

**Rosh Hashanah 2019/5780 – Finding Power in an Age of Chaos**  
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A Jewish joke: A mother takes her baby to the seashore. And while the baby is playing in the sandcastles, a giant wave, a hulking tsunami comes and rips away the child into the sea. The mother sees this and screams, and turns her eyes toward heaven and says, “For this I suffered and struggled? For this you take away my child, the one I love and for whom I labor? For this!” And then, in that moment, another wave comes along and miraculously deposits the child right back into her very arms. The mother looks at her child, sees he’s unharmed, and then turns back toward the heavens and says, “He had a hat!”

You know what that joke is? That is the dictionary definition of *chutzpah*. *Chutzpah*, audacity, daring, boldness. *Chutzpah*. The word *chutzpah* is an old Jewish word; it actually shows up in the Talmud long before Yiddish. *Chutzpah* is a state of being, an attitude, and I am here to tell you today, that Judaism is the one and only *chutzpadik* spiritual path. My former colleague and teacher, Rabbi Ed Feinstein wrote a book arguing that Judaism is a theology of *chutzpah*. It’s part of our tradition; it’s part of the package of being a Jew. It’s in our ideology, theology, cosmology, ontology, epistemology, phenomenology, and psychology – get it? *Chutzpah* is our story – and it comes right from the Torah.

So, listen to an ancient myth that is not from the Torah:

In the beginning, there was only water churning in chaos. From the chaos, the waters divided into two: the sweet, fresh water known as the father god Apsu, and the bitter, salty ocean waters known as Tiamat, the mother goddess. And when they joined together, their commingling brought forth all the gods of the world: gods of sun and moon and stars, gods of war and peace, of fertility, barrenness, of rain and drought. These gods were driven by passions and jealousies and lust. Their carousing filled the world with noise and commotion, so much so that father Apsu decided to kill them all and restore his world to peace and quiet. Learning of this plot against her children, mother Tiamat tipped off her son Ea who used his magic to put Apsu to sleep and kill him. Enraged at the death of her husband, Tiamat herself turns against the younger gods. So she created 11 monsters to destroy all the gods. The gods gathered in anxious council – what could be done? Who dared to stop the all-powerful mother goddess. Up stepped Marduk, god of thunder and lightning, and he proposed a bargain. He would fight the mother goddess on behalf of all the other gods and, if victorious, he would be crowned king of the gods. The plan was quickly adopted and off to battle against his mother went Marduk. The battle raged and raged until Marduk gained the upper hand. He pried open the mouth of the goddess, propped it open with a thunder bolt and then cast another lethal lightning bolt deep into Tiamat’s belly. She died in agony. Marduk sliced her dead body in half, half he set up high in the sky, and half he placed below, under the earth, and then he set about celebrating his great victory with a grand festival where he was crowned king of the gods. But his rejoicing was short-lived, for it was Tiamat who provided sustenance for the gods, and once she was gone there was no source of food. Seeing this, Marduk set about creating a suitable servant for the gods. He squeezed out the blood of the vanquished goddess into the mud of the river and formed out of that mixture, the human being. The human being was given the task of serving the gods –

literally. Humanity was ordered to offer savory sacrifices whose smoke billowed toward heaven and satisfied the appetites of the gods.

So goes the ancient Mesopotamian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*, written in the ancient language of Akkadian, authored sometime before 2000 BCE. This was Abraham's bedtime story. Of course, however, a myth should not be confused with a mere child's fairy tale – it's not just for children. A myth is a statement of a culture's fundamental truth in the form of a story. It is not to be read in the past tense, it's not a "once upon a time in a galaxy far away" – myths are a culture's statement of human existence in the present, of what's happening right now.

So what world is described in the ancient Mesopotamian creation myth? It's a divided world with disparate powers pitted against one another, locked in conflict. The gods driven by lusts, jealousies, or boredom are set against each other in perpetual warfare. It's a world without order; a world without a moment of peace. And into this world the human being is planted – a pitiless, puny, powerless bystander. Anything a human is inspired to create might be stolen or ruined by the uncontrollable impulses of the gods. We are children building sandcastles by the sea and the tide inevitably washes all of our hopes and dreams away. This myth counsels resignation and surrender: "Submit," "submit and acquiesce," "do as your told," "serve the gods and perhaps you and your children might survive another day."

This Mesopotamian myth, inscribed on clay tablets, was discovered by archaeologists in 1849 when they uncovered the ancient city of Nineveh in Iraq – today we call it Mosul. And out of this find, we now understand something important about our Torah. The Torah is a protest; a rejection of the Mesopotamian worldview and its pathetic image of human existence.

*"In the beginning God created heaven and earth, the earth was unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water and God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day."*

That's Genesis, and compared to the Mesopotamian myth ... well, it's boring. You couldn't film it – good metaphysics makes bad cinema. There's no battle, no lust – there's no blood! Instead, just this tedious, but majestic sense of order. Life rolls out in an orderly plan and order brings predictability, but the thing is – in a predictable world – there's room for human dreams, room for human beings to work, to build.

And the single most important words of Genesis are, "God saw that it was good." This world has potential. In the Mesopotamian myth, the human being is created from the blood of the vanquished goddess in order to satisfy the appetites of her selfish children. Genesis scoffs at this:

*“God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ And God created man in God’s image, in God’s image God created him, male and female, God created them. God blessed them and said, ‘Be fertile and increase and fill the earth and master it, and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky and all the living things that creep on earth.’”*

In Genesis, the human being bears the image of the Creator and shares in the power over the world. In the Mesopotamian myth, human being is object; in Genesis, human being is subject – an actor in the drama of creation, to be partner with God, responsible for the destiny of the world.

The Torah went to war against the ancient pagan myth, not because it is empirically false – myths are never factually disproven. The Torah fought against this myth because it diminishes the dignity of being human. The Mesopotamian myth blocks the possibility of human dreams for the world and sees human efforts as futile. Sure, Lord Acton taught us that absolute power corrupts absolutely, but so does absolute powerlessness – when powerlessness and surrender leave us only with despair and isolation. When we despair about our ability to shape the conditions of our existence; when we despair in any possibility of achieving our hopes and dreams – the human soul decays. So, the Torah went to war and instead suggested a revolutionary idea: human beings are God’s partners in creating the world.

No idea in history has been more audacious or more chutzpahdik. And it’s important because, at the end of the day, your theology is correlative to your anthropology. In other words, whatever you think about God, is actually the way you think about being human. Your belief about God is really just the horizon of what you actually believe about human possibility.

So, the revolution of the Torah was not what it says about God. The Torah actually tells us very little of God. We know nothing of where God comes from, no origin story, we don’t know God’s essence. All we know is that God dreams and creates, and God encounters human beings in the process of creating. The revolution of the Torah was its conception of humanity – our capacities, our imperfections, and our remarkable possibilities.

And this drama plays out throughout the Torah, and today I want to give it to you in three acts:

Act 1 – In Eden: God creates a world of order and peace and blesses it, but God wants more than mere inertia. God wants a partner to enjoy this world and to help take care of it, so God creates one conscious, self-aware creature and places the human being in this garden of pristine beauty and tranquility. Note that it is a garden and not a wilderness or shopping mall. A garden is that singularly marvelous place where nature and artifice meet. It demands knowing hands to tend it; a garden is dynamic where everything is connected ecologically, organically, and the human being is charged with maintaining the interconnected oneness of all that lives in it – *l’shamrah u’l’avdah* – to guard and cultivate it – that is the meaning of human existence. But, even in that perfect place of tranquility, the

human being isn't content ... and if you have been the parents of teenagers, you could predict what happens.

The human being wants to create his own reality and self-determine, so Adam and Eve break their one rule; they betray the partnership, and, perhaps as bewildered as any parent might be, God sends them out and grants their freedom.

Act 2 – Outside the Garden: Mankind turns away from God's dream of oneness and individuation goes wild. And over ten generations, corruption and violence fill the world and again, like a parent might, God is livid. But before God completely disowns the world and destroys all of humanity, God spots one good man, an *ish tzaddik*, one righteous man – his name is Noah.... Russell Crowe (if you saw the movie). So, God says, 'I can't create a human being to be my partner, but maybe I can choose one.' But when Noah – this chosen one – is finally gone, mankind again takes to corruption and violence. And again, God is disappointed. With all of God's power, God could not create nor find a worthy partner.

But ... if you can't create one and you can't choose one, maybe you can teach one.

Act 3: *And the Lord said to Abram, "Leave your native land, your father's house, go to the land that I will show, I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you, be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, curse those who curse you and in you, shall all the families of the earth be blessed."* So, why did God pick Abraham? Well there are lots of answers, but it's actually pretty clear why – his name started with an 'A.' It's a random choice. Pick any guy; pick anyone. Strip him of his culture and identity, and remake him into a vessel of divine blessing and say to him: *be a blessing*. Be a blessing, not to Me, God, but to the world – be my partner. This is not a vertical relationship as in every other religion – the Torah turns it sideways and into a horizontal relationship. God *needs* this guy; God *needs* human beings.

