

## **Rabbi Jen Feldman, Yom Kippur Sermon, 5771**

One evening this past summer, I hatched a great plan for my boys. I'll load them both into the car early tomorrow morning, I thought, drop Sol off at day camp and then get to my in-laws in time for a special outdoor swim play date. Hillel will have an exciting activity before needing his late morning nap, and then he'll wake up just in time for picking up big brother.

This may sound simple enough. For one adult, though, getting two young children out of the house for two separate activities with all the necessary protections for having fun in the sun on a day with a heat wave -- by 8:40 in the morning, mind you -- is no small feat. I practically mapped out the attack plan in my sleep the night before. And so, the next morning, after we were all fed, toothbrushed, dressed, sunscreened, bug sprayed, with water bottles, snacks, swim suits, changes of clothes, and lunch all packed.....we were out the door as planned. I had a sense of accomplishment and relief....we did it. A bit

exhausted from the morning rush, we arrived at day camp on time before 9:00AM – another success. Then, as then six year-old Sol was getting out of the car, he paused and had a moment of realization. And he said to me, somewhat sheepishly, “Oops, Ima, I forgot my lunchbox.”

The day camp, by the way, was about twenty minutes from our home, in a lovely rural setting, with no grocery stores or restaurants nearby. And so, because of the forgotten lunch – one small, absent-minded mistake – I spent the rest of the morning going back and forth between home and summer camp with a toddler in the car – a toddler who lost his patience for the car seat shortly after his birth, and who whiled away this summer morning screaming in protest.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about chaos – chaos in our lives, and chaos as it relates to our understanding of God.

Of course a forgotten lunch box and an extra round trip to day camp don't throw most of us into theological crisis. But they do illustrate a fundamental idea in chaos theory. Small changes in a system can lead to big, unpredictable results. That's commonly known as the “butterfly

effect,” based on the idea that something no greater than the flapping of a butterfly's wings can affect changes in the weather.

We spend a lot of time and energy, I believe, trying to control the chaos in our material lives in part because we would like to deny how susceptible our lives are to chaos – how easily our plans can be torn asunder. Consider this: Americans spent over 7 billion dollars last year on home organizing products. We seek control where we can get it. You can bet that when circumstances or events in my life seem overwhelming, I will somehow find time to clean the kitchen floor, vacuum the rest of the house, and file or recycle the seemingly endless stacks of random papers on the kitchen counter.

Small chaos is hard to tolerate because it reminds us of big chaos. In the backs of our minds, we know that stability in our lives is a fragile and passing thing: that the butterfly effect describes the results of a forgotten lunchbox – and also the results of a random genetic mutation, or of a slight tectonic shift, or of a driver who didn't get quite enough

sleep the night before. And when a crisis or a tragedy sends our lives spinning, that is when the big questions start to come up.

In a chaotic world, where is God? This theological question creates an even greater challenge during the High Holy Days, as our machzor, our High Holy Day prayerbook, is filled with images of God as Master, King, Judge – the One separate and beyond the world yet in complete control. These images flow from both classical biblical, and, to a large extent, rabbinic theology – God created the world from nothing and continues to control nature, history and personal fate. God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. But our lived experiences challenge this classical theology. As a chaplain, I heard from residents in the nursing home where I worked, “Rabbi, I’ve been a good person my whole life. How could God do this to me?”

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson writes of the challenge to his own personal theology that he experienced when his son was diagnosed with autism 14 years ago. “I had been taught that God was all-powerful, which would mean God could have prevented Jacob’s autism but

didn't." In his initial anger and confusion, Rabbi Artson felt that his entire system of belief had been shattered, and, for a year and a half, he found himself unable to pray. He notes wryly that for a rabbi this was "a bit awkward professionally."

What brought Rabbi Artson back to connection to God, and what I want to share with you today, is his re-thinking what God is and how God relates to the chaos of our lives. Rabbi Artson asks us to turn to the opening of Genesis. He notes that, in contrast to the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, the universe created from nothing, Torah tells the story this way: "When God began creating heaven and earth, there was *tohu va-vohu* (chaos), and the *ruach* (wind/breath/spirit) of God was vibrating over the face of *tehom*, (the deep), and God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."

So Genesis teaches that the *tohu va-vohu* and *tehom* "wild and waste," "the deep" – that is, chaos – existed before God's activity; in order to mitigate it, God engaged in a process of creation. Rabbi Artson again:

The simple meaning of Genesis 1 is that there is pre-existent darkness and chaos. The *tehom*, the chaos, already exists—bubbly, uncontainable and undomesticated. God’s creative act is not the special effect of something from nothing, but the steady chesed (lovingkindness) of converting chaos into cosmos. Tohu va-vohu and the *tehom* (the deep) have always existed, and threaten still. God has always been, and is still, inviting/commanding the chaos into cosmos. We have misunderstood the nature of Divine creativity and power.

In this view, God is not a being who exists outside of the natural world, controlling all actions and dictating all results.

Rather, we can understand God as persuasive, inviting us to endure and grow in the midst of the chaos that naturally exists. Artson writes, “It is God who provides the grounds for our creativity, our becoming more connected, more just, more compassionate.”

The High Holy Day prayer Untaneh Tokef confronts us with a list that we chant each Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur of the different ways we may meet our ends in the coming year. Who by fire? Who by water? Who in the end of their days and who before their time? People we love can be taken from us. Illness can overcome us. Tragedy can strike with no warning. What do we do in the face of this? The prayer answers, “u'tefillah, u'teshuvah, u'tzedakah, ma'avirin et roah ha-g'zerah.” Prayer, repentance, and tzedakah soften the decree. If we listen to the words carefully, we understand: the decree remains in place. We are still fragile, still mortal. God will not change the rules of the game, roll back chaos, bend the universe on our behalf. Rather, God is in the ability to respond to loss and suffering, and in the soul's yearning to do so. U'n'taneh Tokef teaches us: teshuva – turning to others, to God and to ourselves with honesty, compassion and forgiveness; tzedakah – using our personal and material resources to better the lives of others; and tefillah – staying spiritually awake, aware of life's blessings even amidst

sorrow – these acts bring healing and direction, compassion and meaning to our lives.

Yom Kippur can feel like an island in time. We are here together, removed from our daily routines, our day structured by prayer, fasting and reflection. In contrast to everyday chaos, life during this 25 hours can seem predictable, as predictable as one page in the machzor leading to the next. But we know that “life as usual,” with all of the challenges and difficulties it entails, is as close as the door of the synagogue. At the end of this day, when we return to ordinary time and activities, may we do so strengthened, knowing that in the face of chaos we can turn to each other, to our community, to God for the capacity to endure and the inspiration to live meaningful lives. May it be a new year of reflection, of turning to our best selves, of reaching out with compassion, awareness, and good deeds. G'mar chatimah tovah – A good final sealing in the book of life.