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Temple B'nai Abraham, Bordentown, NJ

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5768

"Remembering Our Beginnings"

Shanah Tovah!!! Happy New Year!!!

Welcome to Erev Rosh Hashanah at Temple B'nai Abraham. In order to really arrive at this moment, let me give you a brief synopsis of where we are.

Tonight, of course, we sit in the sanctuary of our synagogue. This tiny room, the third floor of a converted 19th Century house, that can seat approximately 70 people. Downstairs we have our social room and Hebrew school, that can seat another 50 people. In the back of the social hall is the kitchen and bathroom, recently remodeled just last year. There is also the basement, which I would strongly advise against going down.

Now, let's extend outward just a bit. B'nai Abraham sits on the street of Crosswicks, opposite the Catholic Church of St. Marys. We are in the heart of downtown Bordentown, only a few hundred feet from the Post Office and the Police Station on Farnsworth Ave. We are also right at the intersection of 130 and 206. 295, and the New Jersey Turnpike are also within walking distance. The river where we will perform Tashlich tomorrow is just a hop, skip and a jump away.

At this point, everything should be fairly familiar to most of us in the room.

However, now let me draw the camera back just a little bit further. We are now, some a thousand feet above the sanctuary. We can see the rooftops of the row houses on this block, and an outline of the street and the surrounding area. As we continue to ascend higher, even these begin to disappear, lost amongst the extensive highways and waterways in the immediate area. The lushness of the North East coast of America becomes immediately evident, as well as its swelling population. Soon, the landscape of New Jersey becomes lost and fuzzy. Perhaps, we can see the coastline of North America, and the great and mighty, Atlantic Ocean.

Going up further still, even those become fuzzy. We are now in the blackness of the sky. We see the Earth, nestled between Venus and Mars. The sun, is bright and brilliant overhead, a thousand times stronger than it is here on Earth. Beyond this as we travel beyond the orbit of Jupiter and Saturn, the Milky Way its meteorites and mini-planets, covers us in its white glow. Now, suddenly, we are lost amongst billions and billions of stars, planets, black holes, and an unimaginable darkness.

From this vantage point, our sanctuary in Bordentown seems tinier than a speck of sand on an endless beach. Even with the strongest telescope it would be impossible to get even the faintest glimpse of our rooftop.

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the beginning of all beginnings, the time before anything - even the blackness of space - existed at all.

The year zero on the Jewish calendar is not the birth of Abraham or the beginning of the Jewish people, it does not even mark the beginning of people and the

birth of Adam and Eve, but the actual first moment of everything.

As it is written in our Torah, "Bereishit Bara Elokim Et HaShamayim V'Et Ha'aretz," In the beginning God created, literally, the sky and the land." The sky and land, connoting all physical matter that there is in the universe.

Tonight we begin the Jewish year 5768. That is five thousand seven hundred and sixty eight years since the beginning of all time. And, while, for our contemporary ears, we know that the universe is a lot older than six thousand years, you have to remember, that up until 200 years ago, no one on the planet thought the earth could be older than 10,000 years old.

Creation as dictated by our tradition, was a very quick process. In the less than a week, everything we have on Earth and in Space was thrust into existence.

Amazingly, according to current scientific understanding, the actual explosion that led to our universe today, was actually thousands of times faster than the vision described in the Torah. Science theorizes that at one time, everything that we see today, was condensed to a space so small it, not only could fit in this room, but it might even be able to fit in our very hands. To give you an idea of exactly how small, a proton, which is an infinitesimal part of an atom, five hundred billion of which could fit in the space between our fingers when we mush them together, was a billion times smaller in this early universe.

And, while you might be able to hold it in your hands, you probably would not have wanted to. For, this flat, singular universe was, of course, very unstable. The Torah, perhaps, describes this pre-universe the best when it calls it *Tohu VaVohu*,

unformed and void, or, as Everet Fox writes in his poetic translation of the Bible, “wild and waste.”

From this ugly, unmanageable nothingness, came, well everything.

“Vayihi Erev Vayihi Boker, Yom Echad” “It was evening, it was morning, Day one.”

Bill Bryson, the great travel writer, in his wonderful book *A Short History of Nearly Everything**, describes this moment as such:

“In a single blinding pulse, a moment of glory much too swift and expansive for any form of words, the singularity assumes heavenly dimensions, space beyond conception. In the first lively second is produced gravity and the other forces that govern physics. In less than a minute the universe is a million billion miles across and growing fast. There is a lot of heat now, ten billion degrees of it, enough to begin the nuclear reactions that create the lighter elements – principally hydrogen and helium, with a dash (about one atom in a hundred million) of lithium. In three minutes, 98 percent of all the matter there is or will ever be has been produced. We have a universe. It is a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful, too. And it was all done in the time it takes to make a sandwich.”

