

Yishmael's Lessons of Repentance

For me, one of the most emotive texts in the Rosh Hashana prayers is Hayom Harat Olam. This small paragraph follows each of the three sets of shofar blasts during Musaf. Many remember it fondly through the tunes they grew up with in their childhood shuls. The paragraph reads as follows:

היום הרת עולם. היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים. אם בָּנִים. אם פְּעֻדִים. אם בָּנִים רַחֲמֵנוּ כְּרַחֵם אָב על בָּנִים. וְאִם פְּעֻדִים עֲיִנֵנוּ לְךָ תְּלִיזוֹת. עַד שֶׁתִּחַנְּנוּ וְתוֹצִיאַ כְּאוֹר מִשְׁפָּטֵנוּ אֲיוֹם קְדוֹשׁ:

On this day the world was conceived. On this day all creations stand in judgement — whether as children or as servants. If as children, have mercy upon us as a father has mercy on his children. If as servants,

our eyes depend upon You, until You favor us and bring our judgement forth like the light of day. Revered and Holy One!

When one pays a little more attention to the words, it is striking that we address Hashem as both children and servants. That is to say that we see him both as a Father and as a Master. Now, if I were crafting the prayers for the Day of Judgement, I would have instinctively chosen to address Hashem solely as our Father. After all, it is a time we are seeking mercy. The father figure may have rules and use discipline but ultimately, He loves his child unconditionally. The master figure inherently demands stricter justice and has less patience for the frailties of the servant's mistakes. Why do we even



mention Hashem as a Master at such a critical moment of the year?

It turns out that this short paragraph is retelling a story we have heard before in Jewish history. It describes someone who was both a son and a servant and who prayed for his life in both capacities. Understanding who that person was and the situation he experienced are central in framing our

Rosh Hashana davening, especially this year during the continued war in Israel.

I would like to expand upon an idea from the work of R. Shimon Schwab, *Maayan Beit Hashoeva*, Bereishit 21:9. He argues that there is a character in Tanakh who closely aligns with the figure described in this paragraph in our Rosh Hashana machzor. His name was Yishmael. Born as the first son to Avraham and Hagar, this young man was indeed a complex character. Sarah had initially suggested the union between Avraham and Hagar as a form of surrogacy after her inability to conceive with Avraham. But the relationