

Rosh HaShanah Day 2 - 5783
Temple Sinai - Dresher, PA
Rabbi Sam Hollander
Tzimtzum: Making Room for us in Creation

HaYom Harat Olam. Today the world stands as at birth.

On Rosh HaShanah, we celebrate the start of a new year. Rosh HaShanah is commonly referred to as the birthday of the world. So if Rosh HaShanah is the time when the world is born, why then do we not on Rosh HaShanah read the story of creation, *Breishet*?

So let's reimagine the story of creation, if *HaYom*, today, the world was created. How would the creation of the world be different if it happened in our modern time?

(Genesis 1:3) . וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי אוֹר .

In the Torah we read: And God said, "Let there be light." And there was light.

But if God created the world today, I imagine the story of creation happening a little more like this:

And God said, "Alexa, turn on the light." And there was light.

But after several days of creating the world, God received a notification on God's computer asking to download the latest version of the universe that was just released. And when God agreed to the terms and conditions, and began to download the new update for the universe, the circle indicating the progress of the download, stopped... the circle began to spin without end (*ein sof*), and God, well... God, like any one of us, became frustrated.

Without having yet created human beings, God realizes there is no one of a younger generation to ask for help, God takes out a phone and calls the IT department. Following several minutes on hold, listening to angels singing psalms, God is connected to the next available IT angel. For several minutes, God complains to the ministering angel about the situation, trying to explain that God did nothing wrong and technology is more trouble than good. And when God pauses for a moment, the IT angel asks, did you ever try restarting your computer?

There are few certainties in life: Death, taxes, and needing to restart your computer when there's a problem. You most likely have heard this same advice from friends, family, and tech support. Restarting your computer, taking the time to power down your device before turning it on again, is a crucial step to keeping your electronics running smoothly.

A restart gives your device a clean start. When you restart your computer or device, it clears the memory. When a computer is powered off, the long-term memory, the data stored on the hard disk containing our documents, applications, photos and more remains safely stored. However, the short-term memory, also known as the RAM, is volatile, meaning the memory is erased each time you turn off your computer. That is why, even if you close every application after use, your computer may feel sluggish after performing many tasks because the RAM, the computer's short-term memory, where the data is processed, is reset only when a device turns off.

I know this is very technical, but I want to make sure that we are all on the same page. RAM stands for "Random Access Memory," not the animal or the ram that was sacrificed instead of Isaac that we read about in this morning's Torah reading.

So here is a test, to see if you now know the difference between the RAM, the short-term memory necessary for keeping our computers running fast, and the ram as in the animal sacrificed in the *Akeda*, the binding of Isaac. Here it goes, listen carefully:

Abraham bought himself a fancy new computer. He was showing it to Isaac one day. "Look at all the wonderful programs it has on it. And look at all the neat things it can do..."

Isaac was impressed, but a little concerned..."But dad, I don't think your computer has enough memory."

Abraham replied, "Don't worry, my son; God will provide the RAM."

I have to thank my dad, the computer consultant, for reminding me of this joke. This computer metaphor, of RAM, and the necessity to periodically restart our computers and devices so that we can wipe the slate clean to allow our computers to function properly... this process of making a clean start, making the necessary room in memory for processing the tasks of the year ahead, isn't this what the High Holy Days are all about?

HaYom Harat Olam. Today the world stands as at birth.

There is a kabbalistic teaching regarding creation that is attributed to Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as "the ARI." If you have ever traveled to the mystical and holy city of Tzfat in Northern Israel, you more than likely visited the Ari synagogue. Rabbi Isaac Luria was not only important to his community in Tzfat, but we continue to follow his tradition of welcoming Shabbat each week with Kabbalat Shabbat. Although he only lived to the young age of 38, Rabbi Isaac Luria greatly influenced our understanding of Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah.

According to Rabbi Isaac Luria, prior to Creation, only God existed. God was everywhere. The kabbalists refer to God as *Ein Sof*, the infinite, without end. God was an infinite light that filled all of existence. Prior to Creation, there was no space or void where the infinite light was not present. In other words, there was no space for anything else to exist except for God.

