If you ask a child to draw a symbol of Rosh Hashanah, it’s likely that he or she will hand you a picture of a shofar or apples and honey. If you ask an adult to draw the same picture, maybe you’ll get something more abstract: a mirror, as a symbol of self-reflection; two people hugging, as a symbol of forgiveness; or they might even leave the page blank, as a symbol of a fresh start. But if you were to ask the many generations of rabbis who compiled our High Holiday prayer book to draw the symbols of Rosh Hashanah, you’d wind up with a book full of pictures of parents and their children.

Study the Rosh Hashanah prayer book and you’ll find that the image of the parent-child relationship is everywhere. We read in the Torah and haftarah four stories about parents and their children. We stand before the ark and call God Avinu, our loving parent, and refer to ourselves as banecha, God’s children. Our tradition says that Rosh Hashanah corresponds to the Sixth Day of Creation—the day that humankind was born. We don’t have to be biblical literalists to understand the significance of that statement. In the evolutionary history of our planet, the emergence of humanity represents a momentous shift. Rosh Hashanah celebrates that shift, and calls it “the birthday of humanity”—the day that God became a parent.

This Rosh Hashanah, I find that I’m especially attuned to images in our prayer book of parents and children—because this year, in addition to celebrating my first Rosh Hashanah here at WRT, I am also marking my first Rosh Hashanah as a parent.

As both a rabbi and a parent, I wonder how God might have felt on that Sixth Day of Creation, in that moment of evolutionary history when human life first emerged. I wonder if God might have felt the way that I felt when I first held my child.

This evening, I’d like to paint a new picture of Rosh Hashanah, in the form of an original midrash—a legend about the day that Humanity was born, the day that God became a parent.

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1 Delivered at Westchester Reform Temple on Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777. For Gavi.
3 See, for example, in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy: Avinu Malkeinu and Hayom Harat Olam. In the Yom Kippur Liturgy: Ki Anu Amecha and K’racheim Av. Also others.
4 See Pesikta d’Rav Kahana 23:1
It was the Sixth Day of Creation, and God was beginning to despair of this whole “universe” project. The animals and plants and oceans and stars were all nice enough to look at, but they showed no concern for one another. Galaxies crashed into galaxies without remorse; the animals cared only about the survival of the fittest. And God, who had created every species with love and care, began to worry that the universe might collapse on its own indifference. God needed a partner, one who could show concern for the world beyond itself. And so God said: “Let us make humankind in our image.”

And on that day—which we Jews commemorate as Rosh Hashanah—Baby Humanity was born, and God became a parent.

The first time that Baby Humanity blinked open its eyes, God—who had always had a way with words, who had created entire solar systems simply by saying, “Let there be”—for the first time, God was speechless. With no words to speak, no new thing was created. And so God rested—the first Shabbat.

If resting was new to God, then the whole world was new to Baby Humanity. We had never seen light before, never breathed air, never felt the warm touch of skin. The world was a marvel and we loved living in it.

But then, the sun went down: Baby Humanity’s first night. The world grew dark, and cold. And God—who had, only minutes before, held us in a safe embrace—suddenly, our loving parent seemed far away. Humanity felt afraid. And so we began to cry.

God didn’t know what to do. This was uncharted territory. First, God tried to reason with Humanity, to explain that the sun would come up again in the morning. This didn’t work. Then, God tried to soothe us, to rock us gently and whisper, “hush.” This worked better. But it was only a few minutes before the wailing started up again.

God started to get frustrated. Why wouldn’t Humanity just be quiet already? Then, the frustration gave way to feelings of failure. It was God, after all, who had created this world. What kind of irresponsible person would bring a child here, where the sun goes down at night, where darkness and the cold are inevitable?

The crying lasted all night long—on again, off again—God trying everything to get Humanity to sleep. After several hours, God finally walked away. We would have to fuss it out for ourselves. God listened, heartbroken, as we cried and cried, until our voice grew sore and our eyes grew dry, and we whimpered ourselves off to sleep.

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5 Genesis 1:26
6 Genesis 1:3 and others
7 Genesis 2:2
8 For a similar midrash, see Genesis Rabbah 11:2
God never forgot that night. For God, who was used to feeling omnipotent, it was a humbling experience.

Humanity also never forgot that night. It’s one of our earliest memories. It would come to us often, later in life, when bad things happened to us for no apparent reason. “Where were you, God?” we would ask. The question would puzzle us forever.

This broke God’s heart. After all, God had done everything God could do. But like all parents, God couldn’t take away our pain.

Of course, there were many joyful moments, too. Baby Humanity used to love to reach up and try to touch God’s face. Our baby arms were never quite long enough, but our loving parent was only ever inches beyond our grasp. It was like a game: trying to reach for what was unreachable. We called this game “religion.”

Humanity began to grow, as babies tend to do: first, into a toddler, and then, a child. And as we got bigger, we grew less and less interested in that old game of trying to reach up and touch God’s face, more and more intrigued by the world around us. We wanted to know the names of all the animals, the taste of every kind of fruit. Of course, this was what God had always wanted: a child who would show concern for the world, who could see its many beauties and its many flaws. But nevertheless, God missed being the center of our attention. How could it be that Humanity was already growing up so fast?

