

SERMON FOR ROSH HASHANAH EVE: THE AGE OF AQUARIUS

I sat down to write this sermon a hundred times. That is probably not an exaggeration. All that flew through my head was the nearly endless litany of horror that characterizes our world today. A disease that we should have been able to overcome by now, and indeed would have, had not human ignorance and stubbornness joined forces with the mute power of viral insidiousness. Vast sections of continents burning in uncontrollable wildfires. Other vast sections of continents drowning in flood waters. Incessant, earlier and more powerful hurricanes that spawn tornadoes that reach places almost never troubled by them before.

Glaciers melting at rates far exceeding the worst case scenarios almost embarrassedly published ten years ago. Climate change events occurring now that, again, worst case scenarios placed in 2050 or 2100. Racial tensions again at 1970s levels. Antisemitism at levels unseen since the 1920s and 30s. Crumbling buildings and other infrastructure. Extinction events for one species after another, many with a handful of survivors in captivity only. Heat waves that kill thousands. Cooling technologies as environmentally destructive as they were in the 1950s. Heart disease and cancer rates that sneer at all our latest medical advances.

So this is what runs through my mind and my heart, distilling their powers of cogitation and concern into despair. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a short story called "The Unpardonable Sin." Spoiler alert: although classic Christian thought says that sin is blasphemy, Hawthorne says that sin is despair, or as he also put it, the destruction of the Spirit of God in Humanity. For all life strives ahead only when it rides upon hope, even just a tiny glimmer of hope. And we Jews sure know about hope. Would we still exist 3700 years after our beginnings were it not for hope? From Abraham's longing for children to the beaten and raped folk of the shetlach to the inmates of Treblinka, hope is all that kept us going.

Our brother Naftali Imber wrote a song of hope, *Hatikvah*, in 1878, set to music nine years later by our brother Samuel Cohen, and this song became, maybe even more than the *Sh'ma* itself, the watchword of our people. It is not a mystery that when the new State of Israel sought a national anthem, it would be this powerful expression of faith in lasting hope. So I agree with Hawthorne, maybe hopelessness is indeed the one unpardonable sin. Many of us are, and certainly I myself am, treading far too closely to its hellish borders.

And really, if this is the *weltanschauung* in which I drown, how would I be doing any of you a favor by writing a sermon? Yet others have done so. Listen to the words of Prophet Joel:

Hear this, you old and young, all you inhabitants of the land. Has such a thing been in your days, or even in the days of your fathers? Awake, you drunkards, and weep;

and howl. Alas for the day! for the Day of Adonai is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come. O God, to you I cry; for the fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and the flame has burned all the trees of the field. The beasts of the field cry also to you; for the waters streams have dried up, and the fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.

Blow the shofar in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain; let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of Adonai comes, for it is near at hand. A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness. They run to and fro in the city; they run upon the wall, they climb up into the houses; they enter by the windows like a thief. The rains do not come in their due time and nourish, but destroy, the earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble; the sun and the moon are dark, and the stars withdraw their shining. They beat their plowshares into swords and their pruning hooks into spears, and do indeed study war.

And Joel is not alone. We have trembled before despair many times. Sometimes a community goes over the edge, and is heard of no more. Sometimes a spark of hope flares into a torch and we can see where we must step, finding a pathway to redemption once again. But who aside from God knows whether the next step leads to renewal or to catastrophe?

A moment such as this inspired the Hippy movement. Many simply turned on, tuned in, and dropped out. But many agitated for change that began to happen. Was it to be a fall into horror, or a climb into a new world. That, in the end, always seems to be our choice.

So when those hippies sang about the moon in the seventh house, did they understand what the astrological significance of that expression meant?

The moon in the seventh house two hours every other day, it is not a one time cosmic event. It is associated with the manner by which symbiosis in relationships can be characterized. On the positive side, it can mean affectionate, mutually beneficial partnership. On the negative side, it can mean co-dependent, feckless, mutual abuse. Which way it goes seems to be not guided by the stars, but by our choices. Well, I like that part. But I can see as many signs of degeneration, antipathy and bigotry in this world as I can I see healing, growth in sensitivity, embracing our suffering human kinfolk, indeed, our plant and animal kinfolk as well. How is it all going to end? And the moon is in the seventh house every two days... that's a lot of opportunities to succeed or to squander.

And when those hippies sang about the Jupiter aligning with Mars, did they understand what the astrological significance of that expression meant? It is not an unusual cosmic event either, it occurs nearly every year, sometimes twice in a year.

Jupiter aligns with Mars. Or let us say it the way a Babylonian would. For long before Europeans, or even Romans, or even Greeks pondered astrological significance, the Babylonians did. And ancient Israel was watching the whole time, saying to itself, “I want to touch it, but I don’t.” An attitude that pretty much sums up all of subsequent Jewish attitudes towards astrology.

In Biblical Hebrew, astrologers are called *Kasdim*, and Mesopotamia as a whole was referred to as a realm of Kasdim. Even as early as in Genesis 12, Abraham is said to be born in Ur-Kasdim. From the term *Kasdim* much, much later derived the European term *Chaldean*, and many scholars like to gently deride the ancient author of this text by showing that the Chaldean period of Babylonia did not begin until several centuries after Abraham’s time. But is this what the text is saying? It is probably not referring to what archeologist call Chaldean Babylonia at all. It seems, rather, to be saying that Abraham was born into a society in which astrology permeated the reality of the residents of Ur. And indeed, we have astrological texts from Ur III, a period of the city’s history preceding by eight centuries even Abraham’s time.

