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Tishri II

Rosh Hashanah Portrayals

The Lesson Taught by the Women: Faith and Prayer

Sarah and Isaac

Hagar and Ishmael

Hannah and Samuel

The Lesson Taught by the Akeda: Obedience

Abraham and Isaac

It is not a new revelation that God's Torah, in its description and portrayal of our fathers' practices as they crossed the solemn threshold of the new year, highlights the role of women. Rosh Hashanah is pervaded by a remembrance of the women whose mention evokes thoughts of enlightenment and admonition, devotion and exaltation; women from whom we hope to learn how one should view God and how to pray to Him. Sarah, Hagar, Hannah and Rachel pass before our eyes as shining figures. Their holy mission adorns them like a jewel, they radiate dignity. Each one greets us as a mother: Sarah with Isaac, Hagar with Ishmael, Hannah leading Samuel by the hand and Rachel weeping for her children who had exiled God from their midst.

A nation whose attention on Rosh Hashanah is focused primarily on the destiny and life-style of these women, truly needs no lesson from modern-day heroines and ideals regarding the dignity of women, a basic foundation of all civilization.

God designated the first day of Tishri as a day of stirring trumpet calls, **יום חרוצה יהי לכם**. This message ordains that it should not only be a **יום חרוצה** but simultaneously a **זכרון חרוצה**, a "remembrance of the Teruah." That remembrance of the jolting sound of the Shofar tones should generate in our mind and soul deep and permanent memories: **זכרון חרוצה**.

"In the seventh month, the first day of the month shall be to you a solemn rest, a remembrance of the Teruah, a convocation to the Sanctuary," (Levit. 23, 24) **שבתון זכרון חרוצה מקדא קדש**. Hearken to the jolting

shofar-sounds which herald an invitation to visit the Sanctuary with calm and unperturbed devotion.

Israel's great thinkers perceived the call of the shofar-blasts and understood the message conveyed by the rapid succession of three notes. On the first day of the new year, at the changing of time, they translated the tones into words and gave meaning to זכרוך חרותה: to think and to remember, to procure and retain the message of the new year as proclaimed by the shofar.

Time issues a summons to man and God permits it to penetrate to the portals of his heart.

The essence of time is three-fold, the product of an interchange of three time elements. Each instant consists of the union of the past, present and future. Each moment is the present, was the past, and will be the future; this transformation occurs with the swiftness of each passing thought. In the past, present and future, however, lies our entire existence.

Does the fleeting present come to a halt, does the fading past have a present, the coming future a timely reality? Or is the past only an illusion, the future unknown and the present transitory leaving no trace?

מלכיות—God is the guardian of the fleeting present. The tiniest portion of present time is at His command and has a task to fulfill in God's kingdom. It attains eternal significance only upon the completion of its mission. God is lord and master of the present: מלכיות.

זכרון—Therefore, the past never vanishes. God preserves the most fleeting span of time of the most remote past, as He was present at the creation of each moment and each instant. He keeps alive the accomplishment of each moment of time, preserves it, examines it, remembers it long after it has vanished from the memory of mortals. God is the witness and judge of the past: זכרון.

שופרו—The future, too, has a secure place in God's global plan and is determined not by mere chance or blind fate alone. The future is rooted in the past, the past gives birth to every future moment. God has intertwined the ribbon of past and future; indeed, He ceaselessly continues to weave this bond. The law by which he designates every new occurrence as an element emerging from the womb of the past was established by God as a binding force in the universe. This law still remains subject to His will. Omnipotent and free, He stands above the function of time which He created. Above time, free from time, God frees those men who have retained the Divine spark of freedom within

themselves from the shackles of the past. God's shofar-call tears asunder the chain of past moral and physical decay and summons us toward light, freedom and life. God is the master and redeemer of the future: שופרות.

God is to be our lord and master, witness, judge, father, and redeemer. As our father and redeemer we entrust Him with our future in the knowledge that, as our judge, He carefully scrutinizes our past. Our present we place in the service of our lord and master.

These thoughts are expressed in every blessing, ה' אלקינו מלך העולם—this is the wisdom and spirit which should fill every Jewish heart and should determine our life-conduct. Each moment lived in His service transforms mere existence into meaningful Jewish life.