How crazy to think that everything we are today, was created in the momentary surge of light! It is actually an image, we are well familiar with from a Jewish perspective. In Lurianic Kabbalah, a mystical perspective from the sixteenth century mind of Isaac Luria, the universe with a burst of God's light into the space God had generated in a process of pulling back, Luria called Tzimtzum. So strong was this light, that it shattered into billions of pieces, that we spend our lifetime trying to restore.

Creation Ex-Nihilo, as it is called in Latin, a creation from nothing.

In the fast paced world of contemporary America, a place we almost literally need to workout our bodies and brains every day just to keep up, we tend to keep our eyes focused exclusively on what lies ahead for us. Like a person staring out the window of an airplane, the world behind us is a distant mirage covered by clouds and turbulence. It almost doesn't matter where we came from, only where we are going. The future is always bright and filled with new technologies and new ways of thinking.

But, what do we lose when we only look ahead. There is a sacredness in the past, no matter how distant a past it is.

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, when we remember the speed of the creation of our world, we understand fully how infinitely small we are in such an overwhelmingly, large universe. This universe, that one day long ago, we might even have been able to hold in our hands, seems so impossibly beyond the scope of human thinking.

During the High Holidays we are supposed to carry two pieces of paper in our pockets. On one is written, "I am but dust." On the other, "for me the world was created." We remember God forming Adam, the first man, from the dust in the world. And, we also remember God's breath nestled inside of our body, creating human beings in the image of our creator.

In truth, our actual birth and lives are not so different from that of the universe. I say this as an expectant dad, well versed on the many stages of life inside the womb. If you have not heard yet, Ashirah and I are pregnant and due in the beginning of February.

At home, Ashirah and I have many books describing pregnancy. How at one point, all of us in this room could fit in a single Hebrew letter. For a full fifteen seconds after conception, we are, literally, a one-celled organism. Then, over the course, of just a few weeks we begin to take shape as a human life. By the fifth week, we have the beginnings of a heart. Our central nervous system and muscle and bone formation are beginning to take shape. By the tenth week, the fetus now actually looks like a baby, more than an inch in size, and weighing .18 grams. As tiny as an olive, but with eyes, ears, nose, and even fingers.

While the most exponential changes occur in our first nine months in the womb, we never stop growing and changing until our deaths. The definition of life and the definition of the universe, is constant and continual growth.

No matter how old we are today, can we imagine our selves that small again?

No, we cannot. Just like we cannot imagine all the matter in the universe condensed to the way it was at creation.

However, by sitting in that moment - that very first moment – even for just tonight, we know without a doubt, that anything is possible. As Bryson writes about the Big Bang, it is “a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful, too.”

We are no longer here with our wounds and regrets, but fresh, new again. Before we even begin the process of *Teshuvah*, repentance and personal reflection, we must remember that sacred moment of creation.

We sit in it, holding the fragile pre-universe, that *Tohu Vavohu*, the fifteen-seconds of our own one-celledness and we just enjoy. There is nothing to do or say,

just to be. For a moment, forget about the pounding of our chests that we will do throughout the holiday, and remember only the pounding in our chests. That of our heart and lungs, all the things that happen without our even being aware of them.

Yes, we are here in the sanctuary of B'nai Abraham, but we are also here as a dot on the landscape of earth, in the galaxy of the Milky Way.

“Vayihi Erev Vayihi Boker, Yom Echad” “It was evening, it was morning, Day one.”

The first day of the year 5768.

Shanah Tovah U'Metukah, May it be a year of sweetness and of health and may we never lose sight of the awesome power of the world around us.

We are here tonight in the tiny, but comfortable sanctuary of B'nai Abraham. This space, a converted upstairs of a 19th Century house, is roomy for us on most days, except perhaps on High Holidays. The synagogue has three floors, including the basement, and sits on the street of Crosswicks, opposite the much larger Catholic church of St. Mary.

To help place you even further (and I do this knowing that many people have trouble finding us), we are in the city of Bordentown, which is in itself is a tiny dot in the state of New Jersey. Down the street from us in the intersection of Crosswicks and Farnsworth, is the Post Office, the Police Station and Jester's Café. This is roughly the center of Bordentown. A few miles down the road is Mastori's Diner, perhaps the most well known landmark in the area.

sits in the equally small city of Bordentown, that sits in the small, at least land wise, state of New Jersey, in the country of the United States in the continent of North America. Moving back even further, we are surrounded by oceans, the Atlantic, one side, the Pacific on the other.

