

Erev Rosh ha-Shana Drasha

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Those of you who have studied Hebrew may know that there is no present tense of the verb “to be” in the language. It appears plenty of times in the past tense, and lots of times in the future, but there just isn’t a true Hebrew equivalent to “I am”, “We are”, “She is”. Is it any wonder then, why is it so difficult for many of us to live in the present, to be completely here right now? Jews are great at looking backward. This time of year, we look back at our past actions and try to repent for the bad ones. We look back to our ancestors - both ancient and not-so-ancient, and try to connect our stories with their own. As rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “we are a people in whom the past endures.” We are also pretty good at looking ahead. We glance at the calendar and wonder whether Chanuka will be early or late this year. We speak about the coming of a messianic age that surely will arrive someday. In Aleinu, we sing “*ba-yom ha-hu/on that day*” God will be One and God’s name will be One. But not today. Maybe tomorrow. Or the day after. But looking at ourselves right now, in this moment, that’s pretty hard for us. There is no way in Hebrew to say “I am”.

Tomorrow morning, we will hear the traditional Torah reading for the first day of Rosh ha-Shana, which comes from Genesis 21. In this

passage, Sara and Abraham have been blessed with a son for whom they so deeply yearned, Isaac. But this was not Abraham's first son. He previously fathered a child, Ishmael, with Sara's handmaid, Hagar. Once Isaac is in the picture, Sara wishes for Hagar and Ishmael to be banished from their home, which is indeed the troubling action that Abraham takes. Hagar and Ishmael are sent out into the arid desert wilderness with some provisions, but disaster befalls them. Thrown out of her home, Hagar wanders in the wilderness, not knowing where to go or how to keep her child and herself alive. The water runs out and death seems to be around the corner. We learn: Hagar leaves Ishmael under a bush and sits down at a distance so that she does not have to watch as her child dies of thirst. She cries, and an angel of God speaks: "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy *ba-asher hu sham*/where he is."

God's angel opens Hagar's eyes and shows her a well. They survive their ordeal, and Ishmael becomes a great nation. This nation, though will become a terrible enemy of the Israelites. And so, we are left to wonder, should God have saved Ishmael? Wouldn't it have been better for the Jews if Ishmael had died in the in the desert, and the Jewish people would have had one less nation seeking our destruction?

The text itself offers an answer. It tells us that God hears the cry of the boy "*ba-asher hu sham*/where he is."

Drawing on classic Midrash, the prolific medieval commentator, Rashi, explains this particular phrasing as follows: According to the actions he is now doing shall he be judged and not according to what he may do in future. Because the ministering angels laid information against him, saying, "Master of the Universe, for him whose descendants will at one time kill your children with thirst will You provide a well?" God asked them, "What is he now, righteous or wicked?" They replied to God, "Righteous." God said to them, "According to his present deeds will I judge him."

Ishmael the innocent child was not in that moment Ishmael the wicked enemy of the Israelites. And so, he was judged to be worthy of saving, no matter what he might become or bring into the world later on. This, too, is how our tradition envisions our own judgment during these High Holy Days. Not by who we have been in past versions of ourselves, not by what we hope to be. We are judged by who we are at this very moment, at the beginning of the year 5782.

Whether guilty or innocent, whether or not that will change in the future, this text teaches us that God only looks at who a person is at present, and judges them accordingly. Like Ishmael, we are seen as we are now - innocent and guilty, worthy and flawed. This seems somewhat contradictory with the way we usually think about the purpose of this time of year. We look back at our past deeds and ideally, we repent for them. We look ahead to the fresh new year with all of its possibility,

and promise to do better. We pray that God looks at our past mistakes with mercy, and will see our fervent desire to be better in the future - thus leading to forgiveness. Don't our past and future action matter in this scheme?

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe explained that, yes, our past and our future actions are important to God all year long and do play a critical role in our *t'shuva* process as we regret our past mistakes and make resolutions about our future, but it is not what interests God on Rosh ha-Shana. What God is most concerned with on Rosh ha-Shana is who we are now *ba-asher hu sham* in this one singular moment and snapshot in time, a snapshot so powerful that it can determine and define our fate in the coming year.<sup>1</sup>

When faced with the weight of the High Holy Days, many of us resolve to be better. We see what we have done wrong in the past, and commit to improving our behaviors, our thoughts, our relationships, and our world. From previous experience, I can tell you that I also put these things off. I forget the resolutions I have made, I get distracted by the day-to-day. And so, this is how it must be. I am to be judged for who I am in this moment, not who I believe I may one day become.

Our text tells us that God heard Ishmael's silent cry in that moment. We may read this part of the story as telling us that Ishmael found

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/270866.4?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

the strength to cry out to God and reveal his soul to the Holy One because he let go of the past and future, and realized his true self in the present. If Ishmael had dwelled on his past misdeeds, or thought about who he might become, he may have found it impossible to cry out to God. He would have resigned himself to his fate, dying alone in the wilderness, while his mother cried at a distance. However, he was able to see himself as he truly was right then and there, and with that presence of mind he knew that he was worthy of life. He had merit in that moment. If we, too, find the ability to seek and discover who we are right now, then we can also open our souls and our cries to the Eternal. Not because we have always been blameless, and not because we will fulfill all that we resolve in the coming year, but because of who we are in this instant. Although Hebrew doesn't allow for it, our task is to find a way to say "I am". Here, in present tense, now, "I am".

The words of the prayers and the poems that you will find in our new machzor - *Chadeish Yameinu* - are there to help us seek within our souls and discover who we are right now. If you allow them to, the words and melodies of this Holy Day will guide us deeply into ourselves. With that knowledge of self, we hope that we will also find a way to display that very essence to the Source of Life and silently cry out as Ishmael did - I am worthy. I am. I have merit. Save me. Not because of who I used to be, not because of who I may yet become. Be

with me now as I yearn to be with you. *Ba-asher hu sham* - call out from where you are and be heard.

*L'Shana Tova u'metuka* - May you find goodness and sweetness now, as you enter 5782.