These Godly thoughts shall accompany us throughout the year, during the cheerful as well as gloomy hours of life, and shall inspire us to seek our permanent shelter with God. These thoughts, reinforced by the might of the shofar, are to dominate our innermost feelings and take possession of our heart and soul at the threshold of the new year. With renewed vigor they should govern our feelings, words and deeds in our travels on life's road.

During the first weeks of the year the concepts of מלכיות, זכרות, and שופרות are implanted in our hearts as spiritual seeds. They are nourished with great care to cause them to sprout and to become the healing fruit of our life throughout the entire year. These thoughts penetrate the portal of the new year. Each of these three concepts is accorded a special day of reflection:

On the days of the New Year—מלכיות
during the Teshuvah days—זכרות
and on the Day of Atonement—שופרות

While we ponder how to pay homage to our Lord and Master, and how to improve our conduct before the eyes of our Judge and Witness; while renewing our pledge of atonement to our Father and Redeemer our eyes are directed toward those womanly figures, mothers and children, Sarah with Isaac, Hagar with Ishmael, Hannah with Samuel, and Rachel who weeps for her lost children. The example of these women inspires us to channel our knowledge of God into those thoughts and ideas which are designed to become the seeds of true salvation.

As a result of the shofar-power on Rosh Hashanah we are overcome by the realization of God's greatness and exaltation. The

awesome challenge of seeking God in the sea of eternity places us in danger of drowning, as we confront the scope of Divine omnipotence and the magnitude of His greatness which reaches boundlessly into unlimited eternity. In the lustre and overwhelming power of God's reign in the world, our predicaments and our desires dwindle into total nothingness. How can we expect of God to direct His heavenly gaze upon us, insignificant humans who are merely "transient dust, a disappearing shadow, a shadowy dream." The danger arises that such thinking might result in an attitude of apathetic indifference which considers each occurrence as the result of blind fate and leaves us powerless and hopeless in the sight of the One before Whom we were called for self-examination, self-purification and self-sanctification.

This is the moment when the mothers address us: בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל וחנוכה (ר"ה י) "On Rosh Hashanah Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were remembered." On Rosh Hashanah we were remembered by our merciful Father. On Rosh Hashanah our wishes were fulfilled. On Rosh Hashanah our children were granted to us.

Seek God not in the harmony of the planets, in the thunder of the universe, in the interaction of the physical elements, or in the revolutionary upheavals which change the destinies of nations—but in your own small human individuality.

The stars must move along paths which were assigned to them by the Creator. The interaction of physical elements and the conflicts of nations are governed by immutable laws of nature which God established at the time of Creation. But for those whose hearts yearn for God, whose minds seek Him, God, with His almighty power of creation, remains unfailingly willing at each moment to shape a new world, a new life and a fresh new future.

The formation of nature is complete but the creation of mortals, the planting, care, maturation, the development of human and Godly attributes of man, are continuously unfolding miracles of creation which put all human wisdom to shame and defy all calculations. Thus we are taught by:

Sarah and Isaac

"And God had remembered Sarah as He had said, and now God did to Sarah as He had spoken." (Genesis 21, 1) וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת שָׂרָה כְּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר (Gen 21, 1). God remains close to mankind, He "remembers" them and secures a new future for them. He promises and pledges,

fulfills and achieves. Thus, He grants Sarah the tenderest wish of her life, the unfulfilled opportunity of motherhood.

At first Abraham laughed and Sarah laughed at the pronouncement that the barren ninety-year-old woman would become a mother. The world ridiculed the hopes which the hundred-year-old father and the ninety-year-old mother attached to their child. Rueful laughter greets those who strive to reach lofty goals by insufficient means, those who attach great hopes to small inadequate beginnings, and those who maintain great expectations which seem to defy simple logic.

But Sarah spoke: "That which we laughed at, God has brought about, all who hear about it may laugh at me." (Gen. 21, 6) *יצחק עשה לי* אלקים כל השמע יצחק לי. She continued: "Who has expressed to Abraham the depth and significance of this event" *מי מלל לאברהם*; "That with this child I have become the mother of an entire nation" *הניקה בנים לשרה*; "I have given him the son who will be a youthful support for him in his old age." *בי ילדתי בן לזקניו*.