From the distance of a passenger plane, several miles up in the air, heading toward Newark airport, it would be impossible to see even the faintest glimpse of Bordentown, let alone the street of Crosswicks, or even of St. Mary's Cathedral next door.

Let's pull back even further,

In the vastness of space, B'nai Abraham feels like a mere speck of dust nestled among billions and billions of other specks of dust, utterly and completely invisible. We are tiny beyond comprehension.

Yet, in a space, even tinier than this one, the universe was created.

And, when I say the universe, I mean the universe. What is now billions of light years across, was, at one time, condensed to a size not much bigger than our normal Friday night Kol Hanesamah prayer books.

Out of this space came, well, everything. And, quicker than you can recite many of our high holiday psalms.

As Bill Bryson, the great travel writer, in his wonderful book *A Short History of Nearly Everything**, describes:

“In a single blinding pulse, a moment of glory much too swift and expansive for any form of words, the singularity assumes heavenly dimensions, space beyond conception. In the first lively second is produced gravity and the other forces that govern physics. In less than a minute the universe is a million billion miles across and growing fast. There is a lot of heat now, ten billion degrees of it, enough to begin the nuclear reactions that create the lighter elements – principally hydrogen and helium, with a dash (about one atom in a hundred million) of lithium. In three minutes, 98 percent of all the matter there is or will ever be has been produced. We have a universe. It is a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful, too. And it was all done in the time it takes to make a sandwich.”

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, I, as the rabbi, often feel like a tour guide. Setting the scene and helping everyone remember the counters of the room we now sit. A few years ago, I invited you to a place at the foundation of our country and the formation of Bordentown, which

incidentally celebrates its 325 anniversary this year.

Tonight I invite you to take a step back even further. Beware, our trip is long and dangerous, for we must travel to a time billions of years ago. While officially, we celebrate the beginning of the 5768 year in the Jewish calendar, this number is actually just a rough estimation of period far longer than any human being could have imagined even two hundred years ago. On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate that first moment before anything else ever existed.

Are you ready? All right, so what are we waiting for - let's go!!

So, what does this place look like that we've chosen to visit. Well, the first thing you will notice is how dark it is. We are no longer in the protected confines of our sanctuary, but some where out there in the night sky. Only instead of the moon and stars we are used to seeing at this time of night, there is nothing. And, when I say nothing, I mean nothing. No earth, no sun, no comets, no black holes, indeed, there isn't even any space. While our universe today is unimaginably vast, back then it was small enough to fit inside our very hands. The only thing that exists here is a mass of protons so compact it is a billionth of its normal size. Mind you that even at normal size, a proton is infinitely smaller than a letter in your prayer books you have in front of you tonight. And, that ounce of matter is bubbling, just on the edge of bursting forth.

This universe is as flat or flatter than a sheet of paper, and absolutely quiet. It is, in the words of the Torah, *Tohu VaVohu*, unformed and void, or, as Everet Fox writes in his poetic translation, "wild and waste."

"*Vayomer Elokim: Yihi Or, Vayhi Or*, And, God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light."

The next step, if we are ready for it, is a light so bright and intense that it shattered the fabric of everything around it. This is, according to science, what is known as the "Big Bang," the one big explosion that led to our universe today.

Bill Bryson, the great travel writer, in his wonderful book *A Short History of Nearly Everything**, describes this "Big Bang" in the following way:

"And, so, from nothing, our universe begins. In a single blinding pulse, a moment of glory much too swift and expansive for any form of words, the singularity assumes heavenly dimensions, space beyond conception. In the first lively second is produced gravity and the other forces that govern physics. In less than a minute the universe is a million billion miles across and growing fast. There is a lot of heat now, ten billion degrees of it, enough to begin the nuclear reactions that create the lighter elements – principally hydrogen and helium, with a dash (about one atom in a hundred million) of lithium. In three minutes, 98 percent of all the matter there is or will ever be has been produced. We have a universe. It is a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful, too. And it was all done in the time it takes to make a sandwich."

The Jewish version of the "Big Bang" theory is best surmised by the imagination of Isaac Luria, the 16th Century Kabbalist that single handedly developed the fundamental principals of contemporary Jewish mysticism.

He too saw a quiet space at the beginning of time. However, instead it being empty, lonely, he saw instead a place filled with only God. And, he called this God, appropriately, Ein Sof, or without end. In order to make room for the universe, this *Ein Sof*, had to do something totally and completely against God's nature. The Ein Sof had to do what Luria called *TzimTzum*,

or contract. The *Ein Sof* pulled back and suddenly, there was a space void of God at all, a vessel to hold a universe. Into this vessel, God shot a ray of light, an explosion of God's presence. From this ray, everything that ever is or was, was born. Unfortunately, the power of God could not be contained by any vessel in this new universe, and it thus shattered into millions of pieces. This catastrophe was known as *Shvirat Ha'Kelim*. And, according to Luria, we spend our lives picking up these shards of God and restoring them to a state of holiness.

