**Erev RH!**

*Here we are–
Energy,
Mass,
Life,
Shaping life,
Mind,
Shaping Mind
God,
Shaping God.
Consider—
We are born
Not with purpose,
But with potential.

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.*

*― Parable of the Sower*

These words are from Octavia Butler’s novel: [Parable of the Sower](https://www.octaviabutler.com/parableseries).

I bring them at this moment, at the cusp of the *Shanah* – a word who’s root means: to change, *Shinui*. As we begin the Rosh HaShanah or, the head of the change, I am thinking about how everything changes. We are beset by changes all the time. You might be noticing differences in your body as you grow and age, you might struggle with the daily developments in new technology that we must learn to navigate the world (do I really have to join tik tok? Learn how to use chat gpt?). Like me, you might be frightened by the rise in antisemitism, racism, homophobia, and general hatred here and around the world, and you might be watching with disbelief the political changes here and in Israel. Climate change brings us once-in-a-lifetime storms every few years. Even our congregation is different than it once was. Nothing is the same.

And internally, at this time of year our tradition calls to us to examine ourselves, to look at actions and to make changes in our behavior and in our thinking.

This all makes for a very strong sense of instability! Is *nothing* solid? Where is our foundation?

Many of us feel that change is unnatural – stasis is what we prefer. But stasis, medically, is a problem. We don’t want a stoppage of blood or fluid in the body – it’s meant to keep moving!

In addition to the lack of security that change inspires, change is scary because we do not know what it will bring.

A story:

*There once was this criminal who had committed a crime*

*(Because, hey, that’s what criminals do. That’s their job!)*

*Anyway, he was sent to the king for his punishment.*

*The king told him he had a choice of two punishments.*

*He could be hung by a rope.*

*Or take what’s behind the big, dark, scary, mysterious iron door.*

*The criminal quickly decided on the rope.*

*As the noose was being slipped on him, he turned to the king and asked:*

*“By the way, out of curiosity, what’s behind that door?”*

*The king laughed and said:*

*“You know, it’s funny, I offer everyone the same choice, and nearly everyone picks the rope.”*

*“So,” said the criminal, “Tell me. What’s behind the door? I mean, obviously, I won’t tell anyone,” he said, pointing to the noose around his neck.*

*The king paused then answered:*

*“Freedom, but it seems most people are so afraid of the unknown that they immediately take the rope.”*

This might sound extreme, but it parallels the story of our own people:

practically from the minute they are liberated, they want to return to Egypt instead of entering the promised land. They say: We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. The horrors and oppression and death that they knew was less frightening than the unknown freedom ahead of them.

These stories are not meant to be history – they are paradigms of the human condition.

The artist and poet [Alok](https://www.alokvmenon.com/) suggests that: “the unknown is how we birthed everything. The unknown is actually a fertile ground to build the world that we dream of. The universe and the earth templates change as the natural orientation of the world.”

*The universe and the earth templates change as the natural orientation of the world.*

And, indeed, our own tradition suggests so. Tomorrow, when we say, HaYom Harat Olam, today the world was created, we commemorate the act of creation. But creation was not one and done, a deed that was completed.

The Torah begins (and we will read this tomorrow):

בְּרֵאשִׁ֖ית בָּרָ֣א אֱלֹהִ֑ים אֵ֥ת הַשָּׁמַ֖יִם וְאֵ֥ת הָאָֽרֶץ׃

When God began to create heaven and earth…..

Reb Simcha Bunam of Przysucha understands creation as follows:

God created the world in a state of beginning. The universe is always in an uncompleted state, in the form of its beginning. It is not like a vessel at which the master works to finish it*; it requires continuous labor and renewal by creative forces*. Should these cease for only a second, the universe would return to primeval chaos. (Siach Sarfei Kodesh, 2: 17)

Creation is always being created.

This is not just a mythic statement, but also a scientific one.