From the time God achieved for Sarah that which she had laughed at, she never again ridicules any Godly promise. Calmly she bears the laughter of a short-sighted world which comprehends only that which is tangible and palpable. To be the laughing-stock of the world is the fate assigned to Sarah's offspring. They wander about the world, the littlest bearers of the greatest covenant; in spite of their fragility, they are the instrument of God's great plan. In spite of their apparent weakness, they seek to conquer violence on earth. The world mocked and laughed at Sarah's offspring. But God had spoken: call him *יצחק*, "he will laugh." "And Abraham called the son that was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him—Yitzchok" (Gen. 21, 3).

Therein lies the full contrast between this son of Abraham and Sarah and a mocking world which values and respects only what is tangible and "real." The world laughs at Isaac, the fragile weakling chosen to implement God's triumph on earth. Isaac happily endures the mirth of the world; in turn he laughs at the madness of the mockers who dare to challenge almighty power *ישב בשמים ישחק ה' ילעג למו* "He Who dwells in heaven smiles, my Master mocks them." (Psalms 2, 4)

Therefore, on the Rosh Hashanah day Sarah addresses us: Place your most precious wishes trustingly into God's hand and wait. Wait years, decades, wait your entire life, for joyful fulfillment will come. God guards and shields your children's cradle, your home, your

marriage. The cradles are the focal point of His rulership: let every Jewish mother raise her child as the progenitor of a God-fearing generation and care for him and raise him accordingly.

Hagar and Ishmael

teach us a great truth: God reaches out to the radiant mistress and also to the pitiful maid who was banished from her master's home and sent to a barren desert. Her son, however, joined the numerous "laughers"—מצחק—in mocking Isaac, the "weakling." He thereby lost his share in the great Godly heritage of the house of Abraham. Yet, during his sojourn in father Abraham's house a spark had been kindled in Ishmael, a glimmer to be transmitted to his descendants, enabling them also to assume great distinction among the nations. ואני אשימו כי זרעך הוא "I will make him into a nation for he is your seed."

In the desert where she once experienced the nearness of the "living God," Hagar loses her way; the water in the skin dwindles and in utter despair she tosses her dying son under a tree and retreats some distance away so as not to witness the child's death throes. An angel calls from heaven, "Why do you despair Hagar, fear not" באשר הוא שם "there where he is, God has heard the cry of the lad." And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin and gave him to drink. (Gen. 21, 13)

And we, are we driven to despair? Are we dismayed when faced with wretched misery, completely bewildered when all hope for ourselves and our loved ones ebbs away? On Rosh Hashanah let us analyze the experience of Hagar, let us ask God to open our eyes, ask Him to give us insight and help, באשר הוא שם wherever we may be. Our despair is so pervasive that our eyes search the distant horizon for help, while it lies right before us.

קומי שאי. Remember the Rosh Hashanah day, arise, and bear the burden God has put upon you. Hold aloft that which God has entrusted to you. God is close to those with courage and remote from those who give up hope. Thus, the angel first told Hagar: "Arise and lift up the lad, let your hand keep a firm hold on him." Only then are we told: "And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water (Gen. 21, 18-19)."

Hannah and Samuel

teach us: אל הנער הזה התפללתי "For this child I prayed." (I Samuel 1, 27)

With these words Samuel's mother became the example and guide for all people who pray. Hannah demonstrated the potency of silent prayer and the euphoria that comes over us as the wish is granted by the eternally listening Master of the world.

Family problems and domestic grief gnaw at the hearts of men; they are like fine needle-tips whose miniscule wounds the world tends to overlook, but which in the end cause many a heart to bleed to death. For they strike a man in the one peaceful place to which he flees trying to escape from life's struggles. They transform his haven of rest into a hedge of thornbushes. Bleeding hearts and wounded souls are mocked by all of humanity which fails to understand their misery and pain. Even their most trusted friends reproach them by saying: Why do you weep? Why don't you eat? Why are you so aggrieved? There is no one with whom they can share their misery. Hannah teaches them how to seek refuge with God through prayer. Thus Hannah teaches us how to pray on Rosh Hashanah.