So before God could create anything in the universe, God needed to withdraw and constrict Godself in order to make room for anything else to exist. Only when there was vacant space, could God begin to create.

Rabbi Isaac Luria and the kabbalists call this process, *Tzimtzum*. *Tzimtzum* is the act of withdrawing, of reducing one's presence in order to make space. *Tzimtzum* is the way that God created space for us. By stepping back, not only did God make room for the creation of the world, but in creating a void God also gave us, humans, space to create. God made us partners in creation by giving us space to create. Having the ability and space to create, means that God has blessed us with free will.

While *Tzimtzum* was necessary in the original act of creation in the story of Genesis, the concept of creating space, of taking a step back, *tzimtzum*, can also be applied to our own lives. In many ways, *Tsimtsum* is like restarting a computer. It allows for the RAM to reset. *Tsimtsum* is the restart that clears the memory so that there is space for us to create and manipulate new data on our computers. And we, like computers, also need a periodic reset. We need to take a step back, to take up less space so that there is room in this world for ourselves and others.

We live in a world of echo chambers and constant headlines. The opinions of one person can be magnified through social media. A tweet or a sound bite can be retweeted and reshared, and thus that one opinion can take up an infinite amount of space in our world. Often we experience information overload, leaving no space for our own voices, thoughts and opinions.

In just the last several weeks, tech giants such as Twitter and Apple debuted new features such as an edit button for tweets and edit/delete function for text messages. A New York Times article commented, "Since Twitter was unveiled in 2006, the basics of using it have been simple and constant: You wrote a tweet, you posted it - and then you dealt with the consequences. There were no take-backs on the timeline." I think it is interesting that both Twitter and Apple have decided it is time for users to have the ability to edit and even delete. The practice of *tzimtzum* asks us to reevaluate how much space we are using, and if we are self-aware, we are able to make an edit, to take a step back and leave room for others.

Rabbi Dov Linzer, the head of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in New York, writes about *tzimtzum* and creation, saying: “For a world to exist, God had to pull back from absolute perfection so that space could be made for others, so that existence could be so multifaceted, so richly complex. When we create, we, too, have to make sure that our creation is more than just an extension of ourselves. How much do we involve others in our plans, collaborate, listen to other perspectives and reflect upon them? How much do we truly value the unique contributions that our spouse, our friends, our colleagues can make? How much do we make room for the values of others, particularly when they differ from our own? This type of complex, rich creation can only come after the first powerful act of *tzimtzum*.”

Take a moment to think to yourself, how much space am I taking up right now? Not the literal physical space you are inhabiting, but how much space do your thoughts, opinions and ideas take up in a room? Being aware of how much space we take up and how much space we leave for others is not an easy task. Even God forgets to practice *tzimtzum*.

Here is where that happened: The second half of the Book of Exodus discusses the blueprint and the construction of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, that was to be used as the portable sanctuary and dwelling place for God as the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness. The Mishkan was to serve as a meeting place, for Moses and the Israelites, to be present with God. It would serve as a resting place for the cloud embodying God that led the Israelites to rest among the people during their 40 year journey. In the final verses of the Book of Exodus, when the Mishkan is finally complete, the Torah says: “...When Moses had finished the work the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.” (Exodus 40:33-35)

Thus, the Book of Exodus concludes with Moses being unable to enter the Mishkan because God took up all of the space, leaving no room for anyone, not even Moses. While *Sefer Shemot*, the Book of Exodus ends with God leaving no room for Moses, the next book of the Torah, *Vayikra*, Leviticus begins in an unusual way. The opening word, *Vayikra*, meaning “God called,” is written in the Torah with an aleph that is smaller than the other letters. While there are many interpretations of why this aleph is written smaller than any other letter, Rabbi Menachem Creditor suggests, “Perhaps the small aleph is a physical representation of God contracting just a bit, consciously making room for a sacred partner... The end of Exodus describes God as an inaccessible partner. The beginning of Leviticus describes God’s space-giving call... Whereas the Exodus journey ends with no room for Moses, the small aleph of Leviticus re-invites Moses — and each of us too — into a gift of deepening sacred intimacy.”

