

*Seeing Life from God's Perspective*

On this Yom Teruah we are called, once again, to reassess, to reconsider our priorities in light of God's rule. We are asked by HaShem to remember that even though it often does not appear to be so, He actually is reigning upon His throne, and He is bringing to pass those things which accomplish His will. We are compelled again to put away our natural way of thinking and seeing, and trust His description of reality.

The Torah text for the 1st day of Rosh HaShanah is Gen 21, the birth of Isaac (the *haftarah*, opening of the story of Hannah's distress over being childless, her crying out to God, and His answer of a promise to give a son, Samuel.) This is for several reasons: (1) Rosh HaShanah is called יוֹם הַזִּיכָרוֹן *yom ha-zi-ka-ron* "day of remembrance," and the Torah section begins with וַיִּי פָקַד אֶת שָׂרָה, "and Adonai visited (or remembered) Sarah." This, we are taught, is to remind us that on this day, as we call unto HaShem, He will hear and He will answer, even as He answered the righteous cry of Abraham and Sarah. (2) The text also says that Sarah conceived and bore a son unto Abraham in his old age, *at the appointed time* (לְמוֹעֵד), which is understood to mean "at the festival." Tradition has it that Isaac was born on Rosh HaShanah. So the birth of Isaac (Gen 21) is read on the first day, and the *Akeda* (Binding) of Isaac on the 2nd day. Both of these sections vividly remind us of the central issues of this festival: a need to turn from (=repent of) those things which displease God, and a need to obey Him regardless of the cost. These two issues are actually two sides of one coin—two necessary aspects of godly repentance.

God calls us to follow Him, sometimes even against the strongest natural inclinations! How foreign the idea was to Sarah that she should conceive and bear a child in her old age! So foreign was this that it set up the play on words in our text, centered on the word "to laugh" (צָחַק, *tza-chak* which may also show up as שָׂחַק, *sa-chak*, cf. 2Sa 2:14). When the text records (v. 6) "God has made laughter for me; whoever hears will laugh for me," it could just as well be understood as "laugh at me" (הִשְׂמֵעַ לִי-צָחֶק, *ha-sho-mei-a yitz-chak li*). Indeed, the very next issue that arises in the narrative is that Hagar's son, Ishmael is "mocking" (צָחַק, *m'-tza-cheik*, the piel participle of צָחַק, *tza-chak*) Isaac. The word group itself has a wider range of meaning than mere laughter, for the verb צָחַק, sometimes translated "make sport," is used of errant sexual behavior (Gen 29:14, 17; Ex 32:6) or a blantant disregard for life (blood sports, cf. 2Sa 2:14). Abraham's attempts to live life by the power of his flesh (i.e., his resorting to relations with Hagar to bring the promised son) had resulted in a situation in which Ishmael had become a negative role model for Isaac, and perhaps in some form of deviant sexual practice. Perhaps the Egyptian influence of Hagar was still present.

Now we know that this brought about great distress for Abraham because he genuinely loved Ishmael (cf. Gen 17:18 and the midrash on Gen 22:2). To send his son Ishmael away went against his fatherly inclinations. Add to this the command of HaShem (v. 12) "... whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice..." Abraham was to listen to Sarah and obey her! We hardly hear Sarah's voice throughout the narrative. In fact, we only hear her speak when she is laughing. Yet Abraham, contrary to his male ego (something which crosses all time and culture), was to follow the instructions of Sarah.

While it may appear harsh at first reading, if we recognize the word "mock" to signal some clear deviant behavior on the part of Ishmael, then Sarah's request that Hagar and her son be dismissed from the household is both understandable and righteous. A mother's concern for both the physical and spiritual welfare of her children bespeaks a gift from God. For while it is natural for mothers to protect their children physically, even at the point of personal harm, it is also the perspective of godly mothers to give spiritual protection. It would appear that Sarah understood and believed the divine plan to bless Isaac as the progenitor of the people of Israel. She may have even been given insight into the ultimate goal, that is, the coming of Messiah from the people of Israel.

