

CLAY in the Potter's Hands: Human Evolution in a Self-Creating World

A Jewish perspective



by BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON

In the waning days of the kingdom of Judah, surrounded by enemies intending to attack, corrupted from within by a lack of will, a lack of clarity, a lack of identity, the prophet Jeremiah addressed the people of Israel time and again, calling us back to who we are meant to be. On one occasion he says,

Then I went down to the potter's house, and found him working at the wheel. And if the vessel he was making was spoiled, as happens to clay in the potter's hands, he would make it into another vessel, such as the potter saw fit to make. Then the word of the Holy One came to me, 'O House of Israel, can I not deal with you like this potter?' says the Holy One. 'Just like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.'"

These famous lines of the prophet Jeremiah make their way as a poem (*piyut*) into the Rosh Ha-Shanah *Mahzor*, "As clay in the hand of the potter who thickens or thins it at will, so are we in Your hand, O God of love. Recall your covenant and show Your mercy.

In the course of this *piyut*, we, the Jewish people, will be compared to clay, to stone, to iron, to glass, to cloth, and to silver. I would argue that this *piyut* has been misunderstood more than almost other poetic image in the *Mahzor*. The way most commentaries speak about it, we are completely inert and absolutely in God's control. God molds us according to absolute will, untrammelled coercive power, and we are simply the passive recipients of God's might, omniscience, total knowledge and force.

However ubiquitous it may be, this interpretation is wrong, scientifically and religiously.

The wisdom of every thing

Anybody who has worked with clay knows there are things you can do with clay, and there are things the clay will not let you do. Anyone who has worked with cloth, or with metal, or with jewelry, knows that the matter you are doing your work with, constrains the results you are able to achieve. The material has, if you will, its own *hokhmah*, its own wisdom. And what you work in creates a partnership with you. We do not like to think of our interactions like that; we like to think that when we do something we are in control. How many of you can guarantee that your brisket turns out perfectly every time? Obviously, it has a mind of its own, as does the oven, as does the material you work with. How much the more so then, when it comes to living beings? If the clay has its own property which it embodies in the world uniquely, how much the more so human beings, or any of God's creatures?

What this amazing *piyut* is telling us, then, is that God kneads clay as *clay*, mindful of clay's nature, working through and with that distinctive way of being. And God works with metal appropriately for metal, mindful of its metallic nature. And God needs us, and works with each of us, and all of us, in our uniqueness, as we each are. This poem does not portray oppressive domination. It is not about an all-powerful God and wormlike human beings to be ruthlessly crushed at divine will. We call God in this very poem a "God of love." Love is when you know someone well enough that you know what it is they need highlighted; when you know how to coax them into something truly magnificent. A great potter is not

someone who crushes the clay; a great potter intuits the clay into magnificent functional art. And so this poem, and the liturgy we recite on this holiest of days is really a song about God's uncanny ability to know us from the inside; to know what we can bear and what we cannot; to know what are our strengths and what are our needs; and to urge us, to invite us, to take the next step into our own becoming, our own greatness: *La-brit habet*, look to the covenant. What is the covenant if not a relationship between two responsive individuals? If one crushes the other, that is not a *brit*, that is a *milchamah*, a war! Life is not about God attempting to conquer us. Life is about God calling us into relationship.

We are who we are

So the message for us is very simple: we are nothing less than who we are! Each one of us—clay in God's hands—is unique and different from each and every other one of us. And it is God's greatness to recognize our uniqueness. And it is our frailty to forget. So we all assume that every one is just like us, and if they are not, that they should be. But it's not true; other people are not simply duplicates of each other. Some are clay, and some are wood, and some are stone, and some are precious jewels. And every one of them is worthy in their own unique way.

Everything that comes into the world brings novelty into the world; brings something that has never before been seen.

