Rosh Hashanah 5776
D'var Torah, Day 2
By Roby Blecker

Shana Tova.

On occasions like this, when I'm asked to do a d'var Torah, I always try to begin by standing on the shoulders of giants, and for today, I needed far more giants than I usually do. I'm going to be traveling from one pair of giant's shoulders to another, and I'm asking you to come with me and trust me when I say that we'll all safely make it back to the ground again.

The Torah portion for this second day of Rosh Hashanah is B'reshit, the very beginning of the Book of Genesis. And that's appropriate, because the rabbis have written that Rosh Hashanah celebrates the birthday of the world. For better or worse, I'm going to suggest that it celebrates much more than that. So here we go.

Everyone probably recognizes the first few verses of Genesis, though translations may vary. I'm using the translation from *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary* for a particular reason I'll share with you a little later. Etz Hayim translates the Torah text that begins, "*B'reshit bara elohim et ha-shamayim v'et ha-aretz*," as: "When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

Now I want to stand on the first pair of shoulders, to share with those of you who may be unfamiliar with it, some of the opening words of the Zohar, one of Judaism's great mystical works, thought to have been written sometime around the 11th century by Moses de Leon. The Zohar begins: "A blinding spark flashed within the concealed of the concealed, from the mystery of the Infinite, a cluster of vapor in formlessness. Under the impact of breaking through, one high and hidden point shone. Beyond that point, nothing is known. So it is called the Beginning." Enlarging on the picture painted by the Torah, the Zohar describes a single point at the start of everything. File that away, and come with me to our second pair of shoulders.

This pair belongs to another Jewish mystical thinker, a kabbalist, Shimon Lavi, who lived in the latter part of the 16th century. Lavi wrote: "With the appearance of the light, the universe expanded." Maybe this is beginning to sound familiar to the modern mind.

Starting with the sidrah, we jumped several thousand years to the Zohar, then half a milennium to the Kabbalah. Now I'd like to move forward another 500 years into the middle of the 20th century, onto the shoulders of Edwin Hubble, Stephen Hawking, and two radio astronomers at Bell Laboratories, who provided evidence of what is called the Big Bang theory, which hypothesizes that the universe in which we live began as a single point in nothingness and expanded outward from that point.

Now I want to hop on over to Rabbi Daniel Matt, writing in 1996—we've almost caught up to today—addressing the scientific theory of the Big Bang: "In the first few seconds, our universe was an undifferentiated soup of matter and radiation. . . . For the next 300,000 years, the universe was somewhat like the interior of a star. . . . After 300,000 years of cooling, when the temperature reached

3000 [degrees] Kelvin, a transition occurred. . . . Matter and radiation decoupled, and the universe turned transparent. This is the moment of *Yehi or* 'Let there be light.'"

I know we're hopscotching through time and space, and I hope it's not making you dizzy. Please keep trusting me—I promise we'll get where we're going.

But first, I want to go back to the Torah and tell you why I chose Etz Hayim out of all the other translations I could have used. I did it not because of the text, but because of a commentary on this sidrah. The commentary states: "The opening chapters of Genesis are not a scientific account of the origins of the universe. The Torah is a book of morality, not cosmology." And my response when I read that was, "But what if it's both?"

For my reasoning in asking that question, let's look at the writing of a cosmologist—as a matter of fact, one of the world's foremost cosmologists. His name is George Ellis, and he's Stephen Hawking's co-author of the *Large-Scale Structure of Space-Time*. First, I'm going to quote a few sentences from his book entitled *Before the Beginning*. After that, I'm finally going to drop back down to earth and speak about what it all means to me.

In a section of his book called "The Possibility of Revelation," Ellis wrote: "The underlying order of the Universe is broader than described by the understanding of physics alone. . . . The straightforward physicist can simply claim there is no need for [an] extra layer of explanation in order to understand the physical world, and he will be right—provided we attempt to explain only physical reality, accepting without question the given nature of physical laws."

That statement is the key to everything I've tried to bring together here, and I know it's complex and can be confusing, so I'm going to repeat the pertinent clause. ". . . accepting without question the given nature of physical laws."

You and I probably don't take our individual lives for granted—at least, I hope we don't. But if you're like me, you haven't spent much time thinking about how we automatically accept that, of course, life exists. To us, life itself is a given.

To anyone who studies almost any aspect of our physical universe, life is not a given at all. The odds against the development of life as we know it—both intelligent life and simple biological life—those odds are astoundingly enormous. A great cosmological question is why the initial conditions of our universe are such that they provide a suitable environment for the existence—as the Torah would have it—of the heavens and the earth. It is easy these days, as it might not have been in the past, to think of literally thousands of minute changes in the basic laws of chemistry or physics which would preclude life ever arising.

Life needs conditions so improbable that we might well be awed every day about things we are likely not to think about—like the fundamental constants that govern all the physical processes. Those values are the **only** values which would have produced a universe hospitable to life as we know it. Or what time itself, which was, it is believed, created during the Big Bang just as space was, what time had to make happen in order for life to emerge.

As physicist Freeman Dyson, another giant, and expert in a number of scientific fields, has written: "We don't know why the universe is so friendly. To make it possible for life to evolve either on the earth or

anywhere else, two things were essential. There had to be violent events with very short time-scales . . . to bring the chemical elements essential to life out of the insides of stars, where they are made, [and there had to be] collisions between little planets crashing together to form big planets. And then there had to be long quiet periods in which slowly evolving life was sheltered from violence." Dyson calls that the two faces of time: the destroyer and the preserver.

So what does all that have to do with the first verses of Genesis? Everything.

Many people have regarded and will continue to regard Genesis as a creation myth, one of many stories from many cultures and religions, and perhaps it is. But it is a very perceptive creation myth. If the odds of a congenial universe being created from nothingness are worse than the odds of being struck repeatedly by lightning—and they are—then what Judaism does, starting with the Torah and moving onward through the literature of our mystical tradition is to recognize that something or someone took the improbability and tossed it aside. More than just recognize what must have happened to produce the potential for life to arise, Judaism made that something or someone central to creation. We took the two faces of time, the destroyer and the preserver, and turned them into judgment and mercy. We laid a foundation that is not antithetical to the fundamental discoveries intelligent life makes possible, but rather a foundation that predated and predicted a number of those discoveries.

The Torah, the Zohar and the Kabbalah, in other words, knew what was what way before the scientists got around to figuring it out.

I suggest, therefore, that the light that God created in today's Torah portion is not just the light we see around us, or even the light of the spirit, as many rabbis have called it, but the light of the fundamental laws that made this universe hospitable to the appearance of life.

Life itself is far from a given, but it is a gift. We live, you and I, because the light that B'reshit says God called into being, at a particular moment in a universe that began as a single point in nothingness and expanded to everythingness, that light was precisely what we need. And I suggest, along with all the giants who lent us their shoulders today that that improbable precision came about not by accident, but by the careful choices of a purposeful God.

Today's Torah portion asks us to celebrate this greatest and unlikeliest of all gifts—the gift of existence in the heavens and earth that God created back at the very beginning.