

SERMON FOR ROSH HASHANAH MORNING: PRIMAL SCREAM, A SERMONIC SONG

Night sky. Blue-black velvet, star glittering, quiet majesty. Ram's horn moon faintly illuminating the silence; the sky purples as the sun climbs from behind the hills, piercing with overwhelming light all the secret places hidden by the shy infant moon. The cosmos erupts.

"Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh!" scream the angels in huge thundering screaming voices. The sky seemed too quiet for such choral volume.

And yet, and yet, when we turn radio ears to the universe, it screams indeed. Silent-seeming stars are, in fact, crying out. Galaxies shout. The very fabric of empty space continues to wail. And not in the day, no even in the night the quiet seeming midnight shrieks! Night sky, blue-black velvet, star glittering with noisy majesty. When we return to dusk again, we will see Ram's horn moon faintly luminous, but presiding over a cacophony.

5782 years ago this night, the universe was created, give or take a few billion years. Its birth was no quieter than was yours or mine. It screamed and shouted itself into being; we have called it a Big Bang, it was no silent explosion.

From a place that cannot be known, a universe smaller than even the shortest wavelength of the smallest photon of light, a cosmos sized too small for physical description whether in English or in mathematics, a universe so tiny that to call it a pin-point is overwhelming hyperbole, blew into being. Nearly infinitely heavy, nearly infinitely hot and nearly infinitely noisy, the screaming violence uncurled from its nearly nothingness, to thrust outward so utterly that in less than a second it was fifty times as broad as all the earth would sometime later be.

13.7 billion years later, still it screams outward, leaving trails of vapor within the emptiness its passage opens, galaxies congealing from the mists, each enfleshed by a several hundred billion stars. All this birth accompanied by wailing. And in one of countless billions of galaxies, around one of its countless billions of stars swings a ball of iron and stone filmed over with moisture in which the culture of earthly life breeds and swarms, and of the millions of swarming sorts is one sort that can open its ears to hear the birth cry of the whole.

And the creatures haul out their instruments and tune them to the wailing and declare that it is a background radiation of three degrees Kelvin, but the words which pretend to understand cannot cover up the screams; call it what you will, the universe cries as it is born and the cries have not yet ceased, for the birth is not yet over.

When a child is born, we eagerly await that first scream, that primal scream; yet did we forget that echoing in the background is the most primal of all primal screams? Out of that continuing scream emerged the first stars, they lived, screaming, and died screaming and hurling out the debris that would later become new stars. Nearly five billion years ago, or 5782 years ago depending upon which mathematics you prefer, our sun and earth screamed their birth, and the yearly circle dance has brought us unto the cusp of autumn, and the moon too, whose dance has reopened its eye, just a sliver. The new autumnal moon, the signal that Israel has annually awaited these thousands of years to herald its recognition of the birth of the universe that is still being born. *Hayom harat olam*, we say, today the universe is being born!

Three times we say it during each of the two days upon which we celebrate the birth. Once during the service of *Malchuyot*, declaring the sovereignty of God; once during the service of *Zichronot*, declaring the divine universal memory, once during the service of *Shofarot*, declaring the power of the very wailing and screaming itself. And as we announce the birth, we let forth our echoing wails.

During these three services we open wide our ears and listen for that birth-wailing. We do not use a parabolic reflector dish to listen, we use a more ancient sort of infundibulum with which to funnel the cries to our ears, we use the horn of a ram. The ram's horn elegantly illustrates the outward thrusting fractal process by which the beings in this universe come into their being. Small patterns repeating themselves in a rhythm of large scales composed of smaller scales composed of still smaller scales.

Thus the leaves of a fern, branching out from the central stem, are each composed of leaves branching out from a central stem, each leaf of which is composed of leaves branching out from a central stem. Thus the aorta branches into its arteries, ever smaller branching until the ultimate branching of the capillaries, from which a perfect recapitulation in veins branches upward, ever larger, to spill the exhausted blood back into the heart. Thus the river systems of thousands of miles and thus the snail shell and thus the eagle's pinions and thus the forks of lightning and thus the curving arc of the ram's horn.

All these fractal growths are the fruits of the power of being that has decreed that stone and energy and life shall grow forth by such recapitulation of pattern. We call that power of being the Tree of Life and could there be a better name?

And then, upon the days when we celebrate the birth of the universe, a human being opens hands composed of limbs branching forth from limbs, and takes hold of the curving recapitulation of ridges that is the horn and brings it to lips from which the air collected by the tree of bronchial passages is mightily expelled. The breath which parallels the wind rushes into the curving funnel and a noise is offered existence. Not a sweet musical note, cultivated and ranked with other notes into a song or a symphony, but a raucous

tone, a wail, a scream, a capturing of the cries of the universe being born. *Hayom harat olam.*

Each limb of the Tree of Life offers to existence a being, the length of whose generations differ by orders of magnitude. Thus the galaxies, who have not yet lived out their first lives, and thus the stars now into their second generation. Thus the earth has passed through four generations and its stones through a dozen. Thus a tree may stand for a thousand years, but a tortoise for only a hundred and a fly for mere weeks or days.

And then there is humanity. What is the generation of humanity? Surely it is very short, but also very long? The body of a man or a woman: may we hope for much more than eighty or ninety years, and even should we live to one hundred and twenty, what is this compared to a tree, or to a stone or to a star?

