



A Song of Rising Up

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In the beginning, God lifted the world out of chaos.

The Torah paints a dramatic scene. A wasteland. A darkness covering the surface of the *tehom*, the great depths. God sweeping over the face of the water. Out of this expanse of nothingness, God creates something. God creates order.

בראשית א:ג-ד

³וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יְהי אוֹר וַיְהי אוֹר: ⁴וַיַּרְא אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאוֹר כִּי טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹקִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:

Bereishit 1:3-4

³God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.

God’s early acts of creation are all about order and separation. God delineates the light from the dark, the waters above from the waters below, dry land from wet. Creative act after



creative act, the world moves from a barren wasteland toward something that makes sense, where different opposing forces are held separate from one another.

This newly ordered world is capable of sustaining life. There will be those who live on land and those who live in the sea. Those who eat of the grasses and those who eat flesh. In the new order, there is a definition and clarity that makes life possible.

Yet we know that it is a fragile order. Everything is not held quite as separate as we might like. Sometimes the waters of the sea spill over onto the land and the waters of the heavens pour down to the water below. Sometimes light eclipses into dark and darkness blots out the light. This is the stuff of apocalyptic visions in the Prophets, but it's also the reality of the natural world. The world exists in a tentative balance that is always in danger of becoming imbalanced. Alongside that neatly divided cosmos of light and dark, the waters above and below, is the *tehom*, a great and watery deep that is always, barely, held at bay. The *tehom*, the mysterious, chaotic waters upon which God founded the earth, threaten to break free, lower waters once again crashing into upper waters, our very ordered and secure existence at stake.

In Psalm 42, the psalmist cries out to God, his soul downcast. He thinks of God in the place of the Jordan and Hermon, “where *tehom* calls to *tehom*”—where deep calls deep.

Tehillim 42:8

Where deep calls to deep

תהלים מב:ח

תְּהוֹם אֶל תְּהוֹם קוֹרָא



in the roar of Your channels;
all Your breakers and billows
have swept over me.

לְקוֹל צְנוּרֶיךָ
כָּל מִשְׁבָּרֶיךָ וְגִלְיֶיךָ
עָלֵי עֶבְרִי:

The Psalmist stands in the midst of roaring water. The breakers and billows submerge him and crash down upon him. *Tehom* calls to *tehom*. It's as if he is caught in the middle of a conversation between two depths, one *tehom* longing to reunite and crash back together with another, the primordial waters held at bay since creation longing to once again reunite.

Sometimes we are most aware that we stand on dry land, feeling the divine gift of security and safety, in a world of order and delineation. But at other times, another truth comes flooding over us, because one *tehom* is always calling to another. They are pulling, longing to crash back together. At any moment, this order can break down and reveal the fragility at the center of our human existence.

A story in the Talmud Yerushalmi imagines King David digging deep into the core of the earth, preparing the foundations for the Beit ha-Mikdash (the Temple).¹ The Talmud teaches that, even though David dug 1,500 cubits, he still hadn't reached the *tehom*. Perhaps David wanted to reach the very depths upon which God had ordered creation. Perhaps he wanted his creation, the great Temple, to be anchored to these same depths. Instead, however, the Talmud tells us, all he found was a single teapot. He sought to throw it. Maybe he wanted to throw it in frustration; he had been searching for the great and mysterious *tehom* of creation and all he found was a piece of pottery, made to contain the smallest, most domesticated

¹ Talmud Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:2 (29a).

waters imaginable. Maybe he thought the pottery was debris that would disrupt the foundation of the Temple. Regardless, the teapot talks back to him. It says, “You can’t throw me.” David asks, “Why?” It answers, “I’m here to hold down the *tehom*.”

The great *tehom*, the watery depths that have been held at bay since creation, are held back by no more than a teapot!? We may have known God’s order was a fragile one, but there is something stunning and destabilizing about its talmudic depiction. Were David to remove this one teapot, the great depths would rise up and destroy the world.

David doesn’t buy it. He ignores the teapot, as perhaps any of us would. He throws it away—and immediately the *tehom* begins to rise up, threatening to flood the world. How does he stabilize it? What causes the waters to subside, returning us to safety and security? He sings. He sings the fifteen psalms that begin with the words Shir ha-Ma’alot, songs of rising up, and “with every song he sang, the *tehom* receded back to its original position.”

We’re going to encounter a lot in our Torah this year. In just one *parashah*, we’re going to see a world nearly destroyed and a world rebuilt. We will see families that come together and fall apart and find their way back together again. We will see a people go into exile, suffer under oppression, and come out newly formed, with a God and a covenant. There will be order and disorder. There will be building and breaking, some by God and some by human beings. And underneath it all, there will be the *tehom*, held at bay, threatening to rise up.

It can be difficult to face the utter fragility of our existence. We have seen in recent years how quickly a pandemic, a war, can shatter everything we know about the world. But we continue



to move forward—to build, to grow, knowing all the while that things can come undone, the world can fall apart. We keep going. Because somewhere in the thrilling and terrifying mixture of order and chaos that is our world, God has positioned a teapot that is working hard to keep the *tehom* in its place—and if and when it does break free, we will be there with a song of rising up to sing it back into place.

