



# Harat Olam

In the Rosh Hashanah prayers, we say הַיּוֹם הָרַת עוֹלָם. This is often translated as “today is the birthday of the world.” This is based on the idea that the world was created (or Man was created) on the first day of the month of Tishrei.

Yet there is a difficulty with this translation. The verb הָרָה does not mean “to give birth,” but rather “to conceive.” (From the same root we get the words הָרִיּוֹן – “pregnancy” and *horim* הוֹרִים – “parents.”) So should the phrase be translated as “the day the world was conceived”? What would that refer to?

This actually goes back to a debate in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 10b). Rabbi Eliezer says the world was created in Tishrei. Rabbi Yehoshua disagrees and says the world was created six months earlier (or later) in the month of Nissan. These two opinions are reconciled by Rabbeinu Tam (cited by Tosafot on Rosh Hashanah 27a), who says that in Tishrei G-d decided to create the world (i.e. the idea was conceived), and six months later, in Nissan, the world was created. Nissan is in the

spring, when nature is renewed, which is a fitting time to reenact the creation of the world.

Why then do we focus on the creation of the world on Rosh Hashanah (certainly more so than we do in Nissan)? Perhaps to emphasize the centrality of intent. As important as the final results are, what gives them significance is the original intent. *סוף מעשה במחשבה תחלה* – “the final action was [determined] by the original thought.” In a period when we are occupied with repentance, our focus needs to be on our proper intent and thoughts, so our actions will reflect those original considerations.

However, this is not the only word in the phrase whose meaning has been understood differently over time.

The phrase הַרַת עוֹלָם was first used by the prophet Jeremiah: *אֲשֶׁר לֹא מוֹתַתֵּנִי מִרְחֹם וְתָהִי לִי אִמִּי קִבְרִי וְרִחְמָה הָרַת עוֹלָם*, “Because he did not kill me before birth, so that my mother might be my grave, and her womb pregnant forever” (Jeremiah 20:17).

We’ve already noted that הָרַת means “pregnant.” But in this verse, *עוֹלָם* does not mean “world,” but rather “forever.” That is the meaning throughout the entire Bible – it consistently means “eternity” or “always.” In this way, it is related to the word for “hidden” – *נֶעְלָם* – meaning, “the hidden, unknown time.”

So how did it come to mean “world,” which is the most common usage in Modern

Hebrew? Apparently, between the meanings “eternity” and “world,” there was a middle stage, where it meant “age” or “era.” This sense is still preserved in the phrases *עוֹלָם הַזֶּה* and *עוֹלָם הַבָּא*, meaning “this age” or “the age to come” respectively. They refer to either the current time we are living in or a future time which in some way will be very different.

Those two eras are so different that they could be understood to be entirely different worlds – in fact, a more common translation for those phrases is “this world” and “the world to come.”

From the Rabbinic period onward, *עוֹלָם* came to generally mean “world,” and biblical phrases like *הָרַת עוֹלָם* were adapted to this new meaning. Another example can be found in Jeremiah 10:10, which describes G-d as *מֶלֶךְ עוֹלָם*. In the biblical context, that meant “the everlasting King.” But when it was adopted into the formula of Jewish blessings, it became “King of the World.”

On Rosh Hashanah, we profess that G-d is “King of the World.” Of course, by recalling the original creation, we acknowledge that G-d’s reign is eternal as well. For us humans, the distinctions between space and time are difficult to bridge. G-d, however, is above both time and space, so the word *עוֹלָם* applies to Him in both of its meanings.

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