God realized that Humanity would someday, inevitably, go off and venture out on our own. And so, God decided to start equipping us with all the rules and instructions we would need to make our way in the world—“commandments,” as God called them. Some of these were clear and simple: “You shall not murder.” “You shall not steal.” Others were easy to understand, but hard to do: “You shall not bear a grudge.” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Of course, it would be many more years before God would learn one of the hardest parenting lessons of God’s life: that even the clearest of rules are liable to be broken. But nevertheless, in those early years of Humanity’s childhood, God trusted that these rules would guide us as we began to explore the world.

And oh, how God loved to watch us explore. As is the case with many parents, it was God’s greatest joy to see how we were reflections of God’s own self—not because we looked like God, but because we acted like God. On good days, we took only what we needed, shared our gifts with others, and cleaned up after ourselves. In these

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9 For a parallel image, see Exodus 33:20
10 For a similar midrash, see Genesis Rabbah 17:4
11 See Genesis 3:6
12 Exodus 20:12
13 Leviticus 19:18
moments, God knew that God had instructed us well, and felt proud to be raising such responsible children. Even on our harder days, when we didn’t get what we wanted, or when we had to part with something that we loved, God could see God’s self in us. We didn’t realize this as children, but God, too, had known loss and disappointment—loss when one species wiped out another, disappointment that the universe had its flaws. We had not realized that even God, our loving parent, was not perfect. But God knew it. And in us, God saw a child—and soon, a young adult—created in God’s image.

But here comes the part of the story that hurts. Because in all good stories—as in life—things break.

There came a time, as there often does, when what our parent wanted clashed with what we wanted. All those rules that God had created to guide and protect us now seemed to us to be blocking our free exploration. God had created an interesting world, and we wanted to see it all, beyond the boundaries of all those “You shalls” and “You shall nots.” And so—without malice, but nevertheless, knowingly—we broke one of our parent’s beloved rules.

Which rule Humanity broke, I can’t quite say. But I know which rule I broke. And I’m sure that if you think about it now, you’ll remember which rule you broke too.

Of course, God found out. It nearly broke our loving parent’s heart. “We didn’t mean to hurt You,” we tried to explain. “We weren’t a little kid any more. We wanted to make our own decisions.”

But God didn’t understand this—at least not yet. From God’s point of view, the rules were the rules. They were there to keep us safe, to help us take care of ourselves and the world. By breaking the rules, we had broken God’s trust.

“Trust us to live without the rules!” we argued. But God would have none of it.

For many days, God wouldn’t speak to Humanity. At the end of a week, God slipped a note under Humanity’s door. We unfolded it. Written in big block letters, as if they were chiseled in stone, the note read: “You shall honor your parent.”

This made us furious. We wouldn’t let ourselves be controlled. If God didn’t want us break the rules, then God shouldn’t have given us free will. We sunk our teeth in deeper. We raged; we rebelled; we mutinied. For many of us, it would be years before we spoke to God again.

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14 Exodus 20:11
Were it not Rosh Hashanah, our story might end here. But our High Holiday prayer book is full of images of parents and their children for a reason. The prayer book is trying to remind us that the parent-child relationship is one in which forgiveness is always possible.

Forgiveness is always possible because to be someone’s parent or to be someone’s child is an unconditional relationship—not in terms of love, but in terms of role. No matter what happens to any of us, we are always—irrevocably, and by definition—our parents’ children.

Our relationship may fracture: by death or by estrangement, by neglect or abuse. But there is always the opportunity for repair. That might mean an actual reconciliation. Or, when that’s not possible, repair might mean forgiving our parent or child not for what they did to us, but rather for who they are.

In an unconditional relationship, forgiveness is always possible. And this is why on Rosh Hashanah we call God Avinu, our loving parent.

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So how does our story end?

It’s been years since that last big fight. For many of us, we haven’t spoken to God since. But in the intervening years, God has established a tradition, and God sticks to it every year, no matter the state of our relationship. Every year, on Humanity’s birthday—which just so happens to be tonight—God goes up into the attic and finds the dusty old box of memories with our name written on the lid. God brushes off the cobwebs, removes the lid, and starts rummaging through the mementos: a photo of Humanity on the day that we were born; a picture we had drawn; even that note, now crumpled and faded, on which God had written “You shall honor your parent.”

Once, on Rosh Hashanah, we thought we heard footsteps in the attic, the floorboards creaking above our heads. We looked up, searching for the source of that sound. And in an instant, we remembered that old game we used to love so much as children, when we used to reach up and try to touch God’s face.

As if by reflex, we cried out: “Avinu! Is that you?”

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15 See the chapter called “Father” in Jack Miles’s God: A Biography. In the classical sources, see Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:24.
17 See the “book of memories” referred to in Un’taneh tokef
And although we heard no audible reply, something deep within told us that just as we were down here remembering God, God was up there in the attic, remembering us.