And yet, do we not hold the entire existence of the star within our spirit? Can we not measure that life in all its billions of years and talk about it and grow wiser from the knowledge? Do we not hold the very life of all this universe within our spirits? Is not a human being a being so old, that the birth of the universe is an event for which we have been witnesses? Indeed, can we not also hold within our spirits knowledge even of the ultimate death of the universe, which cannot happen for trillions upon trillions of years?

From which branch of the Tree of Life do we hang? What sort of fruit are we, who flicker into existence for a few decades and yet can hold within ourselves the entirety of all that ever was and will be? On the great fractal scale of recapitulation, where are we located? Shall we be measured by our flesh and bones alone, or shall we be measured by our souls? These have been offered to us together, not separately; what sort of fruit of the Tree of Life are we?

If we dare to then state that we are the very image of the Creator, the one who gave birth to this universe, are we speaking too far above our station? Yet how else do we fathom our lives? Both eternal and all-too-subject to time, is there any other creature, star or planet or mountain or stone or tree or beast or bird, that shares this nature? We are the most cosmic of all the creatures of cosmos, for we are not merely a product of the cosmos, we are its very essence. We are not a fruit that hangs from a branch of the Tree of Life, we are its heartwood.

And peering deeply into that heartwood, we find that we are a tree within the Tree. And whenever we spill out our knowledge and assemble it for easy access, it is a tree that we assemble. And the journey of humanity itself is also a tree: from the trunk of primordial times, millions of years ago when a certain group of primates first learned to hear the birth cry of the universe being born.

We may call that trunk by many names; sometimes it serves wisdom to call it Adam and Eve, sometimes it obscures wisdom to so call it. Let us call it Noah or perhaps Jonah:

for it was out of the sea that we are born, out of chaos, out of violence, out of barely sustained survival.

Let us call that trunk Noah or perhaps Jonah. From that trunk emerge the boughs and limbs and branches and twigs and leaves, unfolding generation by generation, until the tree has reached the enormous size wherein its outspread leaves number, here in 5782, more than seven and a half billion. That is how the tree appears today. And all those leaves wave in the breezes, and you and I, we are only a couple of tiny leaves upon this very enormous tree.

There, where the mighty trunk we call Noah or perhaps Jonah, begins to divide, are three huge boughs. These are the boughs of humanity as it evolved in Africa, Asia and Europe. From these three boughs branch off a few other limbs; but from which bough or branch, flutter the leaves, or maybe hang the fruit, that are all the human beings that live. We are the latest foliage and fruit of a near infinity of complex intertwinings, a masechet of branches...

Shoots from Asia spread leaves over the Americas, and then shoots from Europe and Africa as well. The great bough of Asia we call Shem, and out of Shem many limbs emerge indeed. Let us follow that limb called Arpachshad, which branches into many, one of which is called Shelach, from Shelach branch forth several, one of which is the limb from which all the Hebrews and their kin shall derive: Eber. If we follow it up through several more branchings, we come to the great branch we call Abraham.

Today that branch quivers, the winds are tossing this branch about today. All the leaves upon the branches emerging from Abraham are a-flutter. There is the network of twigs called Ishmael. And there is the network of twigs called Isaac.

We open our scroll today, and again the next day, and in it we shall read about Ishmael and then about Isaac. These two carry onward the life-force of Abraham. Their co-existence has been at times peaceful and symbiotic, at other times most hateful. Upon the surface of the tree, where the leaves flutter in the sun and in the wind, the leaves of Ishmael, father of the Muslims, and the leaves of Isaac, father of the Jews, have pulled apart, leaving ugly rifts in the green texture of the tree's totality. But there, reluctantly and with discernible repugnance, a leaf of Ishmael, call it Oleh, and a leaf of Isaac, call it Trufah, have touched. The winds blow, the twigs quiver. What can be made of this? Only the growth of next season will tell.

Yet other winds also blow, many winds from many directions. There is a cold wind from the north. The wind from the east is hard and dry. The leaves flutter fiercely and the concatenation of the whispers of millions and millions of leaves creates a louder sound, a wailing, a crying sound like unto the sound of the birth of the universe, like unto the sound of wind through a ram's horn.

The sound is too over-powering, we stop up our ears and open wide our eyes, trying to shift our attention away from sound and into sight. There we see the millions of swaying leaves, but we are carried forward, until the one leaf which is our own self looms and still we plunge forward, until all the field of vision is a tracery of green veins too bright, too bright! We close our eyes, but the image has been burned into our retinas, colors reversed, and now it appears as a tracery of red veins, brilliant red. The eye follows the tracery and comes upon the beating heart, wildly beating from the adrenaline that has washed over us from the wailing sound of the universe being born. The heart pumps wildly and bursts. It is ready to be healed. It was hurt and needy before, but until it broke it could accept no help. Now it can be healed.

The heart is dissolved into the sea of its ultimate birth. The blood, now old, swirls blackly outward in the currents of the pale grey sea, and our eyes snap open once again, the colors reverse once again, and the wispy white arm of a spiral galaxy flows upon the blue-black wailing emptiness of space. The resolution of my broken heart is a cosmic matter. The repair of my human heart is of consequence to the dance of eons. The birth wail grows louder, but is it the universe or me that makes the sound?

Dripping, I emerge from the sea waters of my birth, my heart whole and pumping life into that one tiny leaf dancing in the breeze that is me. I am ready for the new year. Hayom harat olam, today the universe which is myself is born.