



## A Time of Breaking

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In the beginning, there was nothingness. Except that's not exactly true because there was something. There was chaos. There was wind, there was water, and there was darkness. An untamed wilderness not yet shaped or defined by God's delineations of order. And, then God took to creating the world. God separated light from darkness, day from night, water from dry land. And, a vision of a livable earth was called into existence. And, God was pleased with it. With each act of creation, with each move towards an ordered existence that could sustain life, God saw that it was good.

Until it was no longer good. God saw the wickedness that spread throughout the earth. A world lacking in decency and kindness. And, God regretted this world that God created.<sup>1</sup>

Just as God created the world, God saw fit to destroy the world. Just as the world began in chaos, God plunged the world back into chaos, a return to a wilderness of water, wind and darkness.

We read in Genesis, "the fountains of the great deep burst apart; the floodgates of the sky broke open."<sup>2</sup> For forty days and forty nights, the rain fell. In this time, "all flesh that stirred on earth perished... All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died."<sup>3</sup> These rains returned the world to a time before creation; all existence, all life,

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 6:5-6

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 7:11

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 7:21-22

blotted out from the face of the earth.<sup>4</sup> The world to which Noah and his fellow ark dwellers re-emerged was a world nearly unrecognizable. They would have to begin again.

Following the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish people also found themselves in a world nearly unrecognizable. The Temple was the center of all Jewish life. It was the beating center of the Jewish people to which all hearts turned; the place where they could come together to serve God. The destruction of the Temple required the leaders to begin again. To recreate a world out of the ruins of a world destroyed.

Genesis Rabbah teaches that the flood was not the first time God created a world only to destroy it. Rather, in God's efforts to produce a viable world, a world fit for Torah, God created and destroyed many worlds.

### בראשית רבה ג:ז

אמר רבי יהודה בר סימון, יהי ערב אין כתיב כאן, אלא ויהי ערב, מכאן שהיה סדר זמנים קדם לכן. אמר רבי אבהו מלימד שהיה בורא עולמות ומחריבן, עד שבא את אלו, אמר דין הנין לי, יתהון לא הנין לי. אמר רבי פנחס טעמיה דרבי אבהו (בראשית א, לא): וירא אלהים את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד, דין הנין לי יתהון לא הנין לי.

### Genesis Rabbah 3:7

Rabbi Judah bar Simon said: it does not say, "It was evening," but "And it was evening." Hence we derive that there was a time-system prior to this. Rabbi Abbahu said: This teaches us that God created worlds and destroyed them, saying, "This one pleases me; those did not please me." Rabbi Pinhas said, Rabbi Abbahu derives this from the verse, "And God saw all that God had made, and behold it was very good," as if to say, "This one pleases me, those others did not please me."

Genesis Rabbah teaches that God created and destroyed, created and destroyed, until finally God was satisfied. Each time, God would survey God's work and God would find fault. God would say, this one does not please me. God would destroy that world and from the rubble that remained, God would begin again. Until ultimately, God created our world and God was pleased.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 7:23



In *Ohr HaTzafun*, Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel teaches,

ובעל כורחנו שגם בחורבן העולמות יש חכמה רבה, שמתוך חכמה זו צמח בנין העולם הקיים, שהכתוב אומר עליו: "בְּחָכְמָה יִסַּד-אֶרֶץ" (משלי ג). אין זה, איפא, חורבן כלל אלא זוהי דרך החכמה, שעל ידי הנסיונות השונים של בנין העולמות וחורבנם הוקם היסוד שממנו נתבסס העולם.

