲצוֹת מֵרַחֵק אֲמוּנָה אֱמִן:

O Lord, Thou art my God, I will exalt Thee, I will praise Thy name, for Thou hast done wonderful things; even counsels of old, in faithfulness and truth.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>137</sup>. 25:5.

<sup>138</sup>. *Yeshayahu* 25:1. JPS translation.

The word “*mei-rachok*” has been translated as “of old,” substituting distance in time for distance in physical space. Verses like these have led some thinkers to maintain that the Hebrew mind thinks temporally, in contrast to the Greek mind, which thinks spatially.<sup>139</sup>

The idea of the universe as a continuum in time rather than a demarcation in space, though provocative, has great explanatory power. It helps us understand why the creation story in *Bereishit* plays no role in the *Rosh Ha-Shanah* liturgy. The Scriptural readings for the holiday emphasize God’s remembrance of His promise to *Avraham Avinu*, the first Jew, rather than the creation of heaven and earth. The birthday of the world is significant on *Rosh Ha-Shanah* not because we celebrate the physical origins of the universe, but because it marks the beginning of human consciousness and hence human accountability. This is why Jewish tradition assigns the creation of the physical world to the twenty-fifth of *Elul* and locates the creation of humanity on the first of *Tishrei*, the sixth day of Creation. *Beriyat Ha-Olam* is only a preliminary to *Yetzirat Ha-Adam* (the creation of Man).

The primacy of human consciousness also illuminates the epithet *Yom Ha-Zikaron*, the Day of Reckoning, another name for *Rosh Ha-Shanah*. The overarching message of *Rosh Ha-Shanah* is not merely that the world is not random, but also the corollary that follows from it: Humanity is accountable for its actions. Consciousness, both human and Divine, informs all existence.

It is for this reason that *Yirmiyahu* repeatedly evokes the images of parents throughout the *haftarah*:

בבכי יבאו ובתחנונים אובילים אוליכם אל נחלי מים בדרך ישר לא יקשלו בה כי הייתי לישראל לאב ואפרים בכרי הוא.

They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them; I will cause them to walk by rivers of waters, in a straight way wherein they shall not stumble; for I am ever a Father to Israel, and Ephraim is My first-born. (31:9)

The relationship between parent and child, defined at birth, is fixed and absolute. Just as God has always been and always will be, so His regard for *Am Yisrael* is not contingent on historical circumstance, but is sewn into the fabric of our existence. We are His children. Parenthood is a fact that cannot be denied, a relationship that is intrinsic and essential to both parties. *Hashem* and *Am Yisrael* are not merely fellow travelers, linked by circumstances, but Father and son, inextricably intertwined now and forever. Is it any wonder that on *Rosh Ha-Shanah* we read of *Avraham Avinu* and his beloved son walking together to *Har Ha-Moriyah* rather than the splitting of the heavens and the gathering of the seas?

*Yirmiyahu* challenges us to ponder our position as parents and children in order to understand our responsibilities to the Divine. This is an emotion-laden exercise. Children may have the potential to disappoint but they never lose their ability to delight. Ephraim is the “*yeled sha’ashuim*,” the little boy who no matter how many times he falls short ultimately evokes a smile from his Father. Even the very thought of a child can delight a parent. Though our children leave our orbit and head out on their own, their return is ever anticipated and perennially welcome. This is a relationship that any loving parent can relate to, and therefore the best analogue to the relationship between the Omniscient God and His errant children.

When we become parents, we learn that which is at once the tragedy and the promise of human existence: We are fated to love our children more than they love us. Furthermore, being a parent means having an unlimited capacity to forgive. Therefore, according to *Halakhah*, only one with children may serve as a judge in a capital case – for having children teaches one to love unqualifiedly.

The human mind cannot fathom the Divine. The closest we can come to understanding the nature of God’s unqualified love for *Am Yisrael* is to reflect on our love as parents. In our *haftarah*, the *navi* challenges us to build on our experience as children and parents in order to comprehend the extent of God’s love for us and His unlimited capacity to forgive.

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<sup>139</sup>. See Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*. Norton: New York (1970).