In the early 20th century, scientists began to understand that the universe is made up of energetic forces. We look around and see things – matter, defined as anything that has mass and takes up space. But - almost all mass comes from the kinetic energy of the vibrating electrons and the quarks in the protons and neutrons and the connective energy of the gluons inside atoms. Atoms are the smallest unit of matter – but they are filled with energy! There is constant movement within things that seem to be objects. There is nothing in the universe that is static.

And because the universe is consistently moving, creation’s ongoing development is true not just for things in space, but even time!

Richard Muller, professor of physics at the University of California, Berkeley [writes](https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/09/27/495608371/now-and-the-physics-of-time):

“In cosmology, we think of the expanding universe as the continuous creation of new space; the universe continues to grow as the space between galaxies increases. That recognition makes it plausible that in the ongoing expansion, the universe is creating not only new space but also new time. Each newly created moment is what we refer to as *now*.”

These understandings impact not just science, but philosophy and religion. If the universe is not made up of things, but of constantly unfolding energies, and all beings are such, then perhaps we might not understand God, the Supreme Being, as the static, Unmoved Mover, that was important to Maimonides, but as a dynamic force within and around all that is.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead drew upon the development of these scientific understandings and applied them to theology. And Mordecai Kaplan – founder of Reconstructionism – coined the term *transnaturalism*, understanding that: “God is the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos.”

But this concept is not just new, in fact, it is inherent to Jewish thought. At the Burning Bush, God is described as Becoming itself. When Moshe asks for a name for the divinity that has called to him, he learns that God is called “Ehyeh asher Ehyeh,” “I will be that I will be.”

In the words of our liturgy, Ehyeh is that which מְחַדֵּשׁ בְּכָל־יוֹם תָּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית - renews each and every day—in every moment—the work of creation. Without this ongoing, dynamic Power, the created universe would be incapable of unfolding and evolving as it has been since the moment of the Big Bang. The God of the Torah, and the God of our daily experience of the world, is not an abstract, unchanging, and immutable Unmoved Mover, but That which allows the universe to unfold in all of its dazzling complexity.

What’s the point of this theology? Why am I sharing these concepts that hurt my head to think about – (I’m talking about the physics - but we are going to dive into the physics in our next lunch and learn class – starting October 5!)? Is it just academic? I think not. I hope not.

At this point, it might be useful to point out that any discussion of God is metaphor. Wherever we find ourselves in relation to “belief,” this is essential to remember. Theists have always understood the Divine to be beyond comprehension: the Kabbalists called God the Ein Sof – the Infinite – and Maimonides taught that we could only speak of what God is *not*, not what God is, because God is greater than our definitions, which are inherently limiting. If you’re agnostic or atheist, then please do not understand this discussion as a claim to any literal truth, but rather as an approach to understanding and experiencing life that might bring some meaning and support.

As Kaplan wrote: “[Belief in God] is the faith that reality, the cosmos, or whatever constitutes for us the universe in which we move and have our being, is so constituted that it both urges us on and helps us to achieve our salvation” (by “salvation” he means: the possibility of achieving both personal and social potential through the practice of ideals which foster peace and justice), and he qualifies this by saying: “provided, of course, we learn to know and understand enough about that reality to be able to conform to its demands.” Kaplan, Future of the America Jew, 182–83.

*Provided we learn to know and understand enough about that reality*.

My family has had many changes in the past year, past several years, and I know that so many of you are in the midst of much change. I have been seeking to improve my ability to go with it, and wanted to help you all, as well. Learning about the reality of the world in constant change and the Divine as an essential part of that process supports my effort to be present with whatever is happening in the moment, to not struggle to swim against the current, which tires us out.

The ancient Greek poet Heraclitus wrote: No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.

There is no same river. There is the water, there is the bank, there are the stones, there is the rushing – but the configuration is always different. And we? Are we the same?

We know our bodies change. Speaking of this with a friend recently, she asked: do I follow the approach that suggests I should rage against the changes and expect to play tennis until I’m 90? Or should I just give in?

Is there not a middle way? To recognize the reality of the differences – our bodies are not the same as they were when we were 25, or yesterday. To acknowledge and even grieve the losses and limitations, and then care for – and even love - this new body.

