

Shana Tovah !

As you know, the Board has been committed to looking at ways to do Jewish differently, and so this year, they decided to change the Community Appeal from Kol Nidre to Rosh Hashanah. You all should have received....Only kidding. I have been assured by the rabbi that it is ok to laugh on Rosh Hashanah, which is, after all, a happy holy day as well as a high holy day.

Rosh Hashanah. The sages teach us that this is the birthday of the world. Even though on the Hebrew calendar it is the first day of Tishrei, which is the seventh month of the year, rabbinic lore says that it actually represents a celebration for the sixth day of creation, when G-d added human beings to the world. We celebrate in the seventh month, the Sabbath of the year, just as G-d rested and reflected on the seventh day. We are all here on this holy day to mark the passage of time. We pause, take an inventory, and remind ourselves that our time here is limited. Have we made the best use of it? What did we accomplish in these past twelve months, and what do we hope to do differently in the next twelve? It's a time for reflection, reconnection, and recommitment.

Our Torah portion today reminds us of several themes appropriate for this season. I will put in a plug for Torah Study, which is a wonderful way to spend a Saturday morning. We come together to study stories that our people have told and retold for thousands of years, and which are still relevant today. Today's portion is technically a "re-run": we already studied this passage 9 or 10 months ago since it's from the book of Genesis, the first book of the Torah, and we are currently in Numbers, the last book as we approach Simchat Torah. This portion reminds us of something very important to our lives—not to lose Hope if our prayers are not answered immediately. We remember Sarah, and the fulfillment of her prayers when she was well past the normal age for child bearing.

We enter the story late in the life of our Patriarch, Abraham, and our Matriarch, Sarah. Sarah has made a terrific sacrifice: having been unable to deliver an heir for her husband to continue his blood line and the faith, she encourages Abraham to have conjugal relations with her servant, Hagar, and father an heir through her. Hagar bears Ishmael, who is Abraham's first born. But Sarah never stops praying for a child, and following a visit from an angel, she is told that her prayer will be answered. We start the story today with the Creator's fulfillment of that promise "at the appointed time": God "remembers" Sarah; she conceives a child late in her life, and delivers an heir to Abraham. Abraham names him "Yitzhak" and circumcises him on the eighth day, as G-d has commanded him. Thus, we have the first bris, a

tradition that many of us follow to this day. But note that Abraham waited until Yitzhak was actually weaned before holding his big feast and celebration. Like many religious traditions, this one was “reconstructed” long ago for parents who just couldn’t wait to celebrate the birth of a son or heir.

Sarah now has second thoughts about her earlier sacrifice, and decides that Ishmael—Abraham’s first born and technically the rightful heir—is a danger to her son, and she tells Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham has “grave concern,” but G-d shares some very important marital advice: “Listen to your wife, whatever she tells you...” Most of us haven’t figured out how to reconstruct that one, but we all know what it means: happy wife, happy life! But I think it’s also a teaching that when it comes to planning where we’re going, we may not always be able to see the best route. So we shouldn’t be afraid to ask someone that we love and trust for help with directions.

G-d goes on to tell Abraham that Yitzhak will be “the seed through which your seed shall be called.” But G-d also reassures Abraham that he will make a nation as well out of Ishmael, “for he too, is your child.” For some reason, I think many Jews seem to conveniently forget the meaning of this passage. It clearly says to me that the offspring of Ishmael, the Arab and Palestinian people, are really our “half-brothers.” We share the same father, so we should be more mindful of how we treat them. But that might be a thought that is too political for this holiday, so I will just raise it and leave it hanging for each of you to consider and “reconstruct” in your own way.

Taking a step back, our portion today echos a theme that we see again and again in our study of the Tanakh: the first born does not necessarily inherit the mantle of leadership and responsibility for the Jewish people. We see it with Jacob and Esau; with Joseph and his brothers, and even with Moses, and his older brother Aaron. Leadership and inheritance doesn’t automatically come from the birth order. It must come from somewhere else.

So Abraham follows Sarah’s words as he was instructed to do, and he sends Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert, where they wander aimlessly until their food and water run out, and Hagar fears that Ishmael is going to perish. She lays him down under a bush and moves away so she doesn’t have to watch him die. And she prays. But the text says that G-d hears the child’s voice, and then moves to reassure Hagar that she is not forgotten. And for a second time, G-d says “for I shall make of him a great nation!” The passage also repeats that “G-d was with the boy...” as G-d was with Abraham. So once again, I am forced to ask how can we Jews have forgotten our responsibilities to our half-brothers?

We share the same father, and we are reminded of this each year on Rosh Hashanah when we read this portion! And more than one time...

Our story goes on to note that G-d “opened up her eyes” so that Hagar would see a well of water. We are led to understand that G-d did not deliver a well miraculously, but that the well was there all along, and Hagar, blinded by her grief and upset, had not seen it. G-d lifts the veil from her eyes so that she can see. The lesson for us here is that sometimes the solution to our problem is right in front of us, if only we would pause, take a deep breath, and look (and think) carefully, removing the blinders from our eyes.

Finally, our portion closes with a story about Abraham and Abimelech and Phicol, who wisely observe that G-d is with Abraham in everything he does. They ask Abraham to swear that he will not deal falsely with them or their offspring, and Abraham swears it to them, committing not only himself but future generations. Have we “forgotten” that promise? Later, Abraham complains to Abimelech about servants stealing water from Abraham’s well. Abimelech is shocked and upset: “I didn’t know. Who did this thing?” I see this as a reminder to us all not to assume the worst, and that someone has wronged us out of malice, knowingly and intentionally. They may not have known or been aware, and we should not jump to conclusions and assume the worst.

Rosh Hashanah is a time of year when each of us reflects on what we hope and prayed for last year, and we remember what occurred, and what didn’t occur. Just as G-d remembered the promise to Sarah, so we are asked to remember, as we are all created in G-d’s image. We are reminded to not stop praying or hoping, for Rosh Hashanah is a holiday of hope—and our portion reminds us that G-d answers prayers “at the appointed time.” Or as my late rabbi of blessed memory once taught me many years ago: “G-d answers all our prayers. Sometimes, unfortunately, the answer is just “no” or maybe “not yet.”

So at this time of year, let us all continue to pray and to have hope.

Pray and Hope—that we will have the strength to acknowledge our shortfalls and make the changes we need to make in the coming year.

Pray and Hope—that we will have the wisdom to lift up our eyes and look at our world and see the solutions to our problems, and understand what we have to do to change and solve them.

Pray and Hope—that we will have the persistence to continue to work together to make our world a better place, so that it truly can become the Eden that it was meant to be.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevu: may we all be inscribed in the book of life for a blessing.

—Mark Nussbaum