



*This is a transcript of a video recorded for High Holidays of 2020/5781, part of a rich collection of resources available at: <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/highholidays2020>.*

### ***Chaos and Creativity: Brokenness and Possibility on this Rosh Hashanah***

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*Shanah tovah.* I am Rabbi Rachel Weiss, and I am the lead rabbi of the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Evanston, Illinois.

In the 1990s at JRC, a group of mostly women gathered together to begin a craft project. It started as part of our art and design committee to create what would turn out to be an epic creation. A group of folks ranging in age from around 20, that was me as a member, to women in their 90s and everywhere in between, multigenerational, some related to each other and some not. We came together in a congregant's basement to create a 6-foot wall mosaic made out of broken dishes. An artist in the community had designed and painted the mural, and on planks of wood we would sit for several years, smashing, cutting, breaking, nipping, and trying to just get the right shape and the right color to create beauty.

The focus was on color and pattern and design. Taking pieces of brokenness, brokenness of tiles, but also brokenness in life, relationships, losses, deaths, divorces, politics, all of the different kinds of smashed bits, lots of laughter and lots of connection. Focusing on putting pieces of color together and putting them back together, taking them from a myriad of mess and making it whole. The chaos of the pieces and the shapes gave way to beauty, and at our dedication, we said: "Creation begins when we break and rebuild."

I had the honor of serving on faculty during the inaugural summer of Camp JRF, now Camp Havaya in the Poconos. There in my role as one of the camp rabbis, I worked with our campers and our staff and our rabbis to create a giant mosaic once again. This one would live on the wall of the *hadar okhel*, on the wall of the dining hall at the *merkaz*, the center of camp, and would be a welcome to all. Stretched out across the wall, like an open Torah scroll, going from day to night to rainbow, to all of the sacred stories that would happen at camp together.

The opening of camp was an epic experience for so many of us, and it was the fun of breaking and smashing and creating, of making new relationships, making new experiences. We were all out of our element, breaking up the routine. It was sticky and it was messy and it was gluey. We were up high on ladders and we were up to our elbows in grout. The vision would shift and get reshaped, and it took way longer than expected. It was up on a ladder, many months after camp had ended, that we finally installed it where it would live for the next decade. It was fun. And it was temporal. And it was camp.



These are projects, crafts and artisan works to show us the way that we can put our metaphors into action. An artisan mini *mishkan* of sorts, a project designed to create beauty and fellowship. And if we do it right, be a dwelling space for that which we hold most holy. But while we took a hammer to wholeness, for the sake of creativity, we as a community, as a people, as a Jewish people, know deeply a much more dramatic and destructive kind of trauma.

And right now it feels like we are living yet again in a temple destruction moment. Diaspora, distance, grief. The chaos of ancestral eviction, homelessness, wandering, loss, and uncertainty. In the temple time, the building destroyed, the ritual structure was closed. And in fact, we wrote a role for it to keep existing in our collective memory, in the narrative with the Mishnah, an instruction manual, as it were for a sacred space that wouldn't exist again, but would keep the memory of the holiness and the essence of what happened there alive. The Mishnah text would be an homage to the brokenness by describing the wholeness that was once before. It was hoping to inspire a wholeness that we could create again in the future.

From the destruction, though, we created rabbinic Judaism. And so we are allowed to stand now on these kind of places on this *bimah* and have it be about prayer and about text and about song and not about fiery animal sacrifices. We evolve and we change and we grow. Ani DiFranco wrote (or sang), "Self-preservation is a full-time occupation." On a communal level, our Judaism was destroyed and on a communal level, we rebuilt, slowly, and it didn't look the same.

The trauma is real, and our trauma is real. Most of us have not lived under a pandemic before, and there have been immeasurable losses. Lament and grief are very real. Many of us are weeping in our bedrooms, rocking our children, trying to find some comfort, some consolation. Or rising up in the streets, rioting and crying. We are lonely. We are alone. We are lost. We are feeling abandoned. We are feeling like the broken shards. Healing is to be able to remember this trauma, to remember it in the future without reliving it again.

And right now we are living it over and over day by day, because we're not sure when this period in time will end. On Rosh Hashanah, we hear it. The bitterness of *tekiyah*. Blast and sharp. The piercing chaos of *shevarim teru'ah*, over and over, the nine blasts, the three sharp, long blasts that break. And we feel the pieces reverberate in our bodies until the wholeness, once again, of the last *tekiyah gedolah*, achieved best, of course, with a chorus of many, of lots of *shofarot* sounding longer and longer and longer.

