

Rosh Hashana Torah Reading Aliyot 2017
Musical Meditation Service with Rabbi Chai Levy

Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the world, according to our tradition.
Later in the Musaf service, we'll declare 3 times:
Hayom Harat Olam. Today the world is born.
We celebrate not only the anniversary of creation, but also
The possibility that we can begin anew, and
Recreate, co-create with the Creator,
and make the world the world we want to live in.

More accurately, tradition holds that Rosh Hashana
is actually the birthday of humanity,
the 6th day of creation, according to the Torah.
We celebrate our extraordinary human potential,
our being created *Betzelem Elohim*, in the image of the Divine,
but let's be honest here –
we have to recognize our extraordinary ability to mess things up too.
Just look around at our world.

These ten days from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur are about teshuva,
Returning, restoring, repairing, repenting
(pretty much any word that starts with “re” –)
We look at all that is misaligned and try to realign it
We look at our lives, our relationships, our society, our world
And we re-affirm our faith that we can heal what has been broken.

So I want to view our Torah reading today in this light.
We read the Torah as our sacred literature, our poetry,
the collective dream of the Jewish people,
where we interpret the dream and understand ourselves better.
In other words, as I've said before: we read the Torah seriously, but not literally –
We read it as an invitation to find ourselves and our world
in the stories of our ancestors.

The first aliyah tells of the miraculous birth of Isaac
to Abraham and Sarah in their old age.
On the birthday of humanity, we read the story of one *particular* birth.

The birth of Isaac is significant because it made for the continuation of the Jewish people that began in his parents' generation.

Up until this point, the apparent infertility of Abraham and Sarah signaled the end, but here: a new birth, a new beginning, a new possibility that didn't seem possible before.

We are living in times that are not normal.

Lately, it has sometimes seemed like "the end" of the world as we know it.

Our country is changing, our climate is changing, our weather is changing, so many national and international structures seem to be changing.

The Torah comes here and says – new beginnings are possible; it's not the end.

God remembers us, as it says in the first verse, God remembered Sarah.

This aliyah is about new births and beginnings and invites us to turn (remember teshuva means to turn),

to turn to our dreams for what might be possible.

With the birth of Isaac to the elderly Abraham and Sarah, this aliyah says:

what might have felt like the end of a hope

can actually be the birth of a new beginning

So for the first aliyah, I'll invite up all those who, on this Rosh Hashana, this new beginning, want to set the intention of turning toward a dream you have for a new beginning. There is something that you know needs to be born in this world, and you want to express your hope for this new birth.

Our world is so in need of new hopes and new possibilities,

And perhaps you have a something new

that you want to bring to the world this year.

In the second aliyah, Sarah casts out her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar.

Even though Sarah now has her own child, Isaac,

She is still jealous and resentful of Hagar.

Remember, because of Sarah's infertility, she had given Hagar to Abraham to have a child, but when Hagar became pregnant with Ishmael,

A rivalry began that has led to years of a difficult and painful relationship between the two women.

Our biblical ancestors had family struggles and dysfunctional relationships – just like we do.

Remember: the Torah is our story, our collective dream,

a mirror held up to our own lives.

Sarah isn't acting from her best self.

She's acting with cruelty towards Hagar because of her years of bitterness and disappointment about her own barrenness have affected her and her relationship with Hagar.

But Rosh Hashana is about teshuva. Turning to our best selves.

We can reflect on our lives and our relationships and take steps to do it differently.

The Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, taught that teshuva is believing that in every moment, in every breath, we have the possibility to be new.

With each breath, we receive the life force of the Holy One anew, which means we are not limited to being the same person that we were in the previous breath. Each moment, each breath is a chance to do it differently, to break out of our negative patterns that lead to hurtful relationships, like that of Sarah and Hagar.

So the second aliyah is about turning towards our best selves.

I'll invite up anyone who wants to set the intention this Rosh Hashana

To do teshuva in this way – to recognize that you can be new and you can repair a relationship that needs repairing.

In the third aliyah, Hagar and Ishmael are banished to the desert of Beer Sheva.

They run out of food and water and are desperate.

Hagar can't bear to look at her son, dying of thirst, and the Torah says she lifts up her voice and cries.

Hagar opens her eyes, and

and a well of water miraculously appears, and they are saved.

What allows for this well of life-saving waters to appear?

Just before the well appears, an angel tells Hagar to reach out to Ishmael.

The text says: lift up the boy and hold his hand, but literally:

v'hachaziki et yadech bo, strengthen yourself through him.

The healing, the redemption, the miracle, comes through human connection.

Hagar is strengthened though holding Ishmael's hand –

With that healing human connection, the well appears.

In this crazy world we find ourselves in,

we so need to take hold of the hand of another.

We need each other, we need community, we need human connection

To strengthen and support each other.

And I don't mean just "liking" each other's posts on social media.

I mean real human connection (hold hands now!)–

Like the people in Houston who reached out their hands to save people trapped by flood waters,

or in Mexico who reached out to save people in the rubble of the earthquakes,

or the people who showed up in this room and in many other places after

Charlottesville to hold hands with people of different faiths and races to say

"Love lives here."

I've been talking about teshuva as "turning" – this aliyah is about turning towards another person, or turning towards God – Hagar does both:

She cries out to God, and she reaches out to her son.

This turning towards another saves their lives.

On Rosh Hashana, as we examine our lives and our relationships,

Let's notice the ways we isolate ourselves,

the ways we don't reach out to each other

and ask ourselves where we might need to reach out and turn towards another.

So, the third aliyah is for all those who want to reach out, like Hagar,

And strengthen yourself through another.

To recap,

Teshuva is the turning we do in this process of repair

1. Turning towards our dreams, setting the intention of something new that wants to be born in our world
2. Turning towards our best selves to repair relationships
3. Turning toward another or God in connection, to not being isolated and to finding healing and redemption in that connection