

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

2. While reciting daily the Modeh Ani and thanking God for returning my soul to me, I particularly note what He says to me in the final words of this tefillah: “ rabbah emunatekha / great is your faithfulness “. I hear God telling me that He has faith in me. He is asserting that I, a human being, has potential to renew myself and repair the world. How can I not accept this as a compliment that demands responsibility? Who knows what could be if I truly believed I have the power to defeat evil?

3. I see the Hagar we read of in the Torah selection for first day Rosh Hashanah. I see her and lament the fact that she lacked a specific character trait: Optimism. Banished with her son to the desert, their water supply depleted, Hagar places her son at a distance from herself. She does so certain Yishmael will die, a sight she unsurprisingly cannot behold. But one cannot read Pasuk 19 of chapter 21 in Parashat Vayera and not feel Hagar gave up too soon and too easily. For one thing, God had promised her that her son would father a nation!

“And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled the pouch with water and gave the lad to drink.”

Note that Hagar had only to open her eyes and see a well that had been before her all this time. A simple physical obstruction caused her to burst into tears and to concede. Without faith and hope, confronting and battling life's challenges is inconceivable. Partnering with God in our mending project nullifies the possibility of pessimism. We must hold on to a vision of a better future despite any and all obstacles.

4. I see myself simultaneously praying and listening to my prayers. As years go by, I am more and more convinced that our tefillot are meant to inspire our attitudes, priorities, and actions in our everyday living.

5. At times I stand before God on my own. But for the most part I value my being part of a kehillah. And that kehilla needn't be composed of individuals who think alike. I make room for others who are clearly different from me and strive to listen to them. We must unite if we are to have any chance of mending. Believing we all have our roles to play in unity, I will raise my voice to God in first person plural.

With these images I will hope for a Shana Tova U'Metukah for all of us.

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TORAH SPARKS

Rosh Hashanah

September 19, 2020 | Tishrei 1 5780

Torah Reading First Day Genesis | 21:1-34, Maftir Numbers 29:1-6

Second Day Genesis | 22:1-24 Maftir Number 29:1-6

Haftarah First Day I Samuel | 1:1-2:10; Second Day Jeremiah 31:1-19

In Anticipation of Rosh Hashanah

Bracha Feder, FJC Faculty

Once again we are about to set before us the image of God as Avinu Malkenu. But what image do we have of ourselves as we stand before Him? The shofar is a call for Cheshbon Hanefesh, an examination of our soul. It is an opportunity for spiritual and ethical introspection hopefully leading to self-improvement and the mending of our families, our community, our People, and the world. 'Mending' is an impossibly difficult task yet one expected of us. So, while expressing reliance on God as I pray, it is not the only image of myself I perceive. I share with you five images before me as I enter my Yamim Noraim mindset.

1. I see myself as a child being taught to believe that I am part of something greater than I am. And that 'something' is blessed with a caring and demanding Creator. And so He and I meet and talk, sometimes with a Machzor and Torah in hand and sometimes spontaneously.

Challenging God

(Dvar Torah continued on the back page...)

Rabbi Mordecai Silverstein (from the archives)

The Babylonian Talmud cites Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, as the exemplar for how a person prays. It carefully catalogues her demeanor, her posture, her body language, and even the movement of her lips as she prayed to God to be granted a child. This fastidious attention to Hannah's actions served as a model for the recitation of the Amidah. After this accounting, one sage, Rabbi Elazar, took notice of what seems to be an innocuous sentence: "In her wretchedness, she prayed to (al) the Lord, weeping all the while." (1:10) He noted that the verse uses the preposition "al" (ayin lamed) which usually means "on" instead of the word "el" (alef lamed) which means "to".

Most commentators understand "al" to mean "to", but to Rabbi Elazar, it implied that Hannah was offering a direct challenge to God: "Hannah spoke insolently toward Heaven (literally: hurled words toward Heaven), as it says: 'And Hannah prayed against God'. (Berachot 31b) Surprisingly, the medieval commentators remain silent on this passage, offering neither an explanation nor apologetic. Rabbi Samuel Edels (Maharsha), however, offers an explanation: "This refers to a previous citation where Hannah challenged God for giving her breasts which served no purpose if she was childless."

Is Rabbi Elazar's teaching concerning Hannah's behavior an admonishment? It is interesting to note that he also includes Elijah the prophet along with Hannah as someone who challenged God in this way. It seems that for certain individuals such behavior was quite appropriate. The Jewish tradition is well known for its religious figures who were brash enough to challenge God for the "right cause", among them some of its greatest figures, including Abraham and Moses.

What constitutes the proper conditions for such a challenge? Rav Avraham Kook, the first chief rabbi of Eretz Yisrael (19th – 20th century) offers an interesting psycho-religious explanation: "Since honoring God is the essence of completeness, a person is obliged to attempt to become whole in both ideas and deeds. When this yearning to become whole overcomes a person, he may be unable to restrain within himself his stormy spirit, when he perceives in the governance of the upper world things that prevent his wholeness, even though he acknowledges for himself that God is ultimately just and by Him all acts are measured. Still, when he discerns that the opportunity to become whole might be missed, he cannot remain complacent. His bitterness spills forth and he permits his holy feelings to supplant his reason so that he or his holy cause might become complete. This is what is meant by "And Hannah prayed unto God", namely, that in her stormy spirit, she poured forth her soul in prayer for the sake of wholeness in the world, and in so doing, elevated herself above her rational senses which were focused on reaching God. (adapted from Ein Ayah – Berachot 31b)

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Are We Going Together?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb (CY Faculty)

On the second day of Rosh HaShana we read about the binding of Yitzhak. This learning is focused on that, Bereshit (Genesis) 22.

Text: Bereshit 22:6-8

(6) And Avraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on Yitzhak his son and he took in his hand the fire and the cleaver, and the two of them went together. (7) And Yitzhak said to Avraham his father, "Father!" and he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering? (8) And Avraham said, "God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went together.

- At this point Avraham and Yitzhak are on the third day of walking together. Based on these psukim, what is the atmosphere between them?
- When God approached Avraham with this task, Avraham responded 'hineni' – 'I am [fully] here'. When Yitzhak turns to his father Avraham in Pasuk 7, he responds 'hineni beni' – 'I am here, my son'. What do these sentences suggest about Avraham's state of mind?
- Compare the items that Avraham takes with those that Yitzhak asks about. What is missing? Why do you think that it is missing?
- Why do you think that the conversation of Avraham and Yitzhak (the only one recorded in Torah) is framed by 'and the two of them went together'?

Commentary: Rashi Bereshit 22:6

And the two of them went together – Avraham who was aware that he was going to slay his son, walked along with the same willingness and joy as Yitzhak who had no idea of the matter.

Commentary: Rashi Bereshit 22:8

[He] will see to the sheep – (meaning): He will look out for and choose a sheep for Himself, and if there will be no sheep, then - for the burnt offering, my son will be the offering. Although Yitzhak then understood that he was travelling on to be slain, yet - And the two of them went together – with the same ready heart.

- Rashi inserts supposed words of Avraham between those spoken in the Pasuk. Do you think that Yitzhak indeed understood what was about to happen? How does that impact the story in your mind?
- According to Rashi, what does each of the occurrences of "and the two of them went together" mean? How do you think that each of them felt in the second occurrence (v.8)?