Perhaps instead of tennis, we play pickleball (like some of you and hundreds of thousands of others). Ashtanga yoga becomes chair yoga. Marathons become walks. We recognize and acknowledge the changes and work with what we have now. Our growth does not stop, it just transforms.

Just last week, the Torah portion gave us a model of this in Moses, at the end of his life. Vayelech begins: And Moses walked. Moses kept going, even at the end. Tradition describes the human being as a *mehalekh*, a walker, as distinct from the angels, who are *‘omdim*, standing in one place. Walking signifies personal growth and spiritual striving, never being satisfied with what you have done or whom you have become until that moment. Even as he is about to announce in the next verse his inability “to go in and out” any longer, he was still walking. That, too, is a form of growth.

As with Moses, our bodies change, but so do our psyches. In our lunch & learn class on repentance and repair, one member said: I’m not the same person who did those things; I’m a different person!

Life changes and changes us. The work of these 10 Days of Teshuvah – the days of turning, of the Head of the Change – is deeply recognize this and to explore the situations and opportunities that have been presented to us and change for the better. Better, meaning: living with more love, more compassion, more justice. To do what a new Life is Good t-shirt that Dinah bought me says: Grow with the Flow.

Shanah Tovah – Good changing.

**RH1**

HaYom Harat Olam: today the world was conceived. The anniversary of the creation of the world is also the first of the Ten Days of Teshuvah, repentance, returning. I think it is not a coincidence that Jewish tradition overlaps our own reflection with the celebration of the universe in which we live. Humans and nature are interdependent – or, rather, humans are dependent upon nature and can nature, while not dependent upon us, is deeply impacted by our actions.

Four years ago at this season, there was tremendous excitement in New York when Greta Thunberg arrived in advance of the UN Climate Action Summit. More than half a million people greeted her. They were part of the Global Climate Strike movement that took place in dozens of countries and included more than 4 million people.

This year’s Global Climate Strike – did you know these were still happening? - began yesterday and will continue through the weekend and, in NY, culminate in a large march and rally tomorrow to demand an end to fossil fuels. Why this weekend? To call attention to the United Nations Secretary General’s Climate Ambition Summit taking place in NY on Wednesday.

Secretary General Antonio Guterres convened the Summit because “The damage from the climate crisis is already extensive, and global greenhouse gas emissions remain at record levels. The world needs immediate and deep reductions in emissions now, and over the course of the next three decades, to limit global warming to 1.5°C degrees above pre-industrial levels and prevent the worst impacts.”

As you hear this statement, you might experience a variety of responses:

You might be thrilled: world leaders are focusing on the climate crisis!

You might be cynical: there have been many climate conferences and will any real change be made?

You might be sad: as the words “climate change” bring up a sense of all we are already losing.

You might be frightened, fearful of what a warming future will bring for your children and grandchildren.

You might be all of the above.

Six years ago, the American Psychological Association coined the term **eco-anxiety** –worry or concern about climate change and its effects. An APA survey in February 2020 found that two-thirds of American adults said that they felt at least a little eco-anxiety, and nearly half of those under age 34 said that stress about climate change affects their daily lives.

Members of ethnic minorities are reported to experience more anxiety about climate change than non-minority groups.[[1]](#footnote-1) As early as 2014, studies were showing that nearly 8 in 10 Jewish Americans were saying that climate change was a crisis (31%) or a major problem (47%). That’s a far larger percentage than Americans as a whole.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I wonder if this resonates for you. Do you have eco-anxiety? Do environmental considerations impact your behavior, or how you feel about your actions?

It certainly does for me: One the one hand, we try to use environmentally-friendly products, use bar soap and shampoo to avoid plastic bottles, and compost to keep food scraps out of the landfill. I drive an electric car. But I also live with a very heavy and uncomfortable sense of hypocrisy: the benefits of these actions are completely outweighed by an airplane flight. And I’ve taken 3 of those in the past year. Sigh.

Another emotion I experience now is **Blissonance**, defined as:

When a blissful experience in nature is disrupted by the awareness that your presence may be adversely impacting it, or what you might feel while enjoying a pleasantly warm day in winter but wondering what unpleasant things it bodes about the future (Bureau of Linguistic Reality, 2015).