She stood before God on Rosh Hashanah. ותחפל על ה' and she prayed to the Lord, וחנה היא מדברת על לבה, but Hannah's prayer was also addressed to her own heart. מכאן למתפלל צריך שיכוון לבו (ברכות ל"א), "he who prays must do so with the intention of his heart." Jewish prayer aims at directing our hearts on the proper course toward the truth. This newly awakened perception allows the heart to find the God-pleasing way which is the meaning of prayer. תחפל to judge, תפיל to judge oneself, תפיל to pass judgment on oneself—to give judgment and recognition to the legitimate and rightful truth.

רק שפתיה נעות "Her lips were moving." Undefined feelings and tender impulses of uncertain meaning do not correspond to this concept of prayer. A Jewish prayer must be definite, must express clearly formulated thoughts with specific words (ברכות שם). וקולה לא ישמע מכאן שאסור להגביה קולו בחפלתו (ברכות שם). The prayer must be directed toward oneself and must be utilized for one's own specific needs. Only God and one's own ear hear the dialogue between man and his prayer.

ותור נדר The result of Jewish prayer is a vow, a life-long resolution and determination never to forget the purpose of prayer, never to forget the struggle to merit its fulfillment, never to forget that it was solicited from God, and to dedicate and consecrate the granted wish to a Divine purpose.

Thus Hannah prayed and offered resolutions on Rosh Hashanah.

Even before the birth of her child, she consecrated him to life-long Divine service and called his name Samuel, the one named after God, a name through which Hannah conveyed the intensity of her feelings and the profundity of her love of God.

She called God **צבאו** (I Samuel 1, 11) **אמר ר' אלעזר מיום שברא הקב"ה את עולמו לא היה אדם שקראו להקב"ה צבאו עד שבאתה חנה וקראתו צבאו (ברכות ל"א)** She was the first to use the title "Lord of hosts" in prayer. The use of the name Samuel and **צבאו** places her in the select group of those who have heralded and proclaimed God's presence in Israel.

No other designated name of God but the one coined by this Jewish mother is more appropriate for prayers, gives more meaning and justification to prayer, and raises the hope that the prayer will be answered. Once God is designated as **צבאו**, He cannot possibly be considered the all-pervasive heathen god of gods nor the blind cause of events. The name **צבאו** denotes our personal Lord and Master. Leader and Guide of the world. It is not a hostile cosmos but a world, with all its diversities, peculiarities and contradictions, which the designation **צבאו** transforms into an "army" of myriads of "soldiers" under God's direct "command," each ordered to a specific place, equipped and ready for functional service. The plan of the universe rests in His hands and assumes significance once all His commands are dutifully fulfilled and assigned tasks are faithfully carried out. The only missing aspect would be our enlistment in God's "army," our assignment to our designated place, and the carrying out of our responsibilities.

Together with Hannah we will implore Him to grant us the means and the strength to carry out our duties as members of His hosts. "God, **צבאו**, Lord of hosts," said Hannah, "if You will see the affliction of Your maid, and remember and not forget Your servant, but will give Your maid a man-child, then I will consecrate him to the Lord all the days of his life and no razor shall come upon his head" (I Samuel 1, 11). Did you not in the overall scheme of things also reserve among your great host of servants a task for me? Grant me the joy of motherhood, you who shaped my motherly breasts, let me nourish a child. **ידדים הללו שנחת על לבי למא לא להניק בהן, תן לי בן ואניק בהן (ברכות שם)**. I do not desire this child for myself, I wish to feed him and care for him and raise him in Your service. Let me fulfill the task for which I was created.—This is the only form of prayer which one may always expect to be granted.

Hannah teaches us that we are not simply products of a creator but servants in the vast throng of God's hosts. Hannah teaches us how to entreat, how to pray, and thus we attain nearness to the One we serve. *שאלתנו*, our request, becomes *שלתנו*, the achievement of that which we truly lack (*של חסלו לה* as in *שלל*)—Ruth 2, 16) and which is truly necessary for our (*שלה, שלו*) completeness. May we then also merit the answer: *לכי לשלום וא' ישראל יתן את שלתך אשר שאלת מעמו*: "Go in peace and the God of Israel will grant the request that you put to Him." (I Samuel 1, 17).

