

## **Rosh Hashanah Morning 5783: The Future's Not Set in Stone**

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When my mom drove me around as a child, we often listened to NPR. One day coming home from kindergarten, I burst into tears. My mom, very perplexed, asked, “What happened?” Through my tears, I asked her, “Will I have to go away to college, too?” It was the fall, and the radio station ran a story about college move-in. Apparently, I was in no shape to move away from home and decided I didn’t want to go to college. My mom reassured me, saying it was a long way off, but we would see how I was feeling then. When I was 5, I thought that the future was set in stone, that I would be forced to go to college, and I would never be ready. Since then, I have learned the lesson of Rosh Hashanah - the future is not set in stone; it is ours to shape.

One of the names for Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. The rabbis imagine an extravagant scene wherein the Book of Life sits open, containing each of our names. Today we are judged for the year ahead, to life or to death, to prosperity or to hardship. But - this judgment is not final. Our liturgy tells us *b’Rosh Hashanah yichateivun, Uv’Yom Tzom Kippur yichateimun* - on Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed (Untaneh Tokef). The future is not final.

This morning, we will not read the binding of Isaac, the Torah most of us associate with Rosh Hashanah. Instead, we will read the traditional Torah portion for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Genesis 21, the story of Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar is Sarah’s maidservant, and when Sarah believed she would not give birth, she gave Hagar to Abraham to have a child with, and Hagar gave birth to Ishmael. However, then God told Sarah that she too will give birth, despite her old age, and Isaac is born. When Isaac was grown, Sarah asked Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, and he agreed.

Banished from their home, Hagar and Ishmael eventually deplete their water and supplies. Hagar then “flung the child under one of the bushes and went off and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away, for she thought, ‘Let me not see when the child dies.’ And

she sat at a distance and raised her voice, and wept” (Gen. 21:15-16, trans. Robert Alter). The image of this scene is gut-wrenching: a mother unable to watch her son die, a child dying of thirst all alone, and the sounds of wailing in the otherwise empty desert. Rashi says that Hagar resigns herself to Ishmael’s death. The text repeats twice that Hagar was at a distance from Ishmael, and Rashi explains that as Ishmael came closer to death, Hagar moved farther away. She abandoned him to this fate, believing that it was certain. Only through divine intervention, according to Rashi, Hagar saved her son when a well of water miraculously appeared.

However, this is not the only way to understand Hagar’s actions. Another medieval commentator, Rabbi David Kimhi, disagrees. He writes that Hagar sat at a distance, but not so far away, so that she could continue to watch Ishmael. The text specifies that it was a bowshot’s distance for this reason. He points out that Hagar places Ishmael under a shrub. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire; where there’s plant life, there’s water. Kimhi argues that Hagar understood water was close by, she just couldn’t find it yet (Radak on Gen. 21:16). She was not condemning Ishmael to certain death but providing him shade while she regrouped. She let out her emotions and then continued her search for water. The well was always there, just slightly too hidden or too far away for her to see at that moment (Radak on Gen. 21:19). She wasn’t resigned to death; she refused to let a possible fate be sealed, and with God’s help, found the water to survive.

Rosh Hashanah demands of us: Are you the Hagar of Rashi, resigned to Ishmael’s brutal and tragic death? Or are you the Hagar of Kimhi, ready to create the future you want to inhabit? This passage teaches us that our fate is not set in stone. Instead, we have the power to create the future we want to live in. For me, only long after I had forgotten that fall day in the car in Kindergarten, my mom reminded me of the incident of the sensitive kid already worried about his future. We laughed - in the time since then I had become very excited to leave home, go to college, and continue growing. My future was not set in stone; I was actively creating and changing it as I grew. At this time of year, we often reflect on who we have been in the past, which might place doubts in our minds

about who we are able to become. We fear that our past predetermines our future instead of recognizing our ability to shape it all the time.

Johnny Gargano<sup>1</sup> was 25 when he tested positive for HIV in 1997, and believed his life would end soon. Resigned to that fate, he turned his life on its head, transforming from a church-going, responsible man to a partier and drug dealer. He started using drugs, he said, because he thought he was going to die anyway: nothing mattered anymore. Like Rashi's Hagar distancing herself from Ishmael, Johnny used drugs and partying to distance himself from his fate: why confront what you cannot change. He was caught selling drugs and sentenced to 20 years in prison. While in prison he received some medication to treat his HIV and slowly, he began to turn his life around. In 2014, the Obama administration announced a clemency program for drug offenders, and with the help of someone else who was incarcerated, he submitted his petition. Like Kimchi's Hagar, Johnny's eyes were opened: he wasn't granted a miracle, but the opportunity to change his future, to search for his well of water. In 2016, Johnny was granted clemency and after 12 years in prison, he left. On his way out, the guards told him "See you when you get back." 78 percent of people who are incarcerated return to prison within three years. But not Johnny. While it wasn't easy, and he had slip ups, he firmly held onto the idea that the future is not set in stone. Johnny was the Hagar of Rabbi David Kimchi. He regrouped, found support from family members, friends, and even the president, and then found a way to move forward, creating a future that was not defined by his past.

Today, even though it is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, Hagar and Ishmael remind us that our future is not set in stone. In one midrash where God judges the fate of Hagar and Ishmael, even God recognizes that the future is open to many possibilities. When God judges Hagar and Ishmael for life, and not for death, the angels were furious. They could see a future world where Ishmael's descendants would fight Isaac's. They wanted to kill Ishmael and prevent what they knew would unfold. However, God responds, "right now, is he righteous or wicked?" When the angels confirm that Ishmael

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<sup>1</sup> Johnny's story was featured on Humans of New York. See one of those posts here: <https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/photos/a.102107073196735/8238962382844456/?type=3>

is righteous, God judges Ishmael based on what he has done up until that point (Rashi on Genesis 21:18). Ishmael was not judged on his future, or the future of his descendants, but on his present state: a young boy, shunned by others, desperately in need of water. With this act of mercy, God declares the future is always able to change. God refuses to judge Ishmael based on his future because it is not set in stone. The High Holy Days are the gap between our past and our future where we decide what future we want to create, judging for ourselves a life neither dictated by our past nor foretold by a 'certain' future.

There is an old Jewish joke: a Jewish pessimist says, "Oy, things can't get any worse for our people!" The Jewish optimist turns to the pessimist, smiles, and says, "Sure it can!" And while things can always get worse, they can also get better. A mistake we made yesterday does not doom us to make the same mistake tomorrow. Our future is not set in stone: it is ours to create. What a powerful way to approach this Rosh Hashanah. We take an honest look at who we are and who we have been. And then we can decide who we want to be. We Jews hold fast to the belief that the future is yet to be determined. Let us commit on this Rosh Hashanah to not let our past dictate our future, but to chart our course strengthened by the knowledge that our future in the year ahead is ours to create.