In Hagar we see the opposite characteristic. Once again, in our "politically correct" society we

hardly have eyes to read this story with understanding. Hagar is “kicked out,” ill treated, and suffers even to the point of death. How could anyone judge her actions and motives?! And yet if we will let the text speak, we see a self-centeredness in Hagar that is shocking. While Sarah is concerned for Isaac even to the point of having Abraham send Ishmael away, Hagar appears concerned primarily for herself: (v. 16) “She went and sat herself down at a distance, some bowshots away, for she said, ‘Let me not see the death of the child.’” So intent was she at sheltering herself from the despair of the moment that she left her son to die alone! Though she wept aloud (v. 16), the text is clear that God did not “hear” her cries, but the cries of Ishmael: v. 17 “God heard the cries of the youth.” Then an angel from heaven asks a penetrating question of Hagar: “What troubles you?” There is the question that goes to the heart of the issue! What troubles you? Your own woe or the woes of your son? Your own concerns or the welfare of your son? Unfortunately, we continue to see the same perspective in the descendants of Ishmael today. In the conflict between Israel and her enemies in our own times we have witnessed the same debased practice of Palestinians willingly disposing of the children (packing them with bombs, thrusting them forward in armed combat as some kind of disposable “human shield”) in order to achieve the agenda of the adults. While Israel is not without blemish, one thing is clear: Israeli parents protect their children, even giving their own lives first. Israel does not train their children to become disposal agents of terror.

Here we touch on a very important aspect of repentance, of *te-shuvah*. Repentance or turning can only become a reality when we have finished dwelling upon our own issues and come to esteem as most important God’s issues. How often has repentance been forestalled because we are fearful of what others will think of us? How often have we neglected to turn from what we know is wrong because we have become addicted to self-indulgence? When we think that repentance will “rock the boat” and so we continue in the path from which we know we should turn, we have settled for a false “peace.” The storm that really counts is not the rejection of those who will disdain our repentance, but the righteous anger of a holy God who may simply let us sink in the mire of our own destructive choices if we persist in our unrepentant ways.

What is the incentive, then, for repentance—for returning to the righteous path of God’s design? The first and greatest incentive is that of God’s love for us. If we are truly His, then we have come to know His love. We have come to understand that entirely apart from any merit on our part, God has forgiven us and called us His friend. To know the reality of His love and then to turn away from Him causes untold grief in our souls. The constant call to return is therefore scented with the aroma of His love, and lays claim to the memory of our hearts in which we rehearse the joy of His companionship. Something within us tugs upon our consciousness unrelentingly until we come back. And when we return to Him, our bitterness against others wilts in the light of His love.

But another incentive for repentance is to be found in the very nature of God Himself. The text which traditionally is tied to the Tashlich service on Rosh HaShanah is Mic 7:18-20 which begins, “Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious acts of the remnant of His possession?” Why is our God so compassionate and forgiving? The text continues: “because He delights in unchanging love.” Here then is the second compelling motive for repentance: God never holds back forgiveness from anyone who seeks it. When we go to those against whom we have sinned, we never are sure whether forgiveness or rejection will be forthcoming. But we never need fear God’s response. Anyone who comes to Him seeking forgiveness is guaranteed of His quick and all encompassing kindness. Always will the repentant one hear the kind words of forgiveness from the God who delights in unchanging love. Based upon the full and finished sacrifice of Yeshua, the Father eagerly forgives and restores all who come to Him with a contrite heart. And a contrite heart is the sign of true repentance. Not a self-made agenda that attempts to “use repentance” to further one’s own designs, but a full submission to Him and His ways.

On this Yom Teruah we are therefore urged once again, as we hear the moaning, ancient song of the shofar, to consider those paths in our lives which are leading us away from communion with the Almighty—taking us away from the delights of His presence, and to turn from them and return to walking with Him. Perhaps it is something well established in our lives from which we must turn, or something we have neglected. Maybe it’s a long entrenched habit that we know is destructive to our

soul and thus to those we touch. Perhaps it is apathy or coldness toward the Lord and others. Perhaps it is our unwillingness to forgive others who have sinned against us. "...forgive us our transgression even as we forgive those who have sinned against us." Whatever it may be, God continues to call us back to Himself—to a life of worship in which His Name is set apart through our lives and words.

This season of "*teshuvah*" (repentance) is therefore one of self inspection. We miss the divine message of these *mo'dim* if our perspective is on others. Our first concern must be for making our own hearts right before the Almighty. Only then can we pray and seek spiritual healing for others, asking God to grant them repentance.

May the Ruach have His way in us as He prepares us as the bride of the Messiah. May we respond to His urgings as He calls us to return. And may our hearts, made soft once again by the "oil" which He administers, rejoice in His companionship as we experience His forgiveness and the renewed friendship He offers. May we find that settled peace which comes from abiding in His sukkah!