We are forced to say that also in the destruction of the worlds, there is great wisdom, and from this wisdom, emerged the world that exists. As the Torah writes about this, "The Lord founded the earth by wisdom" (Proverbs 3:19). However, this is not really destruction at all, rather it is the way of wisdom that through the different attempts to build worlds and their destruction that the foundation is established upon which the world is based.<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Finkel teaches that in each act of destruction, there is wisdom. This runs contrary to our instincts. Our instinct teaches us that destruction is the end of something. We mourn the loss of the thing that came before; it is difficult for us to imagine a way forward out of the wreckage. Rabbi Finkel teaches us that rather than see destruction as simply ruins, we are forced to look for the wisdom contained within destruction. What lessons can we glean from the brokenness and how can this learning help us ensure that the next world is a better world?

The destruction didn't end with the many worlds created and destroyed before our world nor did it end with the flood. Rather, there were numerous falls, or moments of breaking, in Jewish history which were followed by periods of rebuilding and creative regeneration. Rabbi Finkel writes, "when we look at the events of the world, we see that every development of the generations and all spiritual advancement came after a fall and debasement, meaning the building of the worlds comes out of the destruction of worlds."<sup>6</sup>

After the destruction brought by the flood, Avraham emerges as our first patriarch with the promise of covenant and descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth.<sup>7</sup> After hundreds of years in which the Israelites are sunk in slavery and oppression in Egypt, the people are redeemed and brought into relationship with God.<sup>8</sup> After the fall of the Temple, the rabbis innovated a new Judaism in which prayers replaced sacrifices, local synagogues replaced one centralized place of worship, and the entire Jewish people was synchronized in a calendar that connected them across geographic boundaries. Each time the Jewish people suffered a

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel, *Ohr HaTzafun*, p. 71

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel, *Ohr HaTzafun*, p. 73

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 13:16

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 26:7-8



devastating blow, each time the world as they knew it was destroyed, a new world was created in its place. A world of promise and hope.

God creates worlds out of destruction and so too, we have the ability to create worlds out of destruction. In Genesis, we learn that human beings are created in the image of God.<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Finkel writes, “this is what it means for the likeness of man to be created in the likeness of God.”<sup>10</sup> To be created in God’s image means that we, like God, have the power to create, to destroy, and to rebuild out of destruction.

I cannot imagine the world that awaited Noah when he stepped out of the ark. Nor can I imagine the depth of loss the Jewish people encountered when the center of their Jewish life was destroyed. And yet, there’s something incredibly powerful (and daunting) in Rabbi Finkel’s teaching. First, there exists the possibility and necessity to create new worlds out of former worlds, to find wisdom in each failed experiment of creation. When something breaks, we are tasked with uncovering the wisdom that will make the next world better, more just, more fit to survive. And second, we as human beings, created in the image of God, have been gifted with the very ability to create these worlds out of the ruins of former worlds.

Tisha B’Av is a moment in which we have a dual responsibility. We are called to grieve the shattering loss of the Temple and to mourn a world absent of God’s indwelling presence. And, we are also called to rebuild from these ruins. Even when we feel we cannot. Even when we can’t see the way forward. Because we are created in God’s image and we, like God, have the power to build worlds out of ruins.

In her poem, “All I Cannot Save,” poet Adrienne Rich writes,

My heart is moved by all I cannot save  
So much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those, who, age after age,  
Perversely, with no extraordinary  
Power, reconstitute the world.<sup>11</sup>

Rich writes that when we are faced with loss, we must acknowledge the fact of destruction. There is no elliding the irreversible suffering and extent of real loss. And, yet, somehow,

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1:27

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel, *Ohr HaTzafun*, p. 72

<sup>11</sup> Adrienne Rich, “All I Cannot Save” from *The Dream of a Common Language*, p. 67



perversely, with no extraordinary power, ordinary people find it within themselves to reconstitute, to rebuild the world.

On this Tisha B'Av, may we take time to let ourselves grieve, to acknowledge the destruction of the world as we once knew it and hold the very real personal and communal losses of the past many months. And, at the same time, even as we feel that we hold no extraordinary power, may we be like God, with the strength to rebuild a better world from the ruins, a world fit for Torah, for God, and for all of humanity.

