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BLOSSOM OF THE UNIVERSE

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Hayom Harat Olam. That is what we say on this holiday. *Hayom harat olam* – this day is the birthday, the birth, the Creation, of the World. *Hayom Harat Olam.*

So happy birthday world. Happy birthday to all life. Happy birthday to each one of you. And if you don't remember how this world came about, I am happy to remind you!

"Torchtree" by Susie Stonefield Miller

In the beginning there was Nothing and Everything. The Everything was so infinite, so uniform and undifferentiated, that it was as if it were Nothing at all. But there was, at some point in time, or maybe this was the starting point of time, a rustle, a ripple in the endlessness. The ripple, which was like a thought or an impulse or something else we might call Wisdom, changed everything. For with the activation of this thought, the tiniest, tiniest seed at the center of Everything exploded. It burst forth and began to grow – a Tree, with its roots spreading out and branching like successive iterations of the Hebrew letter *shin*. These roots stayed firm in the Eyn Sof, in the mysterious Infinite that was Everything and Nothing, while the trunk of the tree bulldozed forth, growing massive and mighty. But it would be a mistake to think vertically here. Because the Tree grew in every possible direction and dimension. It pushed out branches, and those branches formed the edges of reality itself. The Tree began to bud and leaf, to flower and berry. Leaves and flowers began to open, opening up to be this World that we know,

and every other possible world too. All of them, shoots and blossoms and fruit of the Cosmic Tree. All of us, each of us – shoots and blossoms and fruit of the Cosmic Tree. Even now as we speak, the Great Tree is wafting fragrance and shaking loose new souls to be born into the world. The Great Tree is drawing water of Wisdom from its deep roots still anchored in the Divine. The sap of Wisdom is running through the xylem from the deep dark silent mystery so that we – and this whole world – may burst forth, the flower and fruit of the Tree of Life, the Tree that is also called "All". Everything depends on this Tree. All emanates from it. All need it. And all delight in it.

And that's how we got here.

You knew that, right?

Okay, this might not be the most famous Jewish Creation story. But it is a Jewish Creation story, maybe a little embellished by me, that comes from *Sefer haBahir* – one of our oldest Jewish mystical texts, before the Zohar.

Sefer HaBahir tells us that the origin and the workings of the Cosmos are that of a Great Tree, a Tree of Life. Later in our mysticism the Tree gets more theorized, formulated into a series of Ten Sefirot, at which point for many of us, it stops being a Tree at all and becomes a diagram. So I want to stick with the simple, overall, palpable, vegetative, arboreality of the story. And to ask why Universe-as-Tree might be a useful story for us right now.

Unlike the Creation story in Torah – the 7-day "In the Beginning" story – the story of the Cosmic Tree gives us Creation as a process and not an event. In Torah, the world was complete by Friday night – a done deal, a *fait accompli*. But with the Cosmic Tree, we are part of an ongoing blossoming, an age-old unfolding, of which we are not the endpoint. In which case, on this holiday, when we say *Hayom Harat Olam*, we don't mean that this is the anniversary of Creation, but rather that today – *still* today, and every day – the world is being born, the Universe is birthing itself.

For me, this idea of still being in process is a relief. There is a lot of responsibility associated with the world being a *fait accompli*, and of each of us being a *fait accompli*. If this is all a done deal, then the problems we see around us and the suffering we experience within us are all a kind of failure. The world is not the ideal world we imagine it was created to be, and so we see it as broken. And when we are not the people we imagine we were created to be, we see ourselves as broken. And then we are burdened with the difficult responsibility of *tikkun*, of implementing correctives, in order to repair something that keeps breaking, that keeps being not quite what we want it to be.

Ah, but being part of a vast unfolding? This allows for all possibility. It holds the past and present without judgment. It is all in process. ALL OF IT. I am not the same person I was when I was young. Not even physically - my cells are full of elements that have made the rounds since the Big Bang. My atoms have been scattered among flowers and grass and rocks and oceans. I am a reassembly, or a continually reassembling symphony of matter. And the person I am is also subject to change and reassembly. I embody endless possibility. In my High Holy Day introspection, I can stop judging myself for being a disappointing final product. Because I ain't done yet. Instead I can wonder at my ever-changingness. I can wonder and I can resolve and I can look forward to how things might unfold next. I can notice how I've changed and I can think about how I might still shape my own unfolding.

We are essentially dynamic beings, in both body and in spirit. Change can be tiring, of course, especially if we are trying to cling to things as they were. But we are the blossoms of the Cosmic Tree, ever so slowly opening, pollenating, and becoming sweet fruit. Heck, I can smell you from over here.

The Cosmic Tree story also reminds us that we all grow from the same seed – not just all people but all life – all creatures, all things, all matter, all energy, every action, every thought. All of these come from the same place. We are all Universe, made up entirely of the stuff of the Universe. *Eyn Od*. There is nothing else. We are not *in* the Universe. We *are* the Universe. Wholly and entirely.

As Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker capture so beautifully in their book, *Journey of the Universe*, "[J]ust as the Milky Way is the universe in the form of a galaxy, and an orchid is the universe in the form

of a flower, we are the universe in the form of a human. And every time we are drawn to look up into the night sky and reflect on the awesome beauty of the universe, we are actually the universe reflecting on itself."

"And," they conclude, "that changes everything."

And it does. Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, of blessed memory, used to encourage us to adopt a Gaia consciousness – thinking of the planet as a living organism, and everything and everyone in it as its living systems. But this view is even bigger if more abstract. The Universe is alive. It is thinking – through us and through other intelligences known and not yet known. *Eyn od*. There is nothing else.

And this also is a kind of relief. To let go of our biblical mandate to be separate from nature and to rule over it, and instead just be it. The relief for me is palpable. And the experience is less lonely. Because we have each other and the trees and the oceans and the animals and mountains and stars. All of us together, being the Universe together.

There's also something tricky about seeing ourselves and everything else as Universe, as the outgrowth of the Cosmic Tree. Because it is a great equalizer. And that begs a moral question – if everything is always changing, and everything is the Universe unfolding, then by what authority can we judge good and bad? What makes any action or outcome better than any other? Why does anything *matter*?

This is anxiety-making. We are living in a moment when moral judgments are being turned upside down, and truth is being decommissioned. On what basis do we invoke moral judgments and take action based on them?

I think there is a simple guiding principle that comes to us through the Tree, through the Universe, through our mysticism and even through Torah.

Choose life. This is a bit of Torah that we will read next week on Yom Kippur. "Choose life," Torah says. Not "choose what's profitable," not "choose what's convenient" and certainly not "choose whatever, it doesn't matter." But "choose life." This push for the cause of life itself we see everywhere. And it comes to us as the Wisdom that we draw through the Tree of Life, from the roots that are drinking deeply somewhere in the realm of the Divine.

It is this Wisdom that reveals itself to Rabbi Simon who, in Midrash, says, "There is not even a blade of grass that does not have a *mazal* – a guardian angel – in the heavens who strikes it with its light and says, "Grow! Grow!" (Bereshit Rabbah 10:6). In other words, there is some spiritual or Divine dimension that is rooting for us, that is playing the cheerleader for life. "Grow, grow," is what it says. And not just to us. But to every blade of grass. To every molecule of this reality.

And we observe this in the Universe itself. This Universe that has an uncanny tendency to unfold in ways that encourage life. Everything since the Big Bang points in this direction.

"Choose life" is the Universe's mandate. We are part of a Whole, a great integrated organism of a Universe. But that Universe has a Wisdom and a voice, and what it is saying is "choose life."

So how do we carry out the mandate of life in a world in which 200 species go extinct every day? How do we hold every life as a worthy part of the Divine fabric in a moment when the earth is heating up and people are displaced and borders are locked down? How do we uphold the cause of all life in a moment when our political differences are so all-consuming? When so much feels to be at stake? How do we serve the needs of life?

Maybe we can be inspired by the natural wisdom of trees.

Two weeks ago my family drove our youngest kid to college in Seattle. We drove through Shasta Trinity National Forest, a quarter of a million acres of which burned last year. We drove through miles of bare,

blackened trees, or what was left of them. But every so often, we would see a lush swath of green forest, completely surrounded by burn.

These islands of green have a name. They are called by scientists *refugia*. We don't know exactly how a grove ends up becoming a *refugium*, but somehow a particular combination of conditions and placement and diversity (and luck) can create a safe haven for all sorts of life. A group of trees together protecting not just their own lives but the lives of thousands of creatures. When the fire is over, the *refugium* becomes the source of the seeds that regenerate the forest. The insects, birds and mammals that survived the fire sheltering in the *refugium* spread back out from there, returning to that forest sanctuary for food. Some *refugia* can survive and serve this function repeatedly for centuries.

So maybe this is an additional way to think of ourselves in this moment of the world. Together we can be a *refugium* – protectors of life. We can bring all our distinctiveness – our skills, our smarts, our songs – whatever the Tree of Life planted in us. Bring all of that to this community and to the other communities in which we are rooted around the world. We can share this vision, this consciousness, this love and longing at the root level, the way trees speak over distance through the mycelial network. We will be the protectors of people, places and creatures in need through the hard times, and the restorers and renewers of the landscape on the other side of it.

We can do this. We – and all of this – are the blossoming of the Tree of Life into this world. We are drinking wisdom right from the Source. The sap is flowing and the angels are cheering. We – and all of this – are single source. Same atoms, differently arranged, harvested from the same history. And in this moment of continued blossoming, we can choose how we blossom. We can choose to blossom in alignment with the cause of life.

We can do this. In the beginning there was Nothing and Everything. And then there was a Tree. And we are its fruit. *Hayom harat olam.*