

“Today is the Creation of the World”
דבר תורה (sermon) for the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5770 (2009)

היום הרת עולם – *today is the creation of the world!* These are the words we say during the repetition of the Amidah after we blow the shofar. *Today is the creation of the world!* What do we mean by that? The Earth has been around for quite some time. We also say in the Musaf Amidah ליום ראשון זכרון מעשיך תחלת מעשה בראשית *this day is the beginning of your creation, a remembrance of the first day.* If today is a remembrance of the first day, how can it be the *beginning* of creation?

Perhaps the key to understanding these words in our prayers is to realize that the world is always moving, always changing. Every day, every moment, is a different moment. In our daily prayers we say that God is *the one who, in his goodness, renews every day the works of creation.* And so, in a manner of speaking, every day, every moment, God is creating the world.

But then what is so special about today? How can we say that today, in particular, is the creation of the world? The answer to that question is that God’s creation cannot be complete without God’s partners in creation. You see, much as the world is constantly in a state of change, it is also constantly incomplete. The world, in many ways, is less than perfect. There is war and enmity, sickness and disease, hunger and famine. We realize that God has given humanity the challenge and responsibility of *תקון עולם (tikun olam)*– repairing and completing God’s world. Why is today the creation of the world? Because on Rosh Hashanah we remind ourselves that we stand as partners in God’s creation and we hope to renew our efforts toward that goal.

Tikun Olam . . . fixing the world . . . it sounds like such a daunting task, doesn’t it? How can we repair the world? What effect can we have? Can we end all wars? Cure all famines? Heal all injuries? Of course not. No one can change the world for everyone else in the world. There are probably billions of people in this world who will never be affected, even in the slightest bit by what the President of United States does. No, you can’t change the world for everyone. But you can change the world for yourself, and for the people around you. Maybe you can’t end all wars . . . but perhaps you can stop one fight between two people. Maybe you can’t cure famine . . . but you can feed one hungry person. Maybe you can’t comfort every person who is sick or bereaved . . . but you can comfort one person. And don’t for a minute think that those contributions are too small to matter. They mean the world to the people you touch.

Think about what the world looks like for a person who is hungry, and then think about what that world looks like to that same person, shown kindness by a person who provides him with a meal. Imagine what the world looked like to you the last time you felt alone, and then what the world felt like when you realized that you had a friend. Remember what you felt like when the world was treating you unfairly, and no one else seemed to care – and then how you felt when someone told you that they cared enough to fight for your cause.

And how did your life change the last time you were the person to answer the call of someone in need? How did the world change for you when you realized that your life had a positive purpose? When you realized that you had an impact?

I'll give you an example of two minutes of kindness that changed the world for both people involved. When I was in college, there was a short-order chef in a cafeteria I went to. Nice guy. Actually, his name was Guy. For the two minutes it took me to get my tuna melt, or whatever else, we would chat a bit. I'm not sure if he even knew my name. To him, I was simply “Met fan!” We weren't best friends, but he was a good guy that I saw most days. One year, I think around Thanksgiving time, Guy was the victim of a mugging. He was shot several times and critically injured outside a grocery. I got an e-mail about this from the college. It so happened that Guy was in a hospital not too far from my parent's home, and so I went out to make a quick visit to Guy. He was still in ICU, with lots of tubes all around. I think I stayed for about two minutes. Really, I didn't think that much of it. It was just a couple of minutes. Then, a month or two later I was reading the college bulletin, and there was an article written by Guy, talking about how a few of his customers from the cafeteria had come to visit him in the hospital. He described how difficult it was for him after he was shot. All the pain, all the difficulty. He wrote about how he really wasn't sure whether the struggle to live was worth it. Until he got those visits from a few of us. He described what it meant for him to know that his life mattered. That what he did mattered to people. That people cared. Y'know, at the time I didn't think much about those two minutes I spent in that hospital. It was something nice to do. It turned out, it was two minutes that had a big part in changing the world for two people. I now think back to those two minutes as perhaps the most precious two minutes of my entire life.

Simple actions of caring for others can change the whole world, at least for the people involved. And so, we say, היום הרת עולם – *today is the creation of the world!* Today is the day where we renew our efforts to have a positive impact on this world. We ask ourselves: how are we going to change the world for the better this year? What are we going to do differently? I am not just talking about what particular thing we're going to do to help a particular individual or group. I want to know how we can be sure that we remain thirsty to drink from the well of good deeds. How do we make sure that this really is the dawn of a new world for us? We can't just wish that to be the reality, we have to make it our reality. How do we do that?

This first step is to recognize our hunger for more. The Bible tells us that we have an obligation to admonish people for their failures. הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ *you shall surely admonish your kinsman.*¹ How much more so for our own failures. *We have to be our own best friends!* And that means not only that we pat ourselves on the back, but that we demand more of ourselves. Several years ago, I heard Reverend Richard John Neuhaus paraphrasing the teachings of Pope John Paul II in a way that I think said it perfectly: "Settle for nothing less than moral and spiritual greatness. That's what God created you for. Don't cheat yourself."² We need to recognize that we are capable of doing better for those around us. We must recognize that capability, and demand of ourselves that we turn our potential into reality.

And that's why we are here today. We come to synagogue to reflect on our lives, to realize our successes and recognize our failings – and in so doing to strengthen our resolve to tip the balance toward greater success in the future. We look to God and to the Torah as our guides, to inspire and to inform our deeds. We are here to remind ourselves that our desire to do better is not only our own desire, but what God and the world have a right to demand of us.

¹ Lev. 19:17

² Meet The Press, Easter Sunday Special, 2006,

For most of us, we think of religion, and particularly the עשרת ימי תשובה *the ten days of repentance* as an opportunity to ask God to give us life. But that's not quite it. The true reason we are here is to remind ourselves of how we can make ourselves worthy of however many years we have on this Earth. We look to our faith to remind us that we have the responsibility, and the capability, to achieve תקון עולם (*tikun olam*) – making the world a better place because we have stepped into it. If we realize that message. If we are committed to living out that message. If we succeed in moving forward in life with a dedication to realizing and living our ultimate purpose - then how powerful do those words become - היום הרת עולם - (*hayom harat olam*) – today, you and I are creating a better world for the future. So may it be God's will, and so may it be our own will. And let us say, Amen.