The prerequisite for prayer is obedience which denotes the inner strength to fulfill God's command with unyielding courage. It means to exercise the self-control to perform our God-given duties and responsibilities; to surrender ourselves unconditionally to God's demands. Obedience is taught to us by

Abraham and Isaac.

There are those who maintain that only fear of God leads to prayer; that obeying God's commands is merely the result of one's own intellectual and emotional compliance. They seek to free our people from the humiliation of the unintellectual simplicity of the old fathers, who put the *נעשה*, the unconditional acceptance of God's Will, ahead of the *נשמע*, the comprehension of God's commandments. You need only consider Abraham's unconditional act of sacrifice on Mount Moriah to teach us what it means to be *ירא אלקים*, and which is characterized by God as *אשר שמעת בקולי*, you have hearkened to My voice. *אחר הדברים האלה* (Gen. 22, 1) At one hundred years of age Abraham reached the crowning climax of a life which would have a profound impact far into the future of mankind. Abraham realized that his life with its aspirations and the fruit and fulfillment of God's promise were rooted in Isaac.

והאלקים נסה את אברהם God elevated Abraham to be a beacon illuminating mankind's path. As He called to him "Abraham," Abraham's answer was *הנני*, "I am ready." *הנני*, he was prepared for any sacrifice, any deed which God requested of him. *הנני* denotes the unconditional compliance in advance of the actual order, the fierce determination to carry it out without first subjecting it to critical review and personal judgment, without subjugating it to one's own views and desires. This *הנני* manifests the obedience with which man raises himself to join the heavenly chorus of the angels, *גברי כח עשי דברו לשמע בקול דברו*, "who are

armed with strength to fulfill His word, to hearken to the voice of His word (Ps. 103, 20).

This *הווי* was the legacy which Abraham bequeathed to his contemporaries and to his descendants. Only those who strive to reach the lofty plateau of this *הווי* may call themselves sons and daughters of Abraham.

Compliance with God's request was not an easy task for Abraham. "Take your son, the one whom you love," who is so precious to you, to whom you attach the entire promise of your future, (Gen. 21, 12) *כי בן ביעזק יקרא לך זרע*. Take him "and go to the land of Moriah," the site of God's teaching, "and offer him there as a sacrifice. . . ." And Abraham arose early in the morning, saddled the animal, took two of his men with him, took Isaac his son, chopped the wood for the offering, rose and went up towards the place designated by God. Wandering for three days, he had ample time to ponder the dreadful consequence of the Divine order, time to consider the incomprehensibility of the command. Yet neither the enormity of the Divine challenge nor the pain of compliance made him hesitate even for a moment to carry out God's order.

On the third day he reaches the place designated for the sacrifice. He leaves the men behind, takes the wood for the offering and lays it on Isaac and takes the fire and the knife. Together they go on their way *וילכו שניהם יחדו* (Gen. 22, 6). Together, one to sacrifice and one to be sacrificed, both together, to fulfill the will of their Lord and Master.

Where has the time gone when father and son, young and old, the older and younger generation, walked jointly to carry out God's commands. Where is the time when only one road led to the heights of Moriah, to the sanctification of God by father and son, the old and the new generation. Where are the times when the son faithfully adhered to the Law of God as transmitted by his father and was ready to live and die for his heritage.

For thousands of years this unique event on Mount Moriah, the site of His Teachings, has inspired Jewish generations throughout and strengthened their loyalty for the Torah even when it required the harshest sacrifices. A father would bring his son as a sacrifice because he raised him for this Torah, and the son was ready to be sacrificed because he accepted the Torah from his father's hand. Fathers and sons showed no hesitation, had no second thoughts, the young and the

old generation were ready for the Akeda, ready to live and to die for God's law.

"They both went together."

Thus, the shofar-call on Rosh Hashanah emanates from שופר של איל to evoke the memory of the Akeda, which is to penetrate our souls. You summon us בקול שופר—we are ready—הנני.