

ROSH HASHANAH DAY 2026 — Rabbi Raina Sirotty

The In Between Is Living

Today we celebrate the creation of the world.

And the Talmud makes an extraordinary claim about creation: before the world itself was created, *teshuvah* already existed. Before there was a human being to make a mistake, before there was a wrong turn to correct, before there was regret or remorse or the need to begin again, the possibility of *teshuvah* was already there.

A Hasidic commentator, the *Pri Ha'aretz*, takes that idea even further. If *teshuvah* existed before creation, he teaches, then the capacity to change must somehow be implanted within creation itself, and most especially within human beings.

I love that idea. The ability to reconsider, to change direction, to grow beyond who we have been is not something added to us later. It is part of what it means to be human. And perhaps that is why we return to this work every year.

The Days of Awe become, in a sense, a bookmark in time, a place where we stop long enough to look back at what has been, to recognize what we want to carry with us, and to begin imagining what might yet be.

Each of us comes to these days carrying the year that has passed: its gifts and its challenges, its joys and its sorrows. Some of us come here grateful for things that happened this year that we could never have anticipated. Others come carrying disappointments we never expected to know. Some of us are beginning new chapters, others are closing old ones, and many of us have found ourselves in places we never imagined we would be.

Kohelet reminds us, "There is a season for everything, and a time for every experience under heaven." We tend to hear those words as poetry, but perhaps they are also a simple truth about being human. Life does not remain still. Seasons end and new ones begin; things we thought would last forever sometimes do not, and things we could never have imagined sometimes become part of our lives.

And so we arrive at these holy days not quite the same people who stood here a year ago. Perhaps that is one of the gifts of Rosh Hashanah. It does not ask us to erase the year that has passed or pretend that we can simply start over untouched by it. Whatever comes next will be shaped, in some measure, by what we have lived and by who those experiences have made us. And from that place, we begin again.

There is a remarkable story in the Talmud about Adam and Eve and the very first night of their lives. Imagine what that must have been like. They had never seen a sunset. They had never experienced darkness. They did not know that the sun disappears and then returns.

And so, as the light began to fade from the sky and the world around them slowly grew dark, Adam became terrified. The rabbis imagine him watching the sun disappear beneath the horizon and believing that the world itself was coming to an end. He feared that perhaps creation was

returning to *tohu va-vohu*, to the chaos and desolation that existed before God brought light into the world. And so Adam wept, and Eve wept with him, as they waited through that first long night believing that everything they had known was disappearing.

Then morning came. The darkness began to lift, light appeared on the horizon, and the sun rose again. Adam understood something for the first time: what he had experienced as an ending was part of a world he did not yet understand.

There is something wonderfully human about that story. Adam's fear was not foolish; he had no memory of another morning to reassure him. The darkness was real. What he did not know was what the darkness meant. And we are not so different. When something changes and we cannot yet see beyond it, we often begin supplying the ending ourselves. We assume that what we can see in that moment is the whole story, when in fact we may simply be standing in a part of the story we have never lived before.

As Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen wrote in their children's book *Lifetimes*, "There is a beginning and an ending to everything that is alive. And in between is living." It was written for children, but there is something in that simple sentence that adults spend a lifetime learning. We can usually recognize the beginning when we look back, and we know an ending once something is clearly over. But so much of life is lived somewhere in between, when one thing has changed and whatever comes next has not yet taken shape.

There may be no biblical story that understands endings and beginnings more profoundly than the story of Noah.

God tells Noah that the world he knows is coming to an end and commands him to build an ark.

The rains come. The world disappears beneath the water, and for a time the ark is exactly where Noah needs to be. It carries him, his family, and the animals through the destruction of one world until another becomes possible.

But eventually the waters recede.

And God says, "Come out of the ark." Noah steps onto dry ground, and everything is different. The world he knew is gone. There is no going back.

Noah's story is about what happens when one world ends and another begins.

Imagine stepping out. The world is still there, but it is no longer the world he knew.

And it is here that God speaks about the rhythms of creation continuing: "Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease."

And then, only a few verses later, the Torah tells us that Noah, a man of the soil, began by planting a vineyard.

