

Shabbat Shalom.

Now that the suite of Tishrei holidays has ended, after three whole weeks of wishing each other a shanah tovah, we're finally ready *this* week, to start the year afresh with the beginning of the Torah. Approaching this reading always feels a little off kilter, like the past few weeks in the Torah cycle were in a kind of purgatory, waiting to begin again, but not quite ready.

And this year, as we finally roll the scroll back to Genesis, focusing on newness also feels a little stilted. Like this new year doesn't feel all that new. Another year, with the same old tsuris. Another election approaching. Another fall wondering when the war in Gaza will end, or the hostages will return home. Another year in which the climate gets hotter, and in which we worry about the future of democracy. Headlines that are new, but also kind of not. So many familiar anxieties, problems that we still have yet to solve.

As we read a parsha about newness and creative possibility, I wish we really felt like we could tap into it. I wish it were more innate to us to be optimistic about the weeks and year to come, or to feel like we're ready for Genesis. But the Torah waits for nobody. And even if it feels like *this* week will just be a continuation of whatever we endured *last* week, or *this* election will be just like certain elections that we remember, the parsha demands that we begin again. And, maybe, that we force ourselves to believe in newness.

Bereshit Bara Elohim et Hashamayim v'et Haaretz. In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth. V'haaretz hayta tohu vavohu. And the earth was unformed and void.

Or, some translate, when God began to create the Heavens and the Earth, the world was chaotic and disorderly.

We know what comes next. God creates light and darkness, sky and waters, land and seas, flora and fauna, and humankind. God fashions order out of chaos.

As we look at the world today, our country, maybe our own personal lives, many of us are seeking some bit of order. But frequently, when we try to find it, we see

*only* chaos. Or disorder. Becoming overwhelmed by just how much *tohu vavohu* pervades in the world around us. And we get stuck in it.

There are many ways of defining that *tohu vavohu*, the primordial soup before the creation of all things. Saadia Gaon explained that *tohu* is related to *tehom*, meaning “deep,” as if the before times were like a pit of darkness. And that *bohu*, separated into *bo-hu*, means “everything is in it.” Meaning that all matter, and everything that would come to be, was inside of a deep pit. Rashi says that the word *tohu* actually implies “astonishment or amazement, for a person would have been astonished and amazed at its emptiness.”

I don’t want to sound dramatic or depressed, but that really spoke to me this week. I got kind of obsessed with the notion of *tohu vavohu* as I read the parsha this year, given how stuck many of us feel in the muck of living in 2024. So I did a little more digging into that deep pit, hoping to find something relevant, or redeeming, or at least resonant in what *tohu vavohu* actually is.

*Tohu* appears only 20 times in the Tanakh, varyingly referring to formlessness, chaos, confusion, or vanity. And *bohu* only appears three times, always next to *tohu*. Some scholars believe therefore that *tohu vavohu* was a kind of verbal joke, a silly rhyme to emphasize the despair of the *tohu*. Like *tohu sh’mohu*. To really drive home how much nothingness there was.

That tracks with the two other instances of the phrase in the Tanakh, which equally make use of this kind of exaggeration.

In Isaiah, the phrase appears in a depiction of war, describing that destruction like the extreme barrenness of matter before matter. And in Jeremiah, the phrase refers to a sinful generation of Israelites who act foolishly, building a chaotic and rudderless society of *tohu vavohu*, with no light to guide their way.

Both of these later examples in Tanakh remind us that the Torah’s specific description of utter chaos is not reserved only for the pre-creation void. But it *also* can be used to describe times of war, or when society has run amok. That it is possible for the world to feel out of order in any generation or era.

In every case, however, *tohu vavohu* is a temporary state. Out of the need for order, *came* order, in Genesis. And as we sang just moments ago in *Lecha Dodi*, *Sof ma'aseh b'machshava techilah*, the end of creation was in the very first thought. God was able to make order in that chaos, because within that formlessness were the raw materials with which to create. Shortly thereafter in the parsha, God created human beings in God's image, so that we, too, could create order. Just as God creates through speech in Genesis, God gave humans the ability to speak. Naming the animals, as Adam does, continuing the work of creation. And building human civilization.

Kabbalists drive this idea home. They put a lot of emphasis on the idea of the *tohu* that existed before creation. In mystical texts, that chaos is understood to be an unbridled creative energy that broke mythic vessels, which human beings are meant to repair through performing *mitzvot*. In the kabbalistic view, turning chaos into order has been the task of human beings since the very beginning, and it is at the core of Jewish life.

Taking all these teachings together, we might say that it is not enough to merely see that the world is chaotic. It is not acceptable, per our tradition, to allow ourselves to get stuck or overwhelmed by how messy existence may feel. But rather, it is a value to force ourselves to believe that newness is possible within disorder, and to try our best to create it.

Last night, as we read the first words of Genesis out loud, I actually saw this happen in real time. Many of us from CBE gathered at Grand Army Plaza with hundreds of others from different communities in our annual celebration of *Simchat Torah Across Brooklyn*. Given that last year's celebration fell on October 7th, and wound up being the first of many painful moments of division in the Jewish community, many regular attendees felt uneasy going into last night. *New York Jewish Week* even wrote an article about it, with great quotes from our cantor. People were skeptical, maybe even a little afraid. Many did not feel like dancing or being happy.

And at first, the gathering started slow. But with each successive *hakafah*, each rotation of dancing with the Torah, the crowd got bigger. The music became more joyous. People gave in to the possibility that maybe this could actually feel good. No one *forgot* for a moment about the ongoing trauma of our time. But we were

genuinely able to begin again. To round out our holidays, and actually find some bit of newness...as we read Breishit together. We found that it was possible to feel renewed, even when we were convinced that we would not.

As we read Genesis together over the next three months, that is the energy I hope we can all tap into. That creative potential that exists in the *tohu vavohu* that we perceive around us. And as we enter this Shabbat, trying to embody the first Shabbat, may we allow ourselves to feel that newness really is possible over the next few weeks. And hopefully for a long time thereafter.

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