

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5773
Rabbi Silverman

Shana Tova.

There's a story about a little boy who took his baseball bat and a ball and went out to the back yard to play. He said to himself, "I'm the best hitter in the world." Then he threw the ball up in the air and took a swing at it, but he missed. Without a moment's hesitation, he picked up the ball and tossed it in the air again, saying as he swung the bat, "I'm the best hitter in all the world." He swung and missed. Strike two. He tossed the ball up again, concentrating more intensely, even more determined, saying, "I am the best hitter in all the world!" He swung the bat with all his might. And missed. Strike three.

The little boy laid down his bat.....and smiled a big wide smile. "What do you know?" he said. "I'm the best pitcher in all the world!"

At some point in each of our lives, each of us was that little boy. Sometime between then and now, we changed. All of a sudden, "not succeeding" changed from being an indication that we should try again, to meaning that we've failed and should stop trying. This little boy's perseverance, courage, and determination should be a model for us - and while he may have learned it from his parents, in truth, these are qualities and traits that God has already modeled for us, even if we don't realize it.

You think you know the story of creation - the one laid out in Bereshit. But midrash teaches us that there's much more to God creating this world than six days of work and one of rest. And it is there that we first see God modeling perseverance, courage, and determination. I'd like to tell you the story of creation, as told through midrash.

Five thousand, seven hundred, and seventy three years ago, God created our world. Our Rabbis debate - as they tend to about everything - whether today, erev Rosh Hashanah, is the moment God *began* creating the world, or if that happened 6 days ago on the 25th of Elul, which would make right now - this very moment - the moment that God created humanity. Either way, on today's date, 5773 years ago, God stood at the precipice of something great - something grand, something with endless possibilities, unknowable outcomes, and full of potential.

It was not, however, unprecedented.

Years before our world was created, God set out to create a masterpiece - a world. But something wasn't quite right with the creation, and like many artists, God wasn't satisfied with the result and thus, destroyed it.

Persevering, God tried again. This time, something different went wrong - and not anticipating the error, God felt flustered, surprised, and unhappy. World #2 wasn't up to God's standards, so it too was destroyed.

This process happened again and again. God created the world, found that things weren't actually "tov" but perhaps "lo tov" or even "rah", and so those worlds too were destroyed.

Our tradition teaches that God created and destroyed ELEVEN worlds in all, each slightly imperfect, not quite what was desired. And so finally, after trying and failing eleven times, God gathered up the courage to try again 5773 years ago, to create a 12th world, the world as we know it¹.

And that is why we are here tonight - to celebrate not only the birth day of our world, but to celebrate God's perseverance and courage in the face of failure.

It turns out, God wasn't actually the "the Best Hitter in all the world", but God was determined, dedicated, and courageous. Completely comfortable with the idea of failing, God tried, didn't succeed, and so God tried again. And again and again.

We human-beings are self-centered enough to think about the world as being created solely for our benefit. We like to pretend that God created the world from nothing, from scratch, just for us - and that God got it right on the first attempt. It makes us uncomfortable to imagine a God that had to try twelve times to get this right. We wonder what else God doesn't get right on the first try and where the limits of God's powers lie.

But this midrash highlights a different point. It tells the story of a perfectionist God, of a determined God that persevered through many unsuccessful attempts, and of a God who realized that a world with mistakes and mishaps IS a perfect world.

We might ask ourselves, what was different this time, with this 12th attempt? Should we assume that God is happy with the outcome? Or that God didn't feel an urge to step in and change things? No, of course not. Our tradition is overflowing with stories of God changing God's mind or remaking a decision. One need not look much further than Genesis to see a civilization destroyed by a flood, cities annihilated, and people completely wiped out, all because God wasn't happy with the imperfect world.

And yet, this world survived. For 5773 years, God has stuck with us, through thick and thin, never moving onto world #13. Even with years of frustrations, disappointments, and deliberate rebellion, God has stuck with us.

¹ Bereishet Rabbah 3.7

That act alone, the lack of a destructive action, takes a tremendous amount of courage and faith. We live in a world that strives for perfection, often to the point of destruction. Today, on the anniversary of the birth of our world, on God's 12th attempt, God is giving us a gift. That gift is the gift of remembering that we need not be perfect, we need only to be brave in our attempts and to not give up on accomplishing our dreams.

Courage and faith on God's part plays another role in our people's narrative - in the origins of the Torah.