On Rosh Hashanah, we hear the shofar and we also chant from the story of the beginning of creation. In Bereishit, Genesis, one of the alternate texts that we chant on Rosh Hashanah, we read: Creation, *Hayom harat olam*. This is the day the world was born, today.

And birth also requires breaking. In Genesis, in that beginning of Bereishit that many of us can recite, we say: God says, let there be light. And there was light. With speech and with words, seemingly everything comes into being.

But what we also know from science, from evolution, is that the Big Bang and sparks, it wasn't actually something from nothing. There's chaotic energy and gas and amorphous elements, a primordial soup of lots of different things that exist all at once, all in a large, chaotic combination. God doesn't generate. God reorganizes. God reorganizes the *tahom*, the swirling massive energy from God's proverbial high-up eye view. It is created anew, because it is organized in a different way. The broken parts, the light and the dark, the wet and the dry, the swimming and the creeping and the swarming, the colorful and the sparkling, the human, the animal, the plant, the parts that all come together to make a new whole that would be the reality, would be the earth that we inhabit.

Every day in our morning liturgy, we chant, *"berakhamim uvetuvo mekhadeish bekholyom tamid ma'aseih vereishit."* Every day in goodness and in compassion, the wondrous works of creation are renewed all over again. Every day creation is renewed, as it says in one of the poems that we find in our prayer book. Day breaks, newness hatches and emerges. And if we say that every day creation is renewed, then why not every hour? And if not every hour, why not every minute? And if it happens every minute, it happens and has potential to happen every moment. We human beings are replete with potential for change and renewal. We are dynamic. We are evolving. And therein lies the possibility and the hope. Hope.

Now in this moment, we are also profoundly tired. Let me tell you that from personal and professional experience, and I don't have to tell you, because you are probably tired, too. Creativity and possibility feel very far away, because simply the exhaustion and the weight of the trauma is here. So does creativity and possibility erase the loss of the death, of isolation, of depression, of fear? No, of course it doesn't. They are all very much here, and we feel them with so much of our hands and our hearts. All of that exists. We live with it every day right now. But this moment, this moment of creation, of Genesis, of reorganizing the chaos into creativity, this, a model, a container to contain and reorganize the chaos like a mosaic. This is an opportunity to create beauty and bravery from brokenness.

What are these possibilities? What are we to create from our chaos? We in our congregation and our community, like many of you, are now looking at what is essential with a newer lens, a lens of what's most important to us. What do we actually need to function? What do we need to survive? What are the tools we already have? What do we need to seek from the outside world? What's going to sustain us? We are looking at what's essential in ways we never have before. We are looking at what is essential through a lens of equity. And it turns out getting internet access, working from home, having flexible hours has always been possible. It turns out there is more than one way to connect. It turns out virtual and streaming experiences can be meaningful and deeply connective. It turns out what is essential is the relationships and the connective tissue between human beings.

And that is very much here. We have uncovered gaps in all of our communities among race and wealth, gender and healthcare that have always been there, lost in that chaos and now

emerging out of this chaos as things that we have the opportunity to move. We have an opportunity to reorganize our chaos in a way, in systems that are equitable and responsible for everyone. The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* He wrote about calling out the average white person from pacivity, ignoring the chaos of white supremacy and racism. He calls for exactly this moment of breaking up what has been and creating something that is new. He wrote:

There is nothing to keep us from remolding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood. Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved nation to a higher destiny. To a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humanness.

We are striving to create an even more noble expression and vision of being human. The Mishnah says, “In a place where there is no humanity, be human.” In the place of chaos and trauma, find the sparks to lift up. Pick up a broken piece and move it in a new way. Place it and turn it, put it next to a color you did not imagine it fitting next to. Glue it down and see what unfolds. We have seen the creation and emergence of connections with Jewish practices that are deeper and more reachable and resonant than ever before.

This moment was made for Reconstructionist Judaism. This is the moment of taking what has been and recognizing that the status quo around us has changed, and it's time to adapt. It's time to be flexible. It's time to remember where we are rooted and it's time to reach out in the ways that we can be daring. This is a moment in which unexpected connections are thriving. Many people are Zooming into Shabbat services in their pajamas or from their kitchen counters as they are cooking dinner or sitting in their gardens or late at night, as they wind down for the day on the couch with a beloved. People are listening to the liturgy. People are finding ways every day to be more and more connected. We are taking our Judaism on the go. We are weaving it into our lives in ways that our lives can hold now. We might not be able to carve out two hours every Saturday morning to sit in a Shabbat service, come dressed up to a different place and focus, but we may be able to mindfully listen to a teaching that we hear in the morning while we are brushing our teeth.