Let's start with the first great novelty—14 billion years ago, with the world exploding into existence at the very moment of the Big Bang. For the first 2 billion years, all there was, as the Torah tells us, all there was, was light; all there was, was energy. We are the product of that light. Out of the Big Bang came only two elements—hydrogen and helium. That is all that was created at the beginning! These two elements each brought its own *hokhmah*, its own way of reacting into the world. As they collided and mixed, collided and mixed and congealed, they formed intense burning fireball stars. After two billion years of darkness, the entire cosmos turned on, and there was

light everywhere. The cosmos was expanding at an unprecedented rate as these stars lit up the night sky for the first time ever.

And then, as if that illumination were not miraculous enough, some of these stars became so overheated, so big, so dense, that they collapsed in on themselves, exploding out into the world material that had never before existed: Nitrogen and carbon, and all sorts of elements of complexity that had never previously existed, that spit out into the sky and ultimately make possible me and you. We would not exist without carbon; we would not exist without iron. We would not exist without these elements that were not created in the beginning. If God's work had stopped in the first moment, we would not be here. But God's creation is a continuing creation, an unceasing creation. So round 2, is the explosion of the supernovae that donated themselves to life; that give of themselves to the cosmos.

Then, more miraculous yet, billions of years later, in one of these swirling galaxies, on one of its outermost rings, is a star of just the right size, just the right density, just the right heat. And around it, a circle of dust keeps going around and around, and gradually the particles of exploded stardust gather into little balls—those little balls becoming the planets of our solar system.

And on one very lucky planet, the third rock from the sun, there is pervasive thunder and lightning. But not lightning like you and I see today. The lightning of ten billion years ago is a lightning that is constant and everywhere! The entire earth is nothing but molten heat that spits up to the surface, hardens into rock and dives back down, so that—unique on any planet—the heavier elements do not remain buried in the core, they ascend to the surface; they mix with the air and the planet's crust. And in that lightning/water/frothy mix, life emerges. Do you know what powers our consciousness? We are packets of lightning. Our nervous systems are electrical systems. The flash of lightning that burst into life, bursts inside of you at this moment. I am writing words thanks to bottled lightning. And you understand me for the same reason, because this essay—you can share with others—this essay is electric!

And it is God's greatness to recognize our uniqueness. And it is our frailty to forget.

Little packets of channeled lightning start to mingle and mix, and we have been mingling and mixing every since.

And then, as if that were not miracle enough, these little packets of lightning—without prior organization or planning—they learn how to take other matter in and use it to build their own continuity. Life learns to eat. Life learns to digest life. Life learns to grow by building more life, and the miracles continue as cells learn how to convey information. (We are not the first to do it: there was instant messaging 10 million years ago! That is what genetics is all about; the ability of one cell to tell another cell what to do.) And so cells master the capacity to convey information. We get some backbone in ourselves, and then we do something astonishing, unprecedented: We leave our mother, the ocean.

I told you before that you are portable lightning, but that is not the whole story. You are also portable bags of ocean; the saline solution of your blood is closer to the content of ocean water than you might care to know. We are living, walking puddles of ocean, powered by lightning. In our bodies, in our self, is the entire story of the universe's creation. You yourselves contain the energy of the Big Bang, the primordial lightning out of which life emerged, the salty life-giving mix of the sea, the sociabil-

ity of primates—all of that millennial history is in you, in each of us. All of creation is in each of us.

Paul Valéry says, “The universe is built on a plan, the profound symmetry of which is somehow present in the inner structure of our own intellect.” Our minds, our bodies, our emotions, our way of being in the world, are the universe itself organized into consciousness. Or, the universe organizing itself and erupting into consciousness.

Prepared for the world from the beginning

So here is what I want to remind us: We have everything we need for the journey. We are already packed. In fact, the packing has been done for us!

Picture, if you will, our cousin, the bear. Picture specifically a mother bear in the dead of winter asleep in her lair, under a layer of ice and snow. And inside the warmth of her body, picture little bear twins waiting to be born. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry remind us in [The Universe Story](#) that inside their mother's womb, those baby bears have paws that already know how salmon swim. Those paws have been shaped, sculpted and caressed by millions of years of development, so that when that cub is born, he already has the feel of salmon at the end of his paws. He has been honed over millions of years, so

Praying for the coming of the Messiah . . .