It is important to give space for a multitude of voices. There is a common expression, “two Jews, three opinions” and if this is true, think about all of the oversized rooms necessary to

contain all of those opinions and still leave room for the creation of new ideas. In my first year of rabbinical school, there was no shortage of opinions or ideas. However, the issue my classmates and I soon discovered after the first few weeks of class, was that the majority of class discussions were dominated by just a few voices. There was no room for the voices and thoughts of the other rabbinical students in the class.

So what was the solution? No, we did not ask the professor for a larger classroom. Instead we engaged in the practice of *tzimtzum*. In the following months, we practiced being self-aware of how much class time each voice was using. Before raising our hands to add an additional comment or idea, we gave space for a new voice to be heard. And for five years of rabbinical school, each of us learned to take a step back so that there would be space to learn from one another.

While the practice of *tzimtzum* may be new to many of you listening today, if you have participated in services this morning, you already engaged in *tzimtzum*. How is that? Right before we began to recite the Amidah, the central prayer of our service, we took three steps back and then three steps forward. However, the halachic requirement is only to take the three steps forward, but there is no such requirement to begin the Amidah by taking three steps back. So why then do we take those three steps back?

The three steps backwards are a *Minhag HaOlam*, a generally accepted practice, that is derived not from a rabbinic teaching but from lived experiences. Look in front of you. For those sitting in the sanctuary, there is a pew in front of you. For generations we have recited the Amidah while standing in pews. So if you need space to walk three steps forward, you first need to take three steps back. When we take those three steps back before engaging with prayer, not only are we clearing space for us to physically enter into prayer, but we are also clearing headspace so that our minds will have space available to wander and to reflect on the words of the prayers. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes, “On Rosh HaShana we step back from our life like an artist stepping back from his canvas, seeing what needs changing for the painting to be complete.” Like the image of a painter taking a step back to gain new perspective, if we in prayer do not take these steps backwards, then we are like the computer that is not running at its full potential because it needs to reboot. We take three steps back, to clear space so that we can enter prayer with our full potential.

The practice of *tzimtzum* can help us make space for others in this new year. But I am curious, how are you making space for you? The pandemic has changed how we work, how we learn, how we gather and even how we pray. Technology has been a lifeline, and yet we know the exhaustion of Zoom fatigue.

I know that for myself, I am scared to power down. Other than Shabbat and Holidays, my computer and electronic devices are always on. I never turn off my computer or my phone at the end of the day, because who knows, the first thing in the morning I might need to jump onto a Zoom call and it is easier to just let the computer fall asleep on its own instead of turning it off myself. But over the last few weeks, while thinking about this sermon, I began to turn off my computer at the end of the night. Not only do I feel better when I see the screen turn to black, knowing that the work day is over, but also, in the morning, when I turn on the computer to start my day, to my surprise, my computer runs faster.

Just a few days ago, as I was about to press print on this very sermon, my lovely wife, Amanda, wanted to show me a picture she just took on her phone of none other than our beloved dog, Kasha. But when I looked at the picture, the photo was pixelated. Amanda said, "My phone is probably too full, I think I need to delete some apps off the phone." At that moment, I smiled and asked, "When was the last time you turned off your phone?" Amanda was unsure, but turned off her phone letting the screen turn black and a few seconds later turned it on again. And you guessed it, everything worked like it should.

During these next few days, during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, how will you restart? Closing your eyes and taking a moment to breathe, or intentionally taking a few steps backwards, or maybe, just maybe you will for once remember to power down your devices.

Yes, in a world where we are constantly connected, it is okay to power off. In fact, turning off our devices and then turning them back on is crucial, it clears the RAM, allowing us to start with a clean slate. And the same is true for all of us, we all need to do a restart.

Shana Tova!