

TIMELESS TORAH

ROSH HASHANAH : What Will This Year Ask of Us? *Discovering Our Potential in the Year Ahead*

There is something unusual about the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashana. If we were asked which biblical story best captures the meaning of the day, many would think of the *Akeidah* (the Binding of Isaac). The shofar recalls the ram that replaced Yitzchak, making the Akeidah a defining image of Rosh Hashanah. Yet we do not read the Akeidah on the first day. We read it on the second. On the first day, we read the story of Hagar and Yishmael being sent into the wilderness. Why?

One answer lies in just three words: *ba'asher hu sham*, 'where he is'. Hagar has run out of water and moves away from her son. An angel then calls to her: 'Do not be afraid, for Hashem has heard the voice of the boy, *ba'asher hu sham*, where he is' (Bereishit 21:17).

Why emphasise that God has heard his voice 'where he is'? The Sages understand this as one of the great messages of Rosh Hashanah: Hashem sees a person as they are now. That is where change begins.

The Power of the Present

Several months ago, I met a remarkable young man named Ashley John-Baptiste. Ashley grew up in the British care system, moving between foster placements and residential care. His early experiences made it difficult to imagine his future. A turning point came when he was given the opportunity to visit a summer programme connected with Cambridge University. The experience changed his sense of what was possible. He went on to study at Cambridge and later became a journalist, author and broadcaster.

His past had not disappeared. What changed was his understanding of what that past meant. His circumstances did not determine the rest of his life. Someone helped him see that the person he was could become something different. That is the meaning of *ba'asher hu sham*.

The Gemara in Rosh Hashanah (16b) derives from the story of Yishmael the principle that 'a person is judged only according to their actions at that moment'. Although Yishmael's descendants would eventually cause suffering to the Jewish people at future moments in history, that does not determine how Yishmael himself is judged. He is judged according to who he is now.

Rosh Hashanah asks: Where are you now? Not where were you five years ago, and not where do you fear you may be five years from now. Where are you standing today? The past is not irrelevant. Our experiences and mistakes matter, and our choices have consequences. But Rosh Hashanah refuses to let the past become a final verdict.

The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17b) offers a similar idea when it explains the first two words of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, *Hashem, Hashem*: 'I am He before a person sins, and I am He after a person sins and repents.' The Rosh (Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel, d.1327) emphasises that Hashem's relationship with a person is not cancelled by failure. Hashem knows the propensity we have to get things wrong in the future. Yet He still sees the person standing before Him now.

Becoming, Not Just Beginning

This changes how we think about Rosh Hashanah. We associate the High Holy Days with looking backwards and confronting our mistakes. But Rosh Hashanah also begins a year that has not yet been lived. That is at the heart of the teshuvah process, described by the Rambam as a person who recognises what they have done, what they have done, regrets it and resolves to change. The person before Hashem today can become different to yesterday's person.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (d.1986) draws attention to a key phrase used by the Rambam (Laws of Repentance 2:2), *Yode'a Ta'alumot*, the 'One who knows what is hidden'. Hashem knows whether the motivation to change is genuine. What matters is not simply what we have been, or indeed what may happen in the future, but what is happening inside us now.

There is an interesting parallel in contemporary psychology. William Dunlop and Jessica Tracy studied the narratives of people recovering from alcohol dependence. They found that those who understood difficult experiences as part of a story of positive change were more likely to maintain improvement, which they called 'self-redemption'. (*Sobering Stories: Narratives of Self-Redemption Predict Behavioral Change and Improved Health Among Recovering Alcoholics*, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2013).

The central finding here is that the facts of the past had not changed. Their meaning had. Teshuvah does not ask us to pretend that our past did not happen. It asks us to decide now what that past will mean for the future. A failure can become a reason to give up, or an experience that teaches us how to live differently. Real teshuvah means taking responsibility without believing that responsibility means we can never change.

That is why *ba'asher hu sham* is so powerful. The person standing before Hashem today has a history, but also unrealised possibilities.

A Moment in Time

This movement from past to present and towards the future is reflected at a key moment in the prayers of Rosh Hashanah. In *Zichronot*, the middle section of Mussaf, moment in the prayers of Rosh Hashanah. we remember the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people. Then we hear the words of Jeremiah

(31:19): '*Ha'ven yakir li Ephraim, im yeled sha'ashuim*', 'Is Ephraim a precious son to Me?'

Hashem remembers Ephraim, the younger of Joseph's two sons, with the affection of a parent. Ephraim may have failed or travelled far from where he should have been, yet Hashem still sees him as a beloved child. That is *ba'asher hu sham*. Hashem sees us where we are, without reducing us to where we have been. The prayers then move towards the future and the world we hope to build. Memory matters because it can change the way we live. That is the challenge of Rosh Hashanah. We may leave shul recognising a relationship needing attention, a weakened commitment or an aspect of Jewish life we want to strengthen. The question is whether that recognition becomes the first step towards change.

Ba'asher hu sham: Hashem sees us where we are. We do not need to know what the coming year will bring or become a different person overnight. We need to stand honestly before Hashem, recognise where we are and believe that this moment can become the beginning of something new.

On Rosh Hashanah, the Torah does not begin with the Akeidah. It begins with Yishmael in the wilderness, a young person whose future has not yet been determined.

Perhaps that is where we need to begin too.

NEXT WEEK: HAAZINU / YOM KIPPUR

Can We Change the Past?

Haazinu, Teshuva and the Power to Begin Again