

THIS IS THE DAY OF THE WORLD'S BIRTH

A sermon for Rosh Hashana 5768

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Beginning sunset this past Wednesday evening, and continuing Thursday, Jews everywhere, including here, began the ten holiest days of the year, the High Holy Days, the Days of Awe, when, for those ten days, as much as is possible, the daily routine ceases and there's an intense period of contemplation, self-examination, and reckoning.

In a synagogue during the High Holy Days, you're likely to hear a familiar story about Abraham: maybe you remember it.

Abraham gets it into his head that God is telling him to sacrifice his son Isaac on a fiery altar. And so he tricks his son, then ties him to the altar of that crazy sadistic god in his head. And he's about to set it on fire.



In the Midrash are other stories about Abraham. One describes him as a young man trying to find his own way. He falls into conflict with his father and with his tribe and for this he's punished severely, thrown into a fiery furnace. Miraculously, he's saved — but is he? As Michael Lerner¹ points out — He'll

THE READINGS

*Ken Wilbur, from Eye of Spirit,
1997:*

[This time invites us] to see the same currents running through our human blood that run through swirling galaxies and colossal solar systems,

that crash through the great oceans and course through our own veins, that move the mightiest of mountains as well as our own glorious moral aspirations—

one and the same current moves throughout the All, and drives the entire Kosmos in its every lasting gesture,

and refuses to surrender until you remember who and what you are,

and that you were carried to this realization by that single current of an all-pervading Love,

and here, Augustine's words, 'there came fulfillment in a flash of light, and . . . now my will and my desires were moved like a wheel revolving evenly, by the Love that moves the sun and other stars.'

—Ken Wilbur, *The Eye of Spirit*. Boston: Shambhala, 1997, p. 79

*From Michael Lerner, Jewish
Renewal, 1994 —*

Anyone who has attempted to make a serious change in his or her own life knows that even when we make a commitment to change, there are some people who want us to remain the same, who throw us back into our old patterns and insist that who we were is who we always will be. One advantage of having a collective process of transformation is that if *everyone* is simultaneously engaged in the attempt to change, and is surrounded by others who accept the idea that *change is possible*, then . . . the ritual of these days . . . becomes the public proclamation to one another that we are trying to make our own real changes and that we are allowing and accepting the changes of all others in the community.

And hence the liturgy is filled with this message: that the world is filled with this energy that makes for the possibility of transformation of that which is to that which ought to be.

A community that integrates this kind of deep self-exploration with an equally serious focus on communal or societal change generates tremendous spiritual energy. So it is no surprise that the Jewish liturgy moves quickly back and forth between a focus on our sins and a focus on our vision of a new world in which we could imagine . . . a rule of justice and peace and love.

never be the same. Inwardly, he's been burnt and scathed.

Now, in the more *familiar* Torah story about Abraham about to sacrifice his own son Isaac, he seems to be driven by what Freud called *repetition compulsion*. He hears in his heart the screaming legacy of pain and cruelty that was inflicted on him, and confuses it with the voice of God. What was done to him, he's now about to do to his own son.

Have you ever hurt? Do you hurt now? Do you like what, in your hurt, you do?

Abraham's son is actually tied to the altar, and Abraham is ready to light it, when something happens inside him. And because of that — he challenges the outworn god in his head and heart and *his God grows up*. He leaves the small, mean god of his past behind, and he unties Isaac, and he walks away, with Isaac, *changed*.

Here, in one little story about a single individual's experience — what we're seeing is the evolution of human consciousness. The gods inside us grow up. It happens right in the midst of hurt and profound anguish. Transformation. Whaddaya know?



So the meaning of Rosh Ha Shanah, with which these ten days began this past week — *this day of the world's birth*. I want to give you Rabbi Michael Lerner's own words:

The liturgy for the Jewish New Year tells us clearly that the past events in our lives do not ultimately and completely have to bind us, limit us, make us less than we could and should be. . . . Our personal lives and our collective lives can be radically reconstructed. . . . Nor are the social implications hidden: the Rosh Hashanah liturgy explicitly presents us with the utopian possibility as a real possibility . . . It is a revolutionary message: all systems of oppression can be toppled.²

This is the day of the world's birth. *This*.



These are days for examining ourselves, and examining ourselves may lead to some despair — unless we first take in the fact that all this Universe, all of Being, everything that is, including you — possesses an inherent power for self-transformation. This is the day of the world's birth.

