

**Jewish Time for Rosh Hashanah —
A Sermon by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis**

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Harold: As we kind of approach to Rosh Hashanah. I want you to ask yourself. Let's assume that you are asked the way the rabbis in the Talmudic period were asked to pick a particular section or sections from the five Books of Moses which would match the spirit of Rosh Hashanah which is the celebration of the creation of the universe and the creation of the human being. What would you select of all the bibles? And then, we'll Daven and I'll come back and I'll tell you my answer.

Page 21. If I were a rabbi in the Talmudic times and one asked me to select a section of the bible that would express the spirit of Rosh Hashanah that deals with creation, I would, without hesitation, pick on either Genesis 1 or Genesis 2. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. But if you take a look at the Talmud Megillah, you will find that the rabbis selected two sections which we read until today, which has nothing to do with creation.

On the first day, the reading deals with the banishment of Hagar, the concubine of Abraham and Ishmael, their son, into the desert of Beer-Sheba. On the second day, with the near sacrifice of Isaac at Mount Moriah when at the last moment, there is the intercession of the angel who says, "Do not send out your hand unto the son." Well, why not my suggestion, which I think was your suggestion?

In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth. Is it some sort of an omission done by accident? That couldn't be. It must be done with deliberacy, and I'm sure it's deliberate because when you go through the Mahzor and you take a look at the section called, which deal with a whole list of corroborative texts from the bible, you will find all kinds of biblical sections but nothing from the story of creation. Why?

Now, here we have to do some detective work. Because there must be some reason and it seems to me, I smell a kind of polemical reason. There must have been something against which the rabbis were struggling by

omitting the most logical and natural selection from the Bible, namely Genesis.

So, how will we go about finding out? Against whom were they polemicizing? Well, let's take a look at the way religion of antiquities, religions in Babylonia, in Egypt, in Persia, in Greece, how they celebrated their New Years. And for this, I turn to Mircea Eliade, who is a scholar of comparative religion and in two books, deals with this issue. One is called, *Cosmos of History*, and the other, *the Sacred and Profane*.

And he says that for the religious men in archaic cultures, the cosmos was conceived of as a living organism. It was born. It developed. It runs down and on the last day of the year, it dies. And on New Year, there is a resurrection. It is born anew and this, by the way, this pagan understanding of the New Year as the resurrection of the deceased Old Year is something that is carried through in the secular New Year. You noticed how towards the end, if you're in Time Square, or if you listen, there's always this countdown—12, 11, ten nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. Why that particular way?

It is because of a pagan understanding that there is one particular moment in which the world was created and this is the moment in, in that time that there is a return to the pure, to the holy, to the sacred time. We turn back to the origin, to the seed and to the root. And that, according to pagan philosophies, according to pagan and archaic religions, according to Mircea Eliade, is the chance that human beings have to reverse time. You can turn back time. You can recapture. You can regain. You can recover. You can restore. You can relive. You can reverse back to the primordial moment the pure, pristine, original moment in which the world was created because after that, the world is profane and contaminated and more dying and finally, dead.

So, in archaic religions, the paradigm is a rotating wheel. One of the symbols that is used in pagan religions is of a serpent who captures, in the fangs, his own tail which indicates circularity, which indicates completeness. It's something like a wheel of fortune. If you go to Las Vegas... You wouldn't go to Las Vegas, but the others, you go Las Vega, you stand. Somebody spins the wheel and then, you can do nothing. You can't interrupt. You simply have to wait until it falls out on a particular number.

"The world is circular," say the pagans. The world is repetitious and there is nothing at all new. There's only one thing new and that's the very beginning that happens only once in eternity and then, is repeated over and over again. So, we read in Ecclesiastes who represents here pagan thought, if somebody says there is something new, well, it has been already up all time, which was before us and that is pagan philosophical wisdom, both Stoic and Hellenic and Hindu, as well.

You have to accept the order of life as it is. You have to love faith and destiny and what you can do in order to be saved is to symbolically identify yourself with that particular moment and that's what the New Year of the pagans is all about. Salvation comes by a ritual reliving of that moment.

