

Mah Rabu- How Lucky We Are To Be Alive Right Now

Open by Teaching Mah Rabu

Mah Rabu Maasecha Adonai- How great are all of God's creations! (Psalm 104:24).

How incredible is this world in which we live!

How amazing are the things in our world which we take for granted every day.

Or, in the words of Lin-Manuel Miranda, from his celebrated musical Hamilton: *"Look around. Look Around. At how lucky we are to be alive right now!"*

But it doesn't always feel that way, does it? There are moments when we look around and all we see is a world that seems like it is quite a mess. Let's just take a moment to consider the state of world affairs since we gathered together on last Rosh Hashana. Devastating mass shootings in Orlando, Dallas, Louisiana, Minnesota (just to name a few). A continued culture where racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and anti-semitism seem alive and well in the twenty first century. Hot spots around the world where we see no end in sight to famine, and war. Incidents of terrorism all around the world, some by lone wolves and others by groups such as ISIS and Hamas. Including attacks in our own backyard, just two weeks ago. Poverty, homelessness, and hunger continue to plague our cities. The Zika virus has spread like wildfire through South America, the Caribbean, and now to the

United States. And we are in the midst of the most contentious presidential election of our age, which continues to add fuel to the political fire, stoking fears that the divisiveness, brokenness, and challenging state of our democracy will not be healed at any time in the near future.

Are you feeling lucky yet?

And yet.... And yet, it all really depends on how we want to look at our world. It all really depends on where *we are choosing* to focus our attention. Indeed our ancestor Abraham was faced with a similar challenge when his life seemed completely hopeless and the blessings that he had been promised were nowhere in sight. God made a covenant with Abraham promising him that he would be blessed, the father of a great nation, with descendents as numerous as the stars in the sky. And then, just a few chapters later in the Torah, God asks Abraham to take his son, the only son he had with Sarah, the one whom he loved and who he thought was the ticket to the many generations that were supposed to follow, and offer him up as a sacrifice to God.

Abraham was left to wonder: Did God change God's mind? Did Abraham do something wrong? What was he missing here? What was he not seeing?

It has been pointed out that the theme of seeing is a very important one throughout this story of the binding of Isaac. Throughout the narrative, until the very end of the story, Abraham seems to accept his circumstances as quite possibly the end to his very short story. He does not see that he has any other way of looking at his current predicament-- **until one particular moment.**

The Torah tells us that, just as Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac, just as he is holding the knife in his hand, an angel calls out to Abraham telling him not to go through with it. Listen to the language carefully. It is at this moment in the narrative that we learn that Abraham has been looking down, literally and figuratively, the whole time. It is only once he begins to look up, to notice the angel and the ram, that things start to change.

וַיִּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה־אֵיל אַחַר נֶאֱחָז בַּסֶּבֶךְ בְּקֶרְנָיו

When Abraham looked up, his eyes fell upon a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and offered it up as a burnt offering in the place of his son (Genesis 22:13).

It is, of course, this ram and this story which we are to recall when we hear the sound of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah. But just where did this ram come from? Was it there the whole time? Did it somehow appear magically?

Did Abraham not notice this ram that was caught in the thicket and presumably thrashing to get out? According to one interpretation, the ram had been created by God and had been waiting in the Garden of Eden for this very moment. In other words, it had been in existence since the beginning of creation. According to another interpretation, Abraham had actually seen the ram throughout the day continually getting caught up in bushes by its horns. In other words, it was in front of his very eyes the whole time- he had simply not realized its purpose. (Kasher, Torah Shlema).

But whether or not the ram had always been in existence, or had been wandering around in the background the whole time, the one thing we know is that it was not until Abraham actually **looked up**, until Abraham lifted up his eyes- that he could see that all was not hopeless; that there was an alternative way to view the situation.

The same is true with us- we often spend much of our time missing what is right in front of us, choosing consciously or unconsciously to look down instead of taking the time to look up at the source of blessing that is all around.

Of course- the world has many problems. Yes, there are so many examples of the ways we are living in a frightening, dangerous, divisive, and hate-

filled time. But the opportunity that these Days of Awe brings, is the opportunity for each one of us to learn how to look up and see the world differently. On Rosh Hashanah we are challenged to ask ourselves how we, like Abraham before us, can learn to look for the rams and to listen to the voices of the angels that exist throughout our lives, that remind us daily that all is not hopeless, that all is not lost. That we, like Abraham and Sarah before us, are truly blessed even in those moments when we feel cursed. A number of months ago, our congregational president Larry Shapiro, forwarded me an article entitled, "**50 Reasons We're Living Through the Greatest Period in World History.**" Although some of these statistics may be a bit off or outdated, the concept is clear: all is actually not as bleak as it sometimes seems. Did you know that....

