

Shana Tova.

As usual in Reform synagogues, the Torah portion for this second day of Rosh Hashanah is B'reshit, the opening sidrah of the Torah, the grand story of Creation we have been studying individually and as a people ever since the Torah was read from the Temple in Jerusalem on Shabbat, Monday and Thursday. Each year when I read a portion in preparation for today's drash, or for a Friday night d'var Torah, or for a Shabbat morning Torah study, I try to remain open to what it says, even though I can feel as if I'm already very familiar with both its words and its splendid images. If I can remain open, then one phrase, one description or one verse jumps out at me and demands that I explore it and talk about it.

I'm sometimes surprised by what puts up its proverbial hand to be noticed, and this year B'reshit startled the heck out of me. This year, I noticed for the first time what may be one of the closest lines to a throwaway in the sidrah. We read it every year, but to the best of my recollection, we've never lingered over it, never looked at it closely, never thought about what it really meant. At least, certainly, I never had before. Instead, we pass over it as if it were a bit player in the whole Creation show. This year, it landed in my consciousness with a shout of, "It's my turn; pay attention to me!"

The specific words in B'reshit that called to me this year are words I've seen and heard repeatedly when I studied the sidrah, from the earliest days of Sunday school to last year's Torah study. And I only noticed them, really noticed them, a couple of weeks ago.

Those words are: "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day."

We know that on the first day of Creation, according to the opening verses of the Torah, God created light. And I've been under the mistaken impression that that was the sum total of God's work on the first day. This year, I became aware of the fact that I've been very wrong. We don't know the words God used in addition to "Let there be light," but no matter.

What God also created, no doubt using those unknown words, was, in my opinion, more important than the creation of light. God's additional creation right at the outset, was time. I realized—finally—that it wasn't just the first day of Creation, it was the first day ever. And here's why I think that particular creation was more important than the creation of light: Light would allow us to see. Time would allow us to be.

It was the first day because now time had come into existence, where it had never existed before. We call it "the beginning" for a reason, and that reason isn't light, wonderful as light is. Indeed, scientists writing about the formation of the universe have been using the term "pretemporal" to describe what B'reshit characterizes as "tohu va-vohu," which we often think of as "chaos."

By creating time, the first day, God created the potential for a second day, and then a third, and onward through the rest of the early verses of B'reshit. In other words, by creating time, God created the future. The creation of the future is the origin of every possibility that followed. It created hope, which is our tool for thinking about the good the future can bring us, and it created anticipation, which is hope made practical; in some ways, it also created fear, because the future is a blank canvas to us. And by creating the future, God also created its polar opposite—the past. So on the first day of Creation, God created the potential for memory. On the second day, it was possible to remember the first. Progress into the future is balanced against memories of the past.

Stephen Hawking, in his seminal work “A Brief History of Time,” describes time as an arrow. Time’s arrow flies forward, in only one direction, and he explores the nearly unimaginable paradox that we are able to remember the past while not being able to remember the future, though all physical laws seem to make it possible to do both. Time is something that defies the physical laws we’ve accepted in our lives, but there doesn’t seem to be anything we can do about that. Not yet, anyway.

In his book “The Presence of the Past,” Dr. Rupert Sheldrake discusses the mechanism by which the past directly influences the present in both human and animal species. He believes the past never goes away – and the Torah believes that, too. So time is very important in a human sense, but it’s also extremely important in a Jewish sense.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his book “The Sabbath” that Judaism sanctifies time, rather than space. Judaism sees certain times as sacred, and we are originally told to consider the sanctity of time in the Torah. That being the case, I am bewildered by the fact that I never thought about the creation of time itself. I just took it for granted.

I took memory for granted, too. Even though we Jews always remember our origins, even though every year at Passover we are commanded not just to remember, but to become part of the past of our people, I still accepted the existence of time without ever asking myself where time came from. We Jews can live in our history just as strongly as we live in our present, sometimes moving from one to the other without really noticing that that’s what we’re doing. I had never thought that history exists because God created the potential for a past, or that memory exists for the same reason. I had never thought that hope exists because God created the future. I was also unaware until recently that Maimonides asserted that “even time itself is one of the things [God] created.”

I’ll never take the existence of time for granted again. To me, now, time has announced itself to be the most precious of God’s creations, the basis for the life God gave us. Each moment moves to us from the future and sweeps beyond us into the past, turning anticipation into memory, adding up to the total of our individual lives as human beings and as Jews, because on the first day of Creation, God came up with a magnificent, glorious idea and gave us time in addition to giving us light.