



SERMON ROSH HASHANAH: THE MIRACLES OF OUR LIVES

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Tuesday 23 September 2025
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

*You elders stare at me, amazed.
That I'm a thing unprecedented you avow.
But don't you know: the day God made the sun,
it shone as brightly as it does right now?*

[1] Another poemⁱ by the 11th-century Spanish poet Solomon ibn-Gabirol.

[2] So much of Judaism is about the veneration of history. We recite, almost revere, the names of our ancestors multiple times in each service. Our prayers refer endlessly to favours God did for the Israelites of old. We hark back to the wonders of Creation. We memorialise the yahrzeits of loved ones. We commemorate the Sho'ah. We mark our congregational anniversaries.

[3] To be the living souls at the end of this lineage – to be the generations who comprise the current Jewish people – can be powerful and meaningful. But it can also be daunting and even intimidating. Moses might seem like a tough act to follow. The achievements of those who came before, and their extraordinary survival against all the odds, may give us a sense of gratitude but it may also give us a sense of lowliness.

[4] There is a concept in Judaism known as *ירידת הדורות*, 'the decline of the generations'. Particularly prevalent in Orthodox Jewish approaches to law, *ירידת הדורות* means that we are intrinsically inferior, in every way, to those who went before. The further we get from those who had direct concourse with God, the further we get from the

ⁱ Translation from Raymond P Scheindlin, *Vulture in a Cage: poems by Solomon ibn-Gabirol* (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2016), 4-5.

revelation at Sinai, the more our spiritual, intellectual and moral faculties are dulled. For example, the Talmud remarks:ⁱⁱ

If the early generations were like the offspring of angels, we are mere humans. And if the early generations were mere humans, we are but donkeys. And not ... hyper-intelligent donkeys ... but ordinary donkeys!

(It's probably important to stress that this passage, in which humanity becomes dull-witted donkeys over time, was written before Darwin invented evolution.)

[5] This sense of inferiority is often used as an excuse for 'keeping things the same'. Orthodox women wanting a divorce without their husbands' consent, for example? Well, obviously, leading Orthodox rabbis could simply issue a decree permitting this, but lucky them, they can rely on the principle of ירידת הדורות to defend their failure to act.ⁱⁱⁱ 'If the generation of Rabbi Akiva couldn't solve this problem,' they say, 'would it not be the height of overconfident arrogance for us to purport to do so?'

[6] Of course, there is an obvious counterargument here. Think about science instead of religion. Those who had the opportunity to learn about evolution from the mouth of Darwin were, without a doubt, greatly privileged, but would we think for a moment that our own generation is scientifically inferior to theirs because of our distance from him? On the contrary, 21st-century biological knowledge is vastly, vastly superior to that of Darwin, because we know what he knew, plus we know everything that's been discovered since. The Rid, a rabbi in 13th-century Italy, put it neatly:^{iv}

Who sees further, a dwarf or a giant? Surely, [you would say] a giant, whose eyes are higher than those of the dwarf's. But if you place the dwarf upon the giant's shoulders, who sees further? Surely, the dwarf, whose eyes are now higher than the giant's. So it is with us: we are dwarves mounted upon the shoulders of giants, for we have seen their wisdom and add to it.

[7] So we also find traces, in the Jewish tradition, of a narrative which is the opposite of ירידת הדורות. עלית הדורות, 'the ascent of the generations'

ⁱⁱ b. Shabbat 112b

ⁱⁱⁱ See eg Rabbi Josh Levy, "Jewish originalism or living Judaism", Alyth (7 May 2022): <<https://perma.cc/C2S6-SA6B>>

^{iv} See eg Rabbi Josh Levy, "Jewish originalism or living Judaism", Alyth (7 May 2022): <<https://perma.cc/C2S6-SA6B>>



– or ‘enhancement’ – is explained by Dr Tamar Ron Marvin: *“This perspective does not diminish the stature of earlier generations, but rather sees the past as processive and progressive, building towards a higher spiritual level.”*^v

[8] In theological terms, the argument for עליית הדורות, as set out by Chassidic thinkers, points out that, while we may be further from the revelation at Sinai – the beginning of Judaism – we are closer to the end-point, a messianic age.^{vi}

[9] These two notions, while inherently contradictory, coexist somewhat companionably in Judaism. And never more so than at Rosh Hashanah. Up and down. Future and past. Forwards and backwards. Next year and last year.

[10] This coexistence between what has been and what will be is highlighted beautifully by Solomon ibn-Gabriel’s poem: *“The day God made the sun, it shone as brightly as it does right now.”*

[11] What is the poet trying to say? Firstly, there are some constants. The sun which was responsible for this summer’s heatwaves is the same sun that dappled the conference room at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art as the Israeli Declaration of Independence was signed; the same sun that illuminated the shores of Sussex when the first Jews arrived in England after the Norman conquest; the same sun that scorched the backs of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt; the same sun that appeared in Joseph’s dream. No matter how filled with change our world seems to be, no matter how distant we feel from our people’s past, we live under the same sun all our days – and it shines just as brightly as it did for our ancestors.

[12] Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the miracles of Creation are a continual and ongoing process. Advocates of ירידת הדורות, of the decline of the generations, are wrong to assert that we are remote from the time when God had direct interactions with humanity and that our faculties are spiritually blunted by this detachment. On the contrary, we are all personal witnesses to the glory of Creation. The glory of Creation is literally streaming into this room right now. (I

^v Tamar Ron Marvin, “On building a better world: the tension in Jewish thought between yeridat ha-dorot and aliyat ha-dorot”, Lerhaus (27 February 2023): <<https://perma.cc/W88E-MNQN>>

^{vi} Midrash Pinchas: Bilgoraj edition vol 1 p 82



wrote this in July which was, I accept, a bit of a gamble as to whether or not the sun would be streaming in here in September.)

[13] This, in turn, can remind us to celebrate the other miracles in our lives. Miracles don't have to be astronomical in scale – the sun and the sea – nor do they have to be supernatural. Our ability to gather here in safety and freedom, and in such large numbers (again, I wrote this in advance, hoping I wouldn't end up speaking to an empty room), that too is a miracle, the splendour of which is not to be dampened by the background antisemitism which we know exists in society. Our continued existence is a miracle. Our families are miracles. Our friends are miracles. Our bodies are miracles, and the vaccines and medicines and doctors and crops and reservoirs and sewage plants and refuse collectors and police and firefighters and teachers and carers that have sustained us are miracles.

[14] Rosh Hashanah is a time to remember all of these, to give thanks, and to be grateful for our lot. שנה טובה, and may the new year, whatever it brings, continue the miracles of our lives.

