

R Sacks Renewal and Rosh Hashanah

Order will be

1) Creation Man and Gd

2) Unitaneh Tokef - Fate. Hope - followed by eiyen kitzvah -
mashup cheres- that IS life - that is real joy, to accept
that

Even difference joy and simcha - see kohelet intro..

The meaning of a system lies outside the system. Therefore the meaning of the universe lies outside the universe. The belief in a God who transcends the universe was the discovery of Abrahamic monotheism, which transformed the human condition, endowing it with meaning and thereby rescuing it from tragedy in the name of hope. For if God created the physical universe, then God is free, and if God made us in his image, we are free. If we are free, then history is not a matter of eternal recurrences. Because we can change ourselves, we can change the world. That is the religious basis of hope.

There are cultures that do not share these beliefs. They are, ultimately, tragic cultures, for whatever shape they give the powers they name, those powers are fundamentally indifferent to human fate. They may be natural forces. They may be human institutions: the empire, the state, the political system, or the economy. They may be human collectivities: the tribe, the nation, the race. But all end in tragedy because none attaches ultimate significance to the individual as individual. All end by sacrificing the individual, which is why, in the end, such cultures die. There is only one thing capable of defeating tragedy, which is the belief in God who in love sets his image on the human person, thus endowing each of us with non-negotiable, unconditional dignity.

great partnership

It is a worldview of extraordinary simplicity and power. The buzzing confusion of the polytheistic pantheon has disappeared and the entire universe has been cleared for the drama between the lone God and lonely humanity, who have, as it were, only each other for company. Nature has been demystified and demythologised. All Earthly power has been relativised, allowing for the desacralisation of kingship and the eventual secularisation of the political domain.

So Genesis 1, a text that might have been a prelude to science, turns out not to lead in that direction at all. Its frame of reference is moral and spiritual. It is about freedom and order and goodness. It is about a God who creates and makes a being, Homo sapiens, able to create; a God who is free and bestows on his most cherished creation the gift of freedom. Virtually everything that follows in the Bible is about this personal relationship between Creator and creation, at times tender, often tense. To be sure, from time to time the Hebrew Bible expresses wonder at the divine wisdom within creation – the wisdom tracked by science – but that is not where its interest lies.

Great partnership

From where did Jews find the strength to do these things? Who can know? Perhaps every story is different. But I sense something momentous beneath the surface of these events. The only word that does justice to it is faith – not conventional faith, not Maimonides' Thirteen Principles, but something that lies almost too deep for words. I call it faith in life itself.

What a strange idea. Faith in life? Doesn't everything that lives, seek to continue? Isn't the desire for life the most basic of all drives? Yes and no. It is for simple organisms. But human beings are blessed and cursed with imagination. There are things that can deaden or destroy our appetite for life. Not all are as harsh as the Holocaust. They can be quite simple – the belief that nothing we can do will make a difference, that life has no overarching meaning, that we are the random products of genetic mutation, that we are cosmic dust on the surface of infinity. A culture can lose its appetite for life. It happens when most people, most of the time, seek a succession of modes of forgetfulness – work, consuming, the pursuit of pleasure, a succession of moments in which we make ourselves too busy to ask the most fundamental question, Why are we here?, because we suspect it has no answer.

Jews and Judaism survived because we never lost our appetite for life. Much of Judaism is about holding life in your hands – waking, eating, drinking – and making a blessing over it. Much of the rest – *tzedakah* and *gemillat chassadim* – is

about making life a blessing for other people. And because life is full of risk and failure, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we have a chance to make good our failures and begin again.

Jews are not optimists. We know only too well that the world is full of conflict and hate. But to be a Jew – to know that we have free will, that we can change, that we can apologise and forgive and begin again – is never to lose hope. Judaism is about sanctifying life and having faith in it. And there are times – that evening spent with the survivors was one – when that faith is little less than awesome. That is the meaning of those simple, but perhaps not so simple, words: “Remember us for life, O King who delights in life, and write us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, O God of life.”

Faith in Life Itself

Toward the end of his life, having been deaf for twenty years, Beethoven composed one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, his Ninth Symphony. Intuitively he sensed that this work needed the sound of human voices. It became the West's first choral symphony. The words he set to music were Schiller's *Ode to Joy*. I think of Judaism as an ode to joy. Like Beethoven, Jews have known suffering, isolation, hardship and rejection, yet they never lacked the religious courage to rejoice. A people that can know insecurity and still feel joy is one that can never be defeated, for its spirit can never be broken nor its hope destroyed.

R Jonathan Sacks

Why RH before YK?

In the end, I discovered the answer through the people who I came to know, who became my mentors in moral courage, and that is the Holocaust survivors. Now every Holocaust survivor had a different story and had a different way of coping. But by and large, there was a general pattern, which is that they did not talk about what had happened to them. They didn't talk about it to their spouses or to their children. For years and years, sometimes many decades, they just avoided the subject.