After everything Noah has seen, after everything he has lost, he puts his hands back into the earth and begins again—not because the past has been restored, but because life is still asking something of him.

Perhaps every new beginning contains some version of the recognition that what was, is over, that what will be, is still unknown.

Only a few generations later, God comes to Abraham and says, *Lech lecha* - go forth from your country, from your birthplace, from your father's house, "to the land that I will show you." Abraham has to begin his journey before he knows where it will lead. And so it is with so much of life. Sometimes we know only that a chapter has ended and that our story can no longer continue exactly as it has. Abraham's journey is a test of faith because he is asked to move forward without knowing what awaits him. From the very beginning, faith has meant living with uncertainty, trusting that we can take the next step even when we cannot yet see the whole path before us.

Generations later, Abraham's descendants find themselves facing that same uncertainty at the sea. They have escaped Egypt, Pharaoh's army is approaching from behind, and the water stretches out before them. There appears to be nowhere to go. Yet God tells Moses, "Tell the children of Israel to go forward." The instruction is almost impossible to hear without asking: forward where? They cannot yet see the path that will carry them through.

And even after the sea opens, the uncertainty is not over. Our ancestors leave Egypt knowing exactly what they are leaving behind. They have been slaves, they have cried out for freedom, and they have imagined what it would mean to walk away from Pharaoh. But they do not walk directly from Egypt into the Promised Land. They enter the wilderness, and they remain there for forty years.

We know how the story ends, and that changes the way we read the middle. We know that eventually they will reach the Promised Land. The people wandering through the wilderness did not. Forty years is not a passageway. It is a lifetime. An entire generation lived there, and the 10 commandments were given there. The wilderness was not an interruption in their lives; it was their lives.

The Torah also makes clear how little certainty they had about what would happen next. They followed a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When the cloud moved, they moved; when it remained, they remained. Numbers tells us that sometimes it stayed only briefly, sometimes for two days, sometimes for a month or longer. They could wake in the morning without knowing whether they would still be in the same place by nightfall.

Perhaps we underestimate the wilderness because we are always so anxious to get to the Promised Land. But the wilderness is where a people who had known slavery had to learn how to live with freedom. It is where they received the commandments, formed a community, learned responsibility, failed, began again, and slowly became something they had never been before. The destination mattered, but so did the years in between.

While we are waiting to discover what comes next, our lives are not waiting with us.

That may be one of the harder truths of these days. Is there some part of our lives that we have put on hold while we wait to see how the story will turn out? We wait for the difficult season to pass, for the decision to become obvious, for ourselves to feel more certain, for the future to look more like the future we had planned. There is nothing wrong with hoping for change. But there is a difference between hoping for what may come and failing to inhabit the life that is here.

Rosh Hashanah does not resolve that uncertainty for us. In fact, our liturgy is remarkably honest about it. *Unetaneh Tokef* asks us to confront all that we cannot know about the year ahead -

mortality and health, peace and upheaval, security and hardship. We hear those words every year because none of us knows exactly what the coming year will bring.

But the prayer does not leave us helpless. It turns our attention away from prediction and toward responsibility: *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. We cannot know every circumstance we will face, but we can still ask how we will respond, how we will change, how we will treat one another, and what we will do with the time and relationships we have been given. We may not know what this year will bring us, but we have some responsibility for what we bring to this year.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "Faith is not certainty. Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty." That distinction matters. Faith does not mean believing that everything will turn out the way we hope, and our tradition has never promised us that it will. Faith asks something more difficult: that we continue to live, choose, love, and act even when the outcome remains hidden.

Perhaps that is why the rabbis imagined *teshuvah* as existing even before the world itself. Before any human being could know what the future would hold, the possibility of change was already there. The possibility of returning, reconsidering, repairing, and beginning again was woven into the human story from the start.

Adam could not know, during that first night, that morning would come. What he eventually learned was not that darkness was unreal, but that darkness was not the whole story. We come to Rosh Hashanah with the same humility. We know what has ended. We know something of what we are carrying with us. We do not yet know what this new year will ask of us or where it will lead.

And perhaps we do not need to know. We are here now, in the part of the story that is ours to live. There is a beginning and an ending to everything that is alive. And in between is living.

Shana Tova.