Probably a lot of us felt exactly this last winter, when the temperature was consistently about 15 degrees above normal – lovely in January, but not so nice in July. And I had the breathtaking experience of seeing glaciers in Alaska and Iceland – and knowing that they might not be there that much longer.

Last night, I spoke of change as the fundamental nature of all life, as a physical – as in physics – reality, and the possibility of finding God in that change. I recalled a verse from our daily morning liturgy:

מְחַדֵּשׁ בְּכָל־יוֹם תָּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית

Every day – continuously - the work of creation is renewed.

The world is never the same.

And climate change is frightening! And dangerous. This summer’s unprecedented extreme heat and flooding and Canada’s and Greece’s colossal fires are terrifying. My eldest daughter lives in Phoenix, where the temperature was over 110 for 31 consecutive days – a streak nearly twice as long as the previous one. These realities contribute to our fears.

Some say, it’s already too late. Climate change is happening and there is no way the increase in temperature can be stopped. But those who work in climate science disagree. While there is much to be afraid of, there is also reason to hope.

A few examples: prices of solar and wind power, as well as of [**batteries**](https://ourworldindata.org/battery-price-decline) for storing low-carbon energy, [**have all plunged**](https://ourworldindata.org/cheap-renewables-growth). Global deforestation [**peaked decades ago**](https://ourworldindata.org/global-deforestation-peak) and has been slowly declining. [**Sales**](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-01/when-will-gas-cars-be-phased-out-sales-peaked-and-soon-the-fleet-will-too) of new gas and diesel cars are now falling. Coal is [**starting to die**](https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/energy?tab=chart&facet=none&country=GBR~ESP~DEU~CAN~ITA~NLD~PRT&Total+or+Breakdown=Select+a+source&Energy+or+Electricity=Electricity+only&Metric=Share+of+total&Select+a+source=Coal) in many countries. Government commitments are [**getting closer**](https://climateactiontracker.org/global/temperatures/) to limiting global warming to 2°C. Deaths from natural disasters — despite what [**news about climate change-related fires and hurricanes**](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/01/climate/wildfire-extreme-rain-mudslides.html) might appear to suggest — are [**a fraction**](https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/natural-disasters?facet=none&Disaster+Type=All+disasters&Impact=Deaths&Timespan=Decadal+average&Per+capita=false&country=~OWID_WRL) of what they used to be. The list goes on.

In this country, our nation that burned coal, oil and gas for more than a century to become the richest economy on the planet, as well as historically the most polluting, is rapidly shifting away from fossil fuels.

And you might be surprised to know that red states are leading the way. *Texas* [produces](https://www.fool.com/research/renewable-energy-by-state/) more renewable energy than anywhere else in the country — almost twice as much as California, the second-biggest producer. In third, fourth and fifth place are Iowa, Oklahoma and Kansas. Judged by percentage of overall power use, the most prolific source of renewables is Iowa, followed by South Dakota. Then, after Vermont, come Kansas, Oklahoma, Maine and New Mexico.

And not just here: governments around the world are pouring trillions of dollars into clean energy to cut the carbon pollution that is broiling the planet. China, which already leads the world in the sheer amount of electricity produced by wind and solar power, [is expected to double its capacity by 2025, five years ahead of schedule](https://globalenergymonitor.org/press-release/china-poised-to-double-wind-and-solar-capacity-five-years-ahead-of-2030-target/). In Britain, roughly one-third of electricity is generated by wind, solar and hydropower. And in the United States, 23 percent of electricity is expected to come from renewable sources this year, up 10 percentage points from a decade ago.

And when this is not being done voluntarily, people suing, and winning. Last month in Montana, a court found that young people have a constitutional right to a healthful environment and that the state must consider potential climate damage when approving projects. On the 27th, the European Court of Human Rights will hear a case brought by six young people from Portugal against 32 European countries. They are seeking a legally binding decision that would force the governments to act against climate change. These are just two of thousands of climate change cases that have been brought in the past five years.