Consider an odd aspect of Jewish belief and eternity: we pray in the *Machzor* and elsewhere for the coming of the Messiah. We say in the *Ani Ma'amin*, “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah.” Notice that it does not say, “I believe in the Messiah.” What we Jews pledge allegiance to is not belief in the Messiah, but we must believe in the coming of the Messiah. But here's the catch: a Messiah, to be coming, can never arrive. Once the Messiah arrives, he is no longer coming. At that point one could no longer believe in his coming. But Jewish beliefs are timeless affirmations. God is always One, the Torah was given to Moses—these beliefs do not become false over time. So if we are to believe in the eternal coming of the Messiah, then the Messiah must be eternally on the way. Because we know that the Messiah is always on the way (hence, never arriving), our job is to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah, doing what it takes to make the world that much more messianic. We must engage in acts of justice and compassion so that even though the arrival is never completed, the work of the Messiah is advanced, a world with somewhat greater justice; somewhat greater compassion; somewhat greater inclusion; somewhat greater welcome.

A Messiah always on the way reminds us of our goals and aspirations, but it is up to us to work for justice.

that his fur already knows the feeling of the first snows, and of autumn air turning crisp and cold and the time to sleep. His sister's tongue, never yet in the world, is already

*We have been walking and wandering ever since—
little portable bags of ocean powered by lightning.*

a tongue that tastes the sweetness of berries; that knows what it is like to have fruit juice dripping down her chin. Those bear cubs have never yet been in the world, and yet they have everything they need for the journey. And so do you.

In our mother's womb, we also were equipped with everything we need. God is indeed like a potter, but not a tyrant. God is a loving potter who has fashioned us across hundreds of millions of years, so that by the time we reach this world, the moment we come into this world, we already emerge social, curious, interested, connected, outraged by injustice, delighted by joy. We do not teach babies to smile at a smile; they remind us to smile! We carry in our very bodies our cosmic and evolutionary history.

Years and years ago, our ancestors decided, not with their minds, but with their bodies, that human beings would have unusually large brains. And this collective choice has made all the difference. Creatures with crania the size of ours have to be born early. One cannot carry such babies to term; their heads are too big. But if they are going to be born early, and their heads are going to be that big, then one needs a certain voluptuous wide hip among their females. And, we are going to need a certain protective machismo among the men, because those women are going to get stuck holding those babies for an awful long time! Our ancient ancestors' bodies adapted, exaggerating the gender differences that existed in other primates, so that men would be protective dads, and women would be resilient mothers.

With those babies in our arms, we stood up so that we could scan the distance. And that standing up made all the difference. Not just backaches, but it developed for us the need and the ability to walk the long distances that we did. We walked out of Eastern Africa; we walked into the

Middle East; we walked over to Asia; we hoofed it over to Europe; we even made it by way of Russia into Alaska and down into the new world. We have been walking and wandering ever since—little portable bags of ocean powered by lightning.

So this day, and every day, do not be depressed. This moment is not sad. This is a day for us to remember that we have been given everything we need. We do not have to work on it or for it; it is already in us. It is us. We have it. The prophet Jeremiah, conveying God's words, says to us, "Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you; and before you came forth out of the womb I sanctified you." We have been sanctified by God over billions of years, through miracle upon miracle; by fortuitous and unlikely chance that has led to this moment, right now. Astonishing! I want you this very moment to exult in joy; to celebrate the crescendo of the cosmos that is us, that pulses through us, to celebrate it in each other, in who we have become, in what our promises are.

We have everything we need. This is not a time for mourning. This is not a season for fear. We are in the hands of a potter who seeks to understand us well enough to let us become the glorious pottery we actually are.

I close with the words of the poet, Denise Levertov:

*A certain day became a presence to me;
there is, was, confronting me—a sky, air, light:
a being. And before it started to descend
from the height of noon, it leaned over
and struck my shoulder as if with
the flat of a sword, granting me
honor and a task. The day's blow
rang out metallic—or was it I, a bell awakened,
and what I heard was my whole self
saying and singing what it knew: I can.*

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