In both cases, out of places with almost no physical matter comes, as Bryson terms it, a "place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility and beautiful, too." If a seven day creation cycle feels unnerving to contemporary readers, how much more so a three minute one. That 98% of the known universe can be created "in the time to make a sandwich" is beyond comprehension.

But is it?

On Erev Rosh Hashanah we relish the thought that entire worlds can be created in the blink of an eye. There is simply no end to the magic and the mystery of this world that we live in. We come here knowing, that while our lives may hang in the balance during the High Holidays, so do many wondrous possibilities as well.

And, is a three minute universe really that unreasonable? Think about it, and believe me I have this past five months - a pregnant wife will do that to you - our own lives began in an even shorter interval period of time.

There actually was a time when all of us sitting or standing in this room were one-cell organisms. More precisely, we were all one-cell organisms for approximately fifteen seconds. I know, I read about it at *Bodies... The Exhibition* this past March. For those of you who haven't been yet, *Bodies... The Exhibition* is a traveling exhibit where real human cadavers are displayed in all their glorious splendor. Apparently, scientists have developed a process of not only preserving a specimen, but also clearly displaying all the various parts of the body. It is at once breathtakingly beautiful and utterly... well disgusting.

Here is how their website describes it: "A human specimen is first preserved according to standard mortuary science. The specimen is then dissected to show whatever it is that someone wants to display. Once dissected, the specimen is immersed in acetone, which eliminates all body water. The specimen is then placed in a large bath of silicone, or polymer, and sealed in a vacuum chamber. Under vacuum, acetone leaves the body in the form of gas and the polymer replaces it, entering each cell and body tissue. A catalyst is then applied to the specimen, hardening it and completing the process. This method of preservation creates a specimen that will not decay."

For me, one of the most interesting parts of the exhibit was the section devoted to new life, before which I found the fascinating quote about our fifteen seconds of one-celledness. There is actually a warning at the door to the exhibit, not to enter if you feel squeamish about such matters, or if you happen to be pregnant and do not want to see a bunch of dead fetuses.

Here, in this slightly darkened room, cases displayed the actual journey of a baby from

only a few weeks old to just born. You see the fingers and toes sprouting out, the eyes and ears finding their right place on the head, and the body growing in definition and size each week of the pregnancy. And, while 9 months may feel like a long time - it certainly does to me right now - the amount of stuff that happens, without any help from anyone other than the internal organs of the woman's body, is astounding.

More amazingly still is that we, as human beings, do not stop growing and changing until our deaths. We may not feel it or notice it on the short term, but our bodies are continually in flux both internally and externally. In order to even maintain our basic shape, millions of cells have to be born and die every day, perhaps even every hour.

“Vayih Erev Vayih Boker Yom Echad - And it was evening it was morning the first day.”

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, we choose not to look forward or backward, but right here and right now. This requires no journey at all, it only requires that we are truly and utterly present in this moment. It is about appreciating the “here and now” without regret for what we should have done this past year or fear of what might lie ahead.

To explain what I mean, I take you back to Isaac Luria, the man who invented the Jewish version of the “Big Bang,” hundreds of years before people even considered the universe to be much older than 5768.

Born in Jerusalem in 1534, he moved to Egypt when he was 15 years old. There he came to believe that deceased teachers of the past spoke to him and that he had frequent interviews with Elijah the prophet. In one of these “interviews,” Luria believed that Elijah instructed him to move to the land of Israel, so, in 1569, that's exactly what he did. And, not just to anywhere in Israel, but to Sefat, a city perched high in the Galilee and the birthplace of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism.

While only in Sefat for three years before his death in 1572, and never having even had the chance to write on the subject, that is where he developed his creation story. His accent to greatness impossibly short, yet the impact he had on Jewish history immense. And, unlike most Jewish greats, Luria worried little about posterity. He left that to his students. He saw only the brilliance of the present moment, of the stumbling upon a *Kelim*, a vessel of God, and the opening up of “a place of the most wondrous and gratifying possibility, and beautiful, too.”

“Baruch Atah Adonai Elokeni Melech Ha'olam Asher B'dvaro Ma'ariv Aravim”

“Blessed are you God, King of the Universe, whose words brings on the dusk of evening.”

“Shanah Tovah U'Metukah - A good sweet year to all of us.”