Not just actions have changed, but also attitudes: recent surveys show that in 2023 “[Nearly seven-in-ten Americans](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/18/for-earth-day-key-facts-about-americans-views-of-climate-change-and-renewable-energy/) favor the U.S. taking steps to become carbon neutral by 2050.” The current divide now is not between those who believe climate change is a problem and those who do not, but about what actions should be taken. Climate scientists it is possible to solve our environmental problems certainly think so and are actually often less pessimistic than the general public.

Pessimism gets us nowhere. Scaring people can lead to paralysis, not action. The extraordinary Potawtomi botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer – author of the best-selling Braiding Sweetgrass – said recently in an interview on The New Yorker Radio Hour: “So much of the environmental movement…is grounded in fear. And we have a lot to be afraid about—let’s not ignore that—but what I really wanted to do was to help people really love the land again. Because I think that’s why we are where we are: that we haven’t loved the land enough.”

Can we connect to, or reignite, our love of the land? How do you connect to the planet? Take a moment. (Pause) Small ways might include taking a moment to look at the birds outside your window or walking in your neighborhood and looking around you. You could go for a walk with the Sierra Club or Audubon Society. And you might join us this Shabbat for our quarterly meditation walk at Target Rock National Wildlife Refuge, which brings us through woods filled with birds and small animals and deer to the shore of the Long Island Sound with its sea birds and fish and shells.

How might it feel to consider our environmental efforts in the context of love for the earth, instead of fear. The verse we have been coming back to:

מְחַדֵּשׁ בְּכָל־יוֹם תָּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית

Every day, continuously, the work of creation is renewed.

Actually begins: ובטובו – and in God’s goodness, God renews every day, continuously, the work of creation.

In goodness. This is not to say: don’t worry, everything will be fine, pay no attention the hard things you see on the news (but we might watch a little less news since it is, by its nature, sensationalist, really designed to frighten us). It’s also not to say: ignore the sadness and fear you feel. As Rebecca Solnit writes: “I wonder sometimes if … people assume you can’t be hopeful and heartbroken at the same time, and of course you can. In times when everything is fine, hope is unnecessary. Hope is not happiness or confidence or inner peace; it’s a commitment to search for possibilities.”

We can see the goodness in the earth and in each other as we act on behalf of all life; we can have hope. We can be engaged in the repair of our world. There are many things we can do, as individuals and as a community. We can educate, we can pray, we can change our consumption, and we can advocate.

On Sunday, thousands of people in hundreds of communities in 22 countries participated in the 6th Annual Reverse Tashlich. You have likely heard of and participated in tashlich, in which we symbolically discard our sins by throwing breadcrumbs (or better, stones) into the water. I hope you’ll join us tomorrow after services. In Reverse Tashlich, instead of throwing things *into* the water, plastic and marine debris are removed. This practice combines the spiritual reflection and renewal associated with tashlich with the tangible act of environmental conservation. Participants reflect upon their own consumption patterns and how they can make sustainable choices to minimize their impact on the environment.

While Reverse Tashlich will not stop climate change, participants went to bed Sunday having learned something, having done *something*, and having acted as Jews in Jewish community.

What can we do?

We can make changes in our own consumption. Your next car could be electric, or hybrid. When flying, you (and I) could purchase carbon offsets, which fund projects that either lower CO2 emissions or take some CO2 out of the atmosphere and store it. Some common examples of projects include reforestation, building renewable energy, carbon-storing agricultural practices, and waste and landfill management.

We can take political action, locally and nationally. First, we can vote. In July, the Suffolk County Legislature prevented a referendum to come to November’s ballot to protect our water. All their seats are up. You can cast your vote for the environment.

State-wide, New York passed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act in 2019, which seeks to bring the state to net-zero emissions by 2050. There are great plans here, but it needs to be fully funded in each year’s budget. You can reach out to your state senator and assemblyperson.