Midrash teaches that, counter to the common assumption that the Torah was written solely for our benefit, God actually wrote the Torah 974 generations earlier than it was given to Moses.

The story is that the Torah preceded the creation of our world and that God had actually intended to give it to Adam but nixed that idea when Adam didn't follow the only instruction God gave him.

Scarred a bit from the near miss of giving the Torah to someone who would not take care of it, God held the Torah close for many more generations. In fact, when God finally felt ready to share the precious Torah with Moses, the *Malachim* tried to stop him². The Angels beseeched him, saying, "Adonai, you've held this Torah close to you, treasured it and stored it, for 974 generations. And now you want to give it to a mere mortal?!".

And here again, God demonstrated courage and faith - God remained steadfast, and determined that this great book should live, not in heaven but on earth. So the Torah was passed from God to Moshe, and from Moshe to the Israelites, generation to generation, letting "mere mortals" interpret and reinterpret the laws, understanding the Torah in ways that God may or may not have intended.

From these examples, creation and the gift of Torah, we see that God has developed from a Being who destroys creations for the slightest imperfection to one who understands that the Torah was created to be in a world where it could live; and much like the people and things we love, it had to be let free and shared without restraint, in order to have an impact.

To demonstrate the completion of this progression, the Talmud tells the story of God coming full circle and rejoicing when His children, His creations, finally outwit their Creator.

The story is one that you might have heard before. There was a Halachic argument over the kashrut of an oven - Rabbi Eliezer brought every imaginable argument, but the other rabbis wouldn't agree with him.

² Shabbat 88b

Out of frustration, Rabbi Eliezer turned to God and said, “If that Halacha agrees with me, let the carob tree prove it!” - and lo and behold, the carob tree jumped 100 cubits out of its place in the ground. But the rabbis said, “No proof can be brought from the carob tree”.

Rabbi Eliezer tried again and said, “if the halacha agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!” - and the stream of water flowed backwards. But they answered, “no proof can be brought from the stream of water!”.

This happened a third time, with the walls of the beit midrash almost falling over, siding with Rabbi Eliezer - until Rabbi Joshua stepped in, rebuking the walls (and God), saying, “When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, who are you to interfere?!”. And the walls didn’t fall.

Rabbi Eliezer, not quite one to give up on his argument, pulled out his trump card. “If the halachah agrees with me”, he said, “let it be proved from Heaven!”. And a Heavenly Voice cried out: “Why do you disagree with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halacha agrees with him!?”

God announced from heaven that Rabbi Eliezer was right.

But Rabbi Joshua retorted the famous words that we read in yesterday morning’s Torah reading, quoting the Torah itself, “HaTorah Lo B’shamaim Hi” - “the Torah is not in Heaven” anymore.

In other words, at the moment that God gave the Torah to Moses, God ceded the authority to be the sole interpreter of the law.

And most poignantly - the Talmud records God laughing with joy upon hearing Rabbi Joshua’s response. “My children have defeated me”, God said, “My children have defeated me”. Where a less-enlightened being might have expressed disappointment or anger at the challenging of our work, God expressed joy at our empowerment.

Challenging as it is, we have much to learn from God’s examples of courage and joy at the success of others.

Perhaps you share in the production of a project at work and then hand off the pieces to someone else to finish. You act in partnership to create a family unit, but know that no creation is perfect and no outcome completely predictable. We work together to create a community, but need others to share their visions to make it complete.

God took a giant risk by not destroying our imperfect world. And God took another risk by putting the Torah into the hands of the inhabitants of that imperfect world. To make that risk

worthwhile, God needed to trust in us, in humanity, to do right by the Torah - not an easy task. But we have a good model in God, who taught us through actions and decisions how to persevere, how to take risks, how to try again, and how, when necessary, to create anew.

And so for us, tonight, standing on the precipice of our own unrealized potential, we ask ourselves, what will this New Year bring? Will it be an opportunity to change course completely, wiping out the past and creating a world anew? Or will it be about learning to live with the imperfections of our own personal world, ceding control of some of our personal projects, and only stepping in for a course correction when one is truly needed?

The results are, of course, entirely up to you. Follow God's example, be strong, be courageous, and take risks. Don't be afraid to swing and miss. Who knows? Maybe, like the little boy, you'll be surprised to learn that you're the greatest pitcher in all the world.

Shana Tova.