Now, it seems to me that it's only against this pagan background that we can understand the radical conception of Jewish time, the radical conception of the Jewish New Year. For Judaism, God is not revealed in cosmogeny. God is not revealed in the origin in the first moment of time itself. God is revealed not in cosmogeny, but in history. This is extremely important and Mircea Eliade who is no particular friend of Judaism, of Jewish, has to point out that if there is a break, a radical break with pagan religions, it comes from Judaism that understood that time is not... Time is not reversible.

You cannot bring back that which was in and erase it completely. I'll say a word about that in a moment. But remember now, cosmic time is not historical time. Pagan cosmic time is cyclical, is repetitive. It is reversible and it is predictable, "That which was will be. That which will be already was." But in Judaism, time is not cyclical. It is linear. It's linear. That is to say, not that it goes straight. As a matter of fact, it goes like a Magen David, exactly like a Magen David—up, down, lateral, horizontal, vertical, any which way, but time is real.

In Judaism, time is real. It is not horizontal. It moves to say that things that never happened before are going to happen. That's something that is very radical in ancient times, that conception. And I must tell you. The more I think about this notion, the more I understand why it is that Maimonides who was such a rational man, broke with Aristotle, precisely, over the question of miracles.

See. Miracles, to Maimonides, was not some sort of an illogical thing. Miracle is not a denial of logic or of nature. Miracle means that there is something in this world that is not predictable, that there is something in

this world that is imponderable, that there are certain things that can happen because there is an incursion of will, and that will can be God's will. That will can be the will of the people. That will can be my people but I am not simply part of a cyclical, rotating wheel.

Things happen through human efforts, through ideals, through ambitions, through dreams. So that, that which is the predictable way of nature—nature has a way of doing the same thing over and over again—now, is broken. The sea can split. Mountains can dance. The sun can turn black. Rivers can turn red with blood. This is something very, very unusual.

Therefore, you will find that God is as Adonai, is revealed not in Genesis, but in Exodus. God is revealed not in the preamble of the Ten Commandments, "I am the Lord God, who created the heavens and earth." Because that has something which is very important, has nothing to do with you or with me. That is a metaphysical fact. That is a metaphysical belief.

But I am the Lord, your God—your God, who brought you out of a land of bondage, out of a land of Egypt to be free people. This is something else that has to do with history and Jews are concerned with history because history is the way in which the human will, human passion, human ideals, human energies, human decisions make the difference.

You see, in pagan thought, it's sort of... Pagan thought is very, very mythical and that's why there is so little myth in Judaism, very little myth in the bible, and magical. You want to overcome your sins, your transgressions. What do you do if you are a Babylonian, if you are an Egyptian, if you are a Persian, if you are a Greek? Well, what you do is you jump at New Year's into that moment of absolute purity, and everything is reborn and resurrected and your sins are erased.

In Judaism—and I hope you understand this—in Judaism, nothing is erased. If you think, by the way, that in Judaism and Yom Kippur, you erase your sins, you don't understand what it's all about. Then, they don't fool themselves. I never understood it until just the other day.

Told a wonderful story. Once upon a time, there was a king and he had a diamond and the diamond was worth all kinds of money and then, there was a scratch. You've heard this story. The scratch on the diamond and he asked the people. He asked the jewelers to please erase it, to wipe it out because this was a flaw. It destroyed the value of the diamond. Nobody could do it. One man could do it. One jeweler said, "I will take that

particular scratch and I will make it. In return, this diamond will be more valuable than even the original," and it was original.

And he took the scratch and he used it as a stem of a flower and he carved around that stem of the lines in the shape of petals, in the shape of a flower and he returned it. But he couldn't erase it. You can't erase scratches. You can't erase scars because if you erase those things, then, history is meaningless. Then, there are no consequences of events.

So, when they asked him but after all, I'm Yom Kippur, what do we say? Don't we erase the sins? And he answered correctly. He said, "I want you to take a wooden box. Take a wooden box. Pound a nail into it and another nail into it, another nail into it. Pound the nail," he said, "Now, remove the nails." And he removed the nails and it was no longer full of nails but there were holes inside because you cannot erase the past. You can repair the past. You can alter. You can change but you cannot erase the past because if you do that, then time is meaningless.