Now, Rosh Hashana last week — is supposed to remind us of Creation, the marvelous appearance of the world of Life out of the Void. The gift of the breath of life; — and it comes with the question: how are you spending this life of yours; do you know that you are mortal?

But can we really transcend our past, transform ourselves? Can we do it? Is it really possible for us to do it?



That's why it matters that this is the day of the world's birth.

Is there really any ground for hope? Wouldn't it save a lot of time and effort just to give up on ourselves and the world and — you know, *preemptively* — proceed directly to the smoke and ashes?

Wait, wait. If only we can get our heads out of the discouragements, the banality, the fiery furnace and cynicism of these times —

Which is why I believe we, too, need something like the High Holy Days. Withdraw from the tumult and contemplate. Actually stop and look up at the night sky long enough to feel the kinship, the implicate, intimate kinship, the communion of the Universe, and the power of it.

Something more fundamental lies under our existence and runs through it. Go there, under all the noise, go beneath it, go into it.



When the things that encumber the mind and heart are stripped away — When the clutter is cleared away: —

Light.

What you find is Light — a gentle, warm, radiant Light.

Buddhists, and people of every time and place and culture, have known it as something luminous.

Elemental Light.

Buddhists call it the Ground Luminosity.

It is an Energy.

And it's a cosmological concept. As well as a Buddhist one.

The Buddhist concept is **Ground Luminosity**.

A cosmologist might call it **Zero Point Energy**, a concept that comes from Planck and Einstein.³ There are other names. But this is what it is: just what's there, spread through the Universe since the world's birth — that inconceivable moment when Being exploded from some inconceivably small, inconceivably dense point in nothingness and became a vast somethingness. All matter is simply disturbances of this great energy field, Zero Point Energy. The Greeks called it the Plenum. The physicist David Bohm called it the Implicate Order. It's more fundamental than even time and space. And from this "space-time foam" *new particles are constantly surging into existence out of what we always thought was a vacuum.*

Always and everywhere, the day of the world's birth. And we — embedded in a living Universe, all-nourishing mystery, seamless whole.

Now I don't know precisely what this means for you or me when we're suddenly without an income, or for a friend who lies in a coma and the doctors are baffled. What is it *then?*

I know this: it takes a different state of mind and consciousness to begin to grapple with the Abyss when we face the anguish and hurt.



But now, what is this Buddhist thing, Ground Luminosity?

Well, quite simply, it's what's there, always, already there, after you've stripped *everything else* away, after you've been broken open. The very innermost dimension of consciousness.

The Essence. The 'Emptiness' that we now know is empty *only of clutter and junk*. It's what remains.

Some call it Universal Consciousness; some call it The All. Christian mystics know it as the Uncreated and Deifying Light. Buddhists call it enlightenment, know it as luminous, naked awareness. The greatest classic of Jewish mysticism — the *Zohar* — called it the *Shekhinah*.

In the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, the nature of everything is open, empty and naked like the sky. Everything that in life has clouded the enlightened mind has fallen away. Here is a luminous emptiness, without center or circumference: the pure, naked Rigpa — *Rigpa*, Tibetan for 'intelligence,' 'awareness' — but much more than that — 'the innermost nature of mind'; a creative intelligence:

The nature of all is open, empty, naked like the sky.

Luminous emptiness, without centre or boundary: the pure, naked Rigpa dawns.⁴

More than twenty centuries ago Lao Tzu captured it in these familiar lines:

There was something formless and perfect before the universe was born.

It is serene. Empty.

Solitary. Unchanging.

Infinite. Eternally present.

It is the *mother* of the universe.

For lack of a better name,

I call it the Tao.



You can go there in a profound state of meditation.



The experience of the High Holy Days for observant Jews is quite something for Goyim like myself to behold. It might begin with crowds gathered in synagogues until after midnight in a pretty intense experience. From there on out, for the rest of these ten days, many pieces of the clutter of usual daily routine are laid aside to make space for contemplation and wonder.

All this reminds me a little bit of that dramatic New Testament story where Jesus goes into the Temple and overturns the money-changers' tables. Why? It was all clutter. Clutter in the Temple. Greed getting in the way, or just busy-ness masquerading as holiness. Clear away the clutter. Get to the Essence.

We have to get beneath the clutter, clear away the clutter, before we can know the luminous overflowing emptiness, — though it is always, already there. Yes? Is our religious life about the *Luminosity*, or is it about the *clutter*?