- In 1800 U.S. life expectancy at birth was 39 years. In 1900 the life expectancy was 49, in 1950 it was 68, and today it is 79. The average newborn today can expect to live an entire generation longer than his great-grandparents could.
- In 1918, a flu pandemic infected 500 million people and killed as many as 100 million... Today, you can go to Safeway and get a flu shot. It costs 15 bucks. You might feel a little poke.
- In 1949, *Popular Mechanics* magazine made the bold prediction that someday a computer could weigh less than 1 ton. This article was written on an iPad that weighs 0.73 pounds.
- In 1900 almost no homes had a refrigerator in 1900, let alone a car. Today they sell cars with refrigerators in them.
- High school graduation rates are at a 40-year high.

- People talk about how expensive college is today, but a century ago fewer than one in 20 Americans ever stepped foot in a university. College wasn't an option at any price for some minorities because of segregation just six decades ago.
- If you think Americans aren't prepared for retirement today, you should have seen what it was like a century ago. In 1900, 65% of men over age 65 were still in the labor force. By 2010, that figure was down to 22%. The entire concept of retirement is unique to the past few decades. Half a century ago, most Americans worked until they died.
- As recently as 1950, nearly 40% of American homes didn't have a telephone. Today, there are 500 million Internet-connected devices in America, or enough for 5.7 per household.

We can probably all come up with a list of our own examples like this. It is really amazing if you stop and consider that *as human beings* we simply live in an incredible time. And *as Jews*, with historically unprecedented rights, freedom, and power and responsibility in this world- we are left to wonder whether Abraham and Sarah could have ever imagined a world in which what they started would continue to live on- bringing blessing into our lives and into our world thousands of years later.

Rosh Hashanah is a time to remember the importance of celebrating our world. It is a time to focus on this extraordinary time in which we are blessed to exist- something that we often take for granted.

The very notion of Rosh Hashanah as the birthday of the world is, *in and of itself*, a reminder to be appreciative. Because what do we do on birthdays? We take stock. We look at our lives and at the world around us, and we try

to express gratitude, thanksgiving, and optimism for the many blessings in our lives. Rosh Hashanah should be no different. There are so many incredible blessings in this world. There are so many achievements that mankind has made in the past century alone. Yes- there are problems. Yes, there is still much work to do- and it is our responsibility to engage in that work of *tikkun olam*, improving our world, each and every day. But while we are engaging in that work, let us never lose sight of that sense of awesomeness and wonder about which Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to preach and teach:

The awareness of grandeur and the sublime is all but gone from the modern mind...We teach children how to measure, how to weigh. We fail to teach them how to revere, how to sense wonder and awe...

Among the many things that religious tradition holds in store for us is the legacy of wonder...Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin.

Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered....But most of us find it difficult to recognize the greatness and wonder of things familiar to us....

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines....What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder...

As we begin this new year, let us remind ourselves to wonder at the awesomeness and majesty of this time in which we live. Let us remind ourselves of Heschel's teaching that Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. : אֲשָׁא עֵינַי אֶל־הַהַרִים מֵאֵין יְבֹא עֲזָרִי : עֲזָרִי מֵעַם הַ עֹשֶׂה שְׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ :

I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from Adonai, creator of the heavens and the earth (Psalm 120:1-2).

Adonai, help us to lift up our eyes and help us to see the majesty of your presence in this world. Help us to celebrate the incredible outpouring of love, creativity, ingenuity, and advances that have come forth from that first creation of the world and of humanity.

May we never lose our sense of sense of wonder and appreciation for this world in which we live. May we learn, like Abraham to look up instead of falling into the trap of looking down, and focus on that way of seeing which will set us free instead of tying us up in knots.

And may we always remember that these many incredible blessings and privileges in our lives and in our world are best enjoyed when they are shared with others, particularly with those who are less fortunate in this world.

Ma Rabu Ma'asecha Adonai- How incredible is this world in which we live and which we celebrate on this birthday of the world.

Look around, Look around- at how lucky we are to be alive right now.
That would be enough.

Shanah Tovah U'metukah- May it be a good and sweet new year and may we all be inscribed in the Book Of Life.