All of that is real and is new ways to make beauty out of this brokenness. We are seeing so many people who are relying on our Jewish weekly or daily practices as anchors. The Zoom connections far beyond the Passover Seders that we scrambled to create back in April and more and more deeply creative and connective as families Zoom in to experience Shabbat services together from across the country. There is challah baking all together. There are ways that people are sharing their ideas and sharing their questions.

I never thought that Zoom *shivah* would be particularly meaningful. One of the things that I so desire in so many ways when I go to a *shivah* is the capacity to put my arms around someone, to get close, to be there with one another and see all of the experiences of grief in someone's face and to be able to hold it with them. But now, hundreds of faces can show up together

across time zones to say, I am here with you, to see that those connections are still here, and perhaps, the essential pieces that we are discovering about *shivah* and about mourning, a time of deep brokenness that actually allows us to focus on the faces of the people we love. The stories of our beloved as told through so many different lenses, rather than focusing on: Did I bring the coffee cake? Or, have I gotten the hot cups? Or, is everything set up or cleaned up? We simply log on and show up as we are, because the most essential, important thing is not the outside trappings. It's the care and the presence of being there.

What is essential? What do we need to learn right now? What is meaningful? What is connective? What nourishes and restores? These are the questions that we have been asking in our congregation and community. What are all of the different elements that can come together, a new weaving, a new mosaic of sorts, that are going to help us navigate the chaotic and painful time that we live in right now? What are the pieces that fit? And what are the pieces that are extraneous? We have to say goodbye to some of the pieces that we thought were perfect, and it turns out we can't use them right now. The new tapestry that we are creating is an opportunity for newness. It's the way we want to see our community. More access, more equity, more connectivity, more ways for all of us to bring things in ways we had not yet imagined, because we have not been in this moment before.

And Rosh Hashanah gives us that opportunity to say: Today, a new world is born. Today, we smash, we break, we let go, because when we let go, our hands are open to hold something new. Even if we haven't gotten there now, even if in this moment we cannot imagine the chaotic pain and grief of so many dying from coronavirus, of the ignorance and the blatant hatred that is coming out of our country, of all of the ways in which we have not taken public health seriously, of all of the anguish and depression that exists in the world right now, we have not taken it to its full extent yet.

We're not through. We're not done. We're still here. And yet we're still here. The way out is through. And if we hold onto the essentials, the small kindness, neighbors sharing extra food with one another, check-in calls, calling to say, how are you? Are you alone? Do you need anything? Collaboration, the redistribution and the sharing of resources, the way in which we are making choices that are hard for us right now, but are better for the most vulnerable, the greater public health and welfare of our community.

Hope and renewal, that's the *tekiyah gedolah* that we strive to hear. It's our collection of the pieces and the fragments and the shards and the colors, smashed to bits and rearranged into something that is smooth and continuous. Our commitment in this New Year, this Rosh Hashanah, is to find places for all the broken pieces, lovingly placed, named, and honored, and put together with all of us in a creation of beauty, of possibility, of collectivity, of hope.

What are the parts that need to be smashed? What are the parts that are already smashed around you? What are the parts you are stepping on, and it makes you go, "Ow! I noticed that."



What are the parts that look beautiful, and you're not sure where it can fit, but you don't want to let it go? What have you collected over the years? And what are you willing to let go of now? What is broken, and you say, "Thank you," and then bury it? And what is broken, and you say, "This! This I have to take with me"?

What will your mosaic of this New Year look like? It might not be smooth. It will probably take a lot of work. It will be messy. It will be sticky. It might be sharp. And it might take longer than you think. But just like the mosaic that was created by my community of JRC women back in the 1990s, like that mosaic that was created by hundreds of Reconstructionist campers in that summer of 2006, collectively, we create more beauty. And it is not just the beauty of the object we create, but rather it is the beauty of the mosaic that is us, all of the voices, all of the collected pieces, all of the different people and all of our voices, wherever we are, even though we're apart.

This is about the creation of hope and possibility that we will yet be together again, probably in ways different than we used to be, and hopefully in ways we have not yet imagined as we step through the gates and into the possibility of this New Year. *Shanah tovah.*