That's what's so great about rotten things. Consider the let-down, the failure, the loss, the hurt — consider it as an *opening*. “The whole in the ego is where the holy flows in and out,” says Sam Keen. Go into it — not as a cave to hide in, not as a place to live, your own Funksville, no, but as an opening into a Beyond. A passage out of illusion and self-delusion; an inlet from a septic swamp into the ocean; a channel through some abyss into the divine Shekinah, the luminous Emptiness.

True for us as individual persons, and it's true for this whole aching world. Maybe you know the passage in the 24th hexagram of the ancient *I Ching*: “*After a time of decay comes the turning point.*” A wrenching journey to the Abyss is an opening to the very Essence of Being, — the creative Essence.



This is the day of the world's birth.

Can it be that we share the life of a Universe that is alive, self-organizing, intelligent? All of it, from subatomic particles and molecules to planets, galaxies, the whole Kosmos. And everywhere is this great Energy by which everything is interconnected. That's the reason that information from any point in the universe is accessible from any other point. It's the principal of non-locality at work! Particles exist in one location and then in another without ever travelling through the space between.



That essential Light, that Ground of Being — that is what, finally, we are, our original face, who we really are. You are not your hurt, your fear, your grief. You are more than you know. That Light, that Ground of Being. The Hindu Kena Upanishad puts it with stunning clarity. *Thou art that!* Not some God-out-there. It's as close as your breath. And these Days of Awe call us to return to our essential selves, to the divine life that is our life.

There is a creative energy and intelligence that permeates everything:

The grass knows how to grow.

Electrons deliberately leap their orbits and create something new

and genomes know how to transform themselves.

And as for us: the evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahltouris describes *us* — we ourselves — as Zero Point Energy out having a human experience — or, as she puts it, *spirit* having a human experience.⁶ May we substitute that word “Spirit” for this transcendent Energy?

Yes, it *is* possible, at times, to transcend our local selves and experience cosmic consciousness!

Sometimes we get there through practices of meditation, sometimes through contemplation, sometimes in sudden flashes of greater awareness. And sometimes it takes the jolt that rips a hole in the ego to break our trance, our attachment to things that can be taken from us, our absorption in games of competition and success, — sometimes it takes the jolt that rips a hole in all that before we'll let the holy flow in and out.



Kazantzakis' words, which we read earlier, are true:

We are one. From the blind worm in the depths of the ocean to the endless arena of the Galaxy, only one person struggles and is imperiled: You. And within your small and

earthen breast only one thing struggles and is imperiled: the Universe.

Imperiled. Nikos Kazantzakis wrote of the life of the universe as imperiled and he said we are all a part of it; — and we know it *is*, in our time, imperiled — in ways we cannot deny and for which we are responsible. And there is this preëemptive war, and the deepening depravity of our own government's web of deception; there is the rendition and the torture. And more than all these, this world of life is imperiled by the degradation of the earth and seas and air and polar ice caps so that the very future existence of life on earth is in serious question. *Imperiled.*

We now face the most terrible peril humanity has ever faced and yet I want you not to lose sight of this other truth:

It's always the day of the world's birth. The Universe is a roaring engine of creativity. We're due and past due for another leap in consciousness.



Yes, this world of life is endangered, and yes, ours will be the last gasping century of life on the planet unless something changes very soon. And yes, we hurt.

And yes, this intelligent world of life, expressed in us, its cutting edge — it has a long history of evolutionary leaps in periods of great pressure. It's time for a new, wiser, gentler humanity.

There is hope. These lives of ours, with the whole Universe, — flow ever new out of this all-nourishing Mystery not just once, 14 billion years ago — but in every moment. This is the day of the world's birth! It's time for a spiritual revolution and it may as well begin here.

This is the day of the world's birth.

¹ *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation.* New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994, pp 40ff.

² Lerner, 46.

³ Term proposed by Einstein and Stern in 1913, working with a concept developed by Max Planck. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zero-point_energy

⁴ Adapted from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, referring to the dawning of the ground luminosity during the death process.

⁵ In Garma Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa Yen Buddhism.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971, p. 111.

⁶ *When Worlds Converge.* Ed. Clifform N. Matthews, with Mary Evelyn Tucker and Philip Hefner. Chicago: Open Court, 2002, p. 70.

⁷ Duane Elgin. *Awakening Earth: Exploring the Evolution of Human Culture and Consciousness.* New York: William Morrow, 1993, p. 274.