Now, I want you to know that every single moment, every act that you do has consequences. Every tragedy is real. Every experience of love is real. Every event in the world is real and it can't be erased. And if you think that on Yom Kippur, you can come and you can erase it, you are mistaken. All you can do is to repair it.

Now, if this is so, I understand why it is that the rabbis introduced in the Midrash various kinds of legends which only make sense today. But think of it this way. Remember, in pagan time, and secular life has a lot of the pagan left in it, you have to have one particular moment. You know exactly at the stroke of midnight that is when the New Year comes in. Look at this Midrash. Now, repeat several times.

This is one Midrash you can do. Angels asked God, "When is Rosh Hashanah?" And God says, "Don't ask me. Go down and ask the people because whenever they say this is the beginning of our lives, it is Rosh Hashanah or in the Rishon in Rosh Hashanah.

Ordinarily, it says when judges say, "The trial is today," and the accused say, "The trial is tomorrow," whose order is followed? Well, the judge, of course, but not in the case of Israel. Whenever the Bezdin, whenever the tribunal of the people say, "This is Rosh Hashanah," that is the time.

I will suggest to you nobody could prove that I'm wrong or right. I just happen to think I'm right but I think it explains to me the deliberacy with which the rabbis omitted every reference to Genesis 1 and 2. Why, on Rosh Hashanah, you have no reference to cosmogeny, to the creation of the world?—because Judaism is not interested in divine metaphysics. I'm not interested in what God did before the human being was created. What did the rabbis choose?

They chose the stories that dealt with a people's choice, a barren woman, Sarah, who feels cursed because she has no progeny. They dealt with the stories of the jealousies between Ishmael and Isaac. They dealt with the sacrifice of the child. They dealt with the family. They dealt with the promise, a promised land, a promised society. They dealt, not with that time there which have to do with God's creation of the world but with this time now, you and me and here and now. Together, we make time.

Time is serious. Time is important. The future is open. The past is important. The past is not the future. The future is not the past and the present is between us. This is the stuff of divinity. This is what Jewish time is about. It's something that you will not find in Hinduism and you will not find in Hellenism and you will not find in Stoicism and you will, most assuredly, not find in the archaic religions.

And that's what I'm very, very proud of. You think it applies to all of us. Karen is celebrating not simply chronological time, not simply that she is 13 years of age. She is celebrating moral time. This is the time in which she is now freed from her parents, is able to make decisions of her own and that we respect and that which we celebrate. We celebrate the weakness of Karen, the singularity of Karen. She is one of the people who makes time real.

When God created the sun or the moon or the stars or the animals, all He said was, "Yehee. Let there be," and there was. But, not when it came to the creation of the human being. God did not say, "Let there be man." He couldn't say it. You know what the bible says. Let us make... [You use that in the quotation, in your talk]. Let us make the human being in our image. Who is He talking to?

One of the great Hasidic commentaries says He is talking to nobody else but the embryo. He is talking to me and to you and to you because God cannot make us. He can only hope that we will join together with divinity in our growth, in our becoming as a human being. And that is part of what we

are celebrating in the bar mitzvah, in the bat mitzvah, in the celebration of Karen, in the celebration of your parents and your family and your wonderful Chavurah.

You could tell from the way in which Karen shunted, from the way in which she read from the Torah, that this is a unique individual. This is a person who is going to give meaning and life. She is going to create other than chaos, community and purpose. So, we celebrate on this Sabbath, not so very far from Rosh Hashanah, your history, the history of your people which you inherit and the history of your people which you will yet create.

Now, I want to ask this is your people. They're your witnesses. They love you. They rejoice in your joy, as all of us are strengthened in your strength. I want to ask all of you to please rise and to join with me in a prayer of exultation and a prayer of delight to celebrate the promise of Karen's bat mitzvah, what it means to her family, to her people and to all of us.

Let us together pray. Blessed art thou, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has enabled all of us to live, to celebrate with you, this moment of your maturation, this moment of your becoming a bat mitzvah. And all of us say, Amen.

Congregation: Amen.

Harold: As you are now standing, would you join with the Chazzan in the singing of the Kiddush, the sanctification of the wine, of joy and of happiness, on this Sabbath,