In other words, the Torah is telling us that our ultimate ancestor was a product of an astrology-heavy upbringing. Abraham’s father was even named Terach, which is a name based upon the Akkadian word for the moon. Was he an astrologer? Is the much, much later midrash that described Terach as a craftsman of idols closer to the truth than we might think? Was Terach precisely the guy to go to in order to determine what house your moon was in?

Well, Jews have both scoffed at and embraced astrology. Let us not forget that in most of the prominent synagogues built during the first few centuries of the common era, the period, need I remind you when the Mishnah and the Talmud were being composed, warning us away from astrology, those synagogues in which they prayed were filled with astrological symbols! Go find pictures. Take as examples Beyt Alfa, Zippori, Hammat Tiberias, Hosefa, Huqoq, Susya or Naaran. All of these excavated shuls are to be found in Israel itself, or nearby, such as Jordan or Syria. And every one features beautiful mosaic decor, prominently featuring the Zodiac.

These are the shuls that our sages prayed in every day, while scoffing at astrology. But not all of the scoffed. And later still, during the middle ages, even fewer scoffed. Maimonides did. But Abraham ibn Ezra did not, nor did the brilliant Nachmonides, nor the mathematician and physicist Gersonides; they all saw something of value in this science of the stars’ power. And by the way, another strong supporter was Isaac Newton, just to bring in one brilliant science-oriented goyish philosopher. I myself will simply pause and wonder.

In any case, what happens when Jupiter or Zeus aligns with Mars or Aries, or to put it in the language of Abraham, the language of the *Kasdim* with whom Abraham grew up, when the planet Marduk aligned with the planet Nergal. That’s how one of would have expressed it. Marduk was the glorious king of gods, and alignment with him amplified

broadly whatever the effect was of the other planet or planets. Interestingly, that is exactly the same effect Western astrologers claim for Jupiter. Nergal was the god of many things, war among them, like Mars; also disease and death, yet also fertility and vegetation and growth.

Here we have another positive/negative dialectic: shall it be war and disease that is amplified when Jupiter aligns with Mars? Or shall it be growth and green abundance? Stare into a red fire and close your eyes: you shall see the green! To borrow language from yet another culture, the Yin and the Yang blur together. But Chinese astrology has been saying this for nearly as long as the Babylonians.

OK, so the first two lines of this Broadway hippy song, both the moon's house and the planetary alignment, present us with an amazing choice: shall it be mutually destructive, parasitical dependence bringing about war, disease and environmental disaster? Or shall it be affectionate, thoughtful partnership bringing about growth, maturity and a Green revolution? The Age of Aquarius is not simply a hippy love-fest. It is a test of the human character. Are we killer apes or are we *tzaddikim*?

And in fact, when astrologers describe the Age of Aquarius (an age is a 2150 year long period governed by a reverse procession of the zodiacal signs. For example, if the Age of Aquarius is waxing, then it is the Age of Pisces that is waning...) Aquarius oversees yet another dialectic. Either philanthropy, perseverance, freedom, and idealism on the one hand; or megalomania, greed, militarism and elitism on the other. Pick one. The second possibility seems very unhippy-like. Maybe the Dawning of the Age of Aquarius is not such a good thing.

And let us face facts. Would we describe the Age we enter now as typified by mutually beneficial, affectionate sharing? Thoughtful renewal? Philanthropic helpfulness? Green growth? Or is it an age of war, disease, simultaneous fire-storms and floods, greed, and elitist power-grabbing?

I suspect that I know what most of us are thinking. But not so fast. The Yin and the Yang are blurred together. Can we not see generosity glittering through the greed? Environmental concern glowing through the environmental rape? Cures and the treatments that combat the disease? Sensitivity making headway even as racism does?

The Age of Aquarius or whatever we wish to call the present moment is not a hippy paradise bestowed upon us. It is another in a series of challenges. We can make this age the last one and finally destroy this world, or we can make this age the moment when maturity finally takes hold and we bring ourselves by our own bootstraps into a perfected existence. Forget the dubious astrology, for here is the unambiguously Jewish notion of a Messianic Age.

Again, the words of the prophet Joel, which however filled with seeming despair they appeared, now shows the very Jewish, the very human hope shining through:

Do you mourn? Then tear your heart, and not your garments, and turn to Adonai your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repents of the evil. Who knows if he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him?

Blow the shofar in Zion, sanctify a holy day, call a solemn assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the congregation. Be glad then, you children of Zion, and rejoice in Adonai your God; for he has given you the first rain in due measure.

Spare your people, O Lord, and do not give to them an inheritance of turmoil, disease and pain. Why should they say among the people, Where is their God? And Adonai answered and said to his people, Behold, I will send you grain, and wine, and oil, and you shall be satisfied; and I will no more punish you with reproach.

Be glad then, you children of Zion, and rejoice in Adonai your God; for he will again give you the rain in due measure. And the floors shall be full of wheat, and the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. And I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten. And you shall have plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of Adonai your God, who has dealt wondrously with you; and my people shall never be ashamed.