Everything we do has impact. The kabbalists understood us to be able to influence the nature of the universe itself. Before doing a mitzvah, they would say: l’shem yichud kudsha brich hu v’shechinteh/for the sake of the unification of the holy one with the Shechinah, understanding that their action could change even God.

The Talmud tells a story about the impact of individual action: People were traveling on a ship. One took a drill and started drilling underneath their seat. The others said: What you doing?! He replied: What do you care? [it’s not your seat]….We recognize our capacity to destroy the capability of the continuation of life on this planet. But Rabbe Nachman said: if you believe you are capable of destroying, you must believe you are capable of repair.

Instead of feeling powerless before the forces of government and corporations, we must know that our actions have power. In the words of Greta Thunberg: "…the one thing we need more than hope is action. Once we start to act, hope is everywhere."

Our eco-anxiety is real, and there is good reason. The tremendous task before us is daunting. The rabbis acknowledged these feelings when they wrote in the Mishnah: “It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it.” (Avot 2:16).

Let’s work together. Let’s act, generate hope among our communities, and inspire others to act.

Creator of all life, You have bestowed upon us this wondrous planet,

A home filled with beauty, diversity, and abundance,

Where every living being has a place and purpose.

Grant us the wisdom to recognize our role as stewards of the Earth,

To cherish and protect its delicate balance,

So that future generations may also enjoy its blessings.

Help us to be mindful of our actions and their impact on the environment,

To walk gently upon the Earth and leave no trace of harm,

To consume responsibly and conserve its resources.

Inspire us to strive for justice and righteousness in all our dealings,

To work towards a world where no one suffers from hunger or thirst,

Where all living creatures are treated with compassion and respect.

Guide us, O Lord, in finding sustainable solutions to the challenges we face,

To heal the wounds we have inflicted upon our planet,

And to restore harmony and balance to the natural world.

May our prayers and actions be a testament to our commitment,

To safeguarding the Earth and its ecosystems,

And to preserving the sacredness of all life.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'olam,

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe,

Who has blessed us with the gift of this Earth,

And calls upon us to be faithful stewards of its wonders.

Amen. Shanah tovah.

**RH2**

וּבַחֹ֨דֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִ֜י בְּאֶחָ֣ד לַחֹ֗דֶשׁ מִֽקְרָא־קֹ֙דֶשׁ֙ יִהְיֶ֣ה לָכֶ֔ם …י֥וֹם תְּרוּעָ֖ה יִהְיֶ֥ה לָכֶֽם׃

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: …You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded. (Numbers 29:1)

Yom Truah – Rosh HaShanah is not called Rosh HaShanah in the Bible, that name comes later. The Bible does not suggest this day is the date of creation or the beginning of a new year, or even a time of judgment. The Biblical name is Yom Truah. The Day of Sounding. The principal mitzvah, the only one based in Torah itself, is to hear the shofar. In a few moments, we will begin the shofar service.

You have probably heard some of the more familiar explanations of why we sound the shofar:

Maimonides said it is to wake us up to teshuvah. "Sleepers, wake up from your slumber! Examine your ways and turn and remember your Creator." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:4). The 10th century Babylonian rabbi Saadia Gaon gave ten different reasons for sounding the shofar on this Yom Teruah, from the call to teshuvah, to a reminder of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, to a reminder of the exhortations of the prophets for social justice. Perhaps the most well-known of his ten draws upon our Torah reading, recalling the ram, stuck in the thicket by his horns, that replaced Isaac as the offering.

Other traditions connect the shofar with moments of crying and calling out. One of these draws on our story of the near sacrifice of Isaac but comes from a few verses later, in which we hear about the death of Sarah, Abraham’s wife and Isaac’s mother. The Torah does not tell us how or why she died, and its juxtaposition to the story of the Akedah opens the way for interpretation.

A midrash imagines the conversation between Sarah and Isaac when he returns home after having nearly been slaughtered by his father, Abraham.

Isaac returned to his mother and she said to him: ‘Where have you been, my son?’ Said he to her: ‘My father took me and led me up mountains and down hills,’ and told her the whole story. ‘Alas,’ she said, ‘for the son of a hapless woman! Had it not been for the angel you would by now have been slain!’ ‘Yes,’ he said to her.