What did they do? They set about making a home in a new country. They set about having a family, getting married, having children, because most of them had lost their families in any case. They set about having a job, building a career, building a life. They set about helping and strengthening one another. And only much, much later, often fifty years later, did they tell their story, sometimes wrote their story or got somebody else to write their story. Many of the survivors that I knew went around schools, non-Jewish schools, as well as Jewish ones telling their story to the pupils because they really wanted them to understand how precious and how fragile freedom actually is. And I suddenly realised that there was a simple structure to what they did. First, build the future. Then you can remember the past.

I knew a very, very successful businessman who was struck by some very savage blows of bad luck. The result of which was that he lost almost everything he had built. Would have been a devastating blow, I think for anyone, but he was a man of iron will and he worked day and night for ten years to rebuild what he had lost. After ten years, he happened to be giving a talk and he said, "I'm going to spend the next minute saying something I haven't spoken about for ten years." And he referred very briefly to that blow of bad luck and he said, "I haven't spoken about this because I knew that if I spoke about it before ten years had passed, I simply would not be able to carry

on." And from him too, I learned first you build the future and then you can remember the past.

And that is when I understood the relationship between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is about the future. It's about the shana tova. It's about the Jewish future because what do we read about on the first day of Rosh Hashanah? The birth of the first Jewish child, Isaac, and the birth of the prophet and King maker, Samuel, to the previously childless Hannah. Children are the symbol of the Jewish future, and that is what we choose to read about on Rosh Hashanah. Then once we have prayed for the future and thought about the future and our responsibilities for it, then once we have secured the future, on Yom Kippur we can remember and lament the past. Sometimes the past is so difficult that if you focus on it, you fall into depression and despair. And the Jewish way is to say no, just look forward and build a future, and then when everything is secure, you can turn back and look at the past.

That to me is the message for this very, very challenging year. We have just passed through a year of the coronavirus pandemic, which has been, in many ways, the worst crisis the world has faced since the end of the Second World War. It's been very, very challenging. It's been hard for everyone. It seems to me that the most important thing to do is to focus on the future, not on the past.

Hope / UnTaneh Tokef

Avert the evil of the decree. In these four Hebrew words lies the difference between a hope culture and a tragic culture. In ancient Greece, there was a belief that once a decree had been sealed there was no way of averting it. Every act taken to frustrate it merely brought it closer to fulfillment. That forms the heart of the tragedy of Oedipus and Laius. In Judaism every decree can be averted by sincere repentance. That is the significance of the story of Jonah and the people of Nineveh. Jonah came and announced the decree: In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed. But the people repented, and the decree was annulled. There is no fate that is final, no destiny that cannot be changed. Therefore, there is always hope.

Greece gave the world its greatest tragedies, those of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides. Israel was and remains the supreme culture of hope.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

What is Teshuva, Really?

Nor should we be haunted by our mistakes. That, I believe, is why the Torah tells us that Moses sinned. Did it really have to include the episode of the water, the stick, the rock and Moses' anger? It happened, but did the Torah have to tell us it happened? It passes over thirty-eight of the forty years in the wilderness in silence. It does not report every incident, only those that have a lesson for posterity. Why not, then, pass over this too in silence, sparing Moses' good name? What other religious literature has ever been so candid about the failings of even the greatest of its heroes?

Because that is what it is to be human. Even the greatest human beings made mistakes, failed as often as they succeeded, and had moments of black despair. What made them great was not that they were perfect but that they kept going. They learned from every error, refused to give up hope, and eventually acquired the great gift that only failure can grant, namely humility. They understood that life is about falling a hundred times and getting up again. It is about never losing your ideals even when you know how hard it is to change the world. It's about getting up every morning and walking one more day toward the Promised Land even though you know you may never get there, but knowing also that you helped others get there.

Hence the three great life changing ideas with which the Torah ends. We are mortal; therefore make every day count. We are fallible; therefore learn to grow from each mistake. We will not complete the journey; therefore inspire others to continue what we began.

Vzot Habracha 5778

Joy

Kohelet eventually finds it not in happiness but in joy - because joy lives not in thoughts of tomorrow, but in the grateful acceptance and celebration of today. We are here; we are alive; we are among others who share our sense of jubilation. We are living in God's land, enjoying his blessing, eating the produce of his earth, watered by his rain, brought to fruition under his sun, breathing the air he breathed into us, living the life he renews in us each day. And yes, we do not know what tomorrow may bring; and yes, we are surrounded by enemies; and yes, it was never the safe or easy option to be a Jew. But when we focus on the moment, allowing ourselves to dance, sing and give thanks, when we do things for their own sake not for any other reward, when we let go of our separateness and become a voice in the holy city's choir, then there is joy.

Kierkegaard once wrote: "It takes moral courage to grieve; it takes religious courage to rejoice."² It is one of the most poignant facts about Judaism and the Jewish people that though our history has been shot through with tragedy, yet Jews never lost the capacity to rejoice, to celebrate in the heart of darkness, to sing the Lord's song even in a strange land. There are eastern faiths that promise peace of mind if we can train ourselves into habits of acceptance. Epicurus taught his disciples to avoid risks like marriage or a career in public life. Neither of these approaches is to be negated, yet Judaism is not a religion of acceptance, nor have Jews tended to seek the risk-free life. We can survive the failures and defeats if we never lose the capacity for joy.