You know how I know that? I know it because the Torah keeps sticking it right in our face. Remember this? God sees the horrifying violence and corruption in Sodom and Gomorrah. God is surveying how God is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:18ff) and says:

*"Now the LORD had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him?"*

"Shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do?" What kind of question is that? Of course you should hide from Abraham what you're going to do – you're God! What is God worried about? Is God accountable to anyone the way we're accountable, like we're accountable to our spouses, our friends, our children? Yes. The Torah says, yes, God is accountable. If God is going to be the teacher of justice and morality and goodness, then justice must become transparent so that God and Abraham share the same standards of justice and goodness. Once God enters into relationship, God has to operate in the same moral universe as

Abraham and thus God becomes open to questioning. So Abraham does exactly that and questions:

*“Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”*

*And the LORD answered, “If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”*

Now Abraham has sold enough camels in the market of Beersheva to know he’s got a live one here.

So Abraham keeps bargaining: If 50 how about 45, do I have 45? How about 40, if 40 how about 30 and so on and so forth til 10 – 10 going once, going twice – 10 sold to the *Hashem*, The Ruler of the Universe!

It’s a crazy story! *“Far be it from you God to bring death to the innocent as well as the guilty.”* What! “Far be it from you” though is not really what it says. In the Hebrew, it’s *Chalilah lekha* – it’s literary “Shame on you!” Abraham scolds the Lord as he would a child. Is this really what You created and wanted? You wanted to create a world without justice, without a moral order – a world without moral differentiations and where no one can tell the difference between the path of life and the path of death. Is this what You wanted? Shame on you!

I mean at this point, God could have just dropped an enormous Godzilla foot from outer space right on Abraham’s head and ended it. I mean who do you think you are, scolding God! But here’s the miracle of the Torah – God says, “Ok, you’re right.” And why? Because Abraham didn’t appeal for himself alone, and he didn’t do it to make a profit for his family. He did it for the shared dream of the principle of justice.

The Torah teaches that for God, for us, for our world, it is more important to teach the divine prerogative of justice than it is to maintain power or authority. There is a power greater than us, that even God has to hold to. We and God are covenanted, and together must remain faithful to the ideals of justice and morality. Nothing takes priority over that. No one – certainly no human authority – even God’s authority doesn’t take priority over morality. For the Torah, for our great myth, it is indeed sometimes, in spite of God that we remain faithful to justice.

But that Mesopotamian myth, the one that teaches surrender and resignation and, at best, equanimity, it never died – myths never really die. It lied dormant, waiting to grow in a new cultural soil, in a new language. Age after age it has returned during specific historical moments, when the boundaries of human existence have expanded beyond our sensibility; when we struggle to make sense of the world, and we feel like we’re lost.

We're seeing that now. In our generation, we have come to recognize that our existence is no longer solely national or tribal – its global. Markets in China and political decisions in Brazil effect the prices in our corner groceries. Up the street from my apartment is a sushi restaurant and an Indian restaurant. What was once the hardware store is now a yoga studio and where the Blockbuster was is an ashram. Technology brings the whole world into my living room. Environmental crisis knows no bounds – chimneys in India melt glaciers in Greenland; wildlife and ecological extinction; population dislocation. We now realize that our fate is global and so are our problems.

And into this new complicated and confusing setting, the ancient myth returns, whispering: “Your fate, your destiny is determined by forces beyond your comprehension and control. The status quo cannot be fixed and you are certainly not responsible, so *ssshhh*, be quiet. Don't speak up, just accept what is as inevitable.” We hear this whispered in our political discourse, in our popular culture and it's sown into our daily life. Only the fantasy of imaginary superheroes – as we see all the time in movies now – if only they might swoop down to save us.

The Mesopotamian myth preaches a return to simpler times, but that only masks its cynicism, it's hopelessness, and its poison. It masks the reality of our problems, which become exponentially worse when human beings perceive themselves as powerless to do anything to change the world.

But we know that changing the world begins with changing minds: to dreams of hope, to empowerment, to *chutzpah* --- to courage, and to the bold, daring idea of human dignity that our Torah and our people have championed through one challenge after another.

And so amidst our problems, this new year, today, we – each and every one of us – need the message of our Torah and our people more than ever – the message of human empowerment – of engagement, of partnership, and responsibility for the world.

This new year, may we both be inscribed and inscribe ourselves into the Book of Life.  
Shanah Tovah