Sarah began to cry and moan the sound of three wails which correspond to the three blasts of the*shofar,* and her soul burst forth from her and she died.

The midrash says, “the cry of the *shofar* is the tears of Sarah.”

Another midrash also echoes the connection of the shofar to grief and loss:

In the Talmud, in the middle of a technical discussion about the lengths and number of the blasts of the shofar, a connection is made between the Teruah, the shofar calls of this Rosh Hashanah day, and the wailing of Sisera's mother. Sisera, a commander of the Canaanite army, has been killed by Yael, and, in a poetic retelling in the Book of Judges, his mother is waiting for him to come home. Her son is delayed, and she knows that this cannot be a good sign. "Through the window peered Sisera's mother. Behind the lattice she moaned: 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels?'"

Sisera's mother cries, sounds that the rabbis heard echoed in the shofar calls, tears of mourning and loss. Tears of grief for her son. And from here we are taught the number of blasts we are to blow: 100 – 99 for her cries, and one beyond.

And there is another context where 99+1 cries occur. The midrash informs us that “a woman on the birthstone in the grip of labor sobs 100 times—99 of which are for death, and 1 (the last one) is for life.”— [**Midrash**](https://ritualwell.org/glossary/midrash/) Tanchuma, Tazria 4:1

The Shofar reflects the pain of life and gives voice to our own cries of pain, loss, grief, confusion, agony, and even anger.

These interpretations invite us to bring our own tru’ot.

Tru’ot like Sarah’s, for fury, for trauma, for helplessness. Tru’ot like Sisera’s mother’s, for loss and grief. Tru’ot like that of a laboring woman – for pain and suffering and even hope.

The tru’ot of these women all involve children, and those of us who are parents know those challenges, what the rabbis called: *tza’ar gidul banim*, the pain of raising children. When our children suffer, we suffer. And in our community, as in every, many of our children are struggling: with illness, both mental and physical, with addiction, with relationship and financial difficulties.

We have suffered loss – of parents, spouses, siblings, dear friends, children.

Even as we celebrate the New Year and look forward with hope for health and happiness for ourselves and our families and communities, Rosh HaShanah, as Yom Teruah, makes space to acknowledge the brokenness and let it be articulated as a part of our observance. And as a part of how we come together.

We all have sadness, and we don't need to pretend, even for Rosh Hashanah, that it's all great, or even that it's all okay. Our community is holy because we can share our joy, we can share our celebrations, our wisdom, our learning. But our community is also holy because we can bring our whole selves, and that includes bringing our grief and our tears.

Journalist Aimee Gins­burg Bikel wrote:

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| Let your grief course through youLike a great, grand river.Its journey to the sea is long and windingSometimes, the rapids.You are quite sure you will get lost. Drown.Sometimes, the water flows so slowly,you are sure you will be moored, forever.Carving caverns and cracks in the sandstone |
| It will change youIt will shape youOh beautiful, brave soulDo not build a dam,Build a raft.Hold on, allow.For this is your sacred journey homeA holy gift for the patient, openhearted. |

The shared expression of our souls leads us to wholeness and the shofar does not only cry. As the Talmud says about the birthing woman: 99 are tears of pain, and one is the cry of life. Its sobbing, broken cries (*teruah* and *shevarim*) connect us to the broken places of our souls, while its long and steady blasts (*tekiyot*) pull us back to life.

As we hear the cry of the shofar today, may it release our own cries, our tears, our voices, and our deepest heartfelt prayers. And may the power of our collective “cry for life” pull the whole world onto its “path of life (אורח חיים).” And may it be a healthy, joyful, bountiful, light-filled, love-filled, peace-filled, life-celebrating new year for all.

1. (Susan Kassouf, “Thinking Catastrophic Thoughts: A Traumatized Sensibility on a Hotter Planet,” The American Journal of Psychoanalysis 82, 2022, and others) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (“Believers, Sympathizers, and Skeptics: Why Americans are Conflicted about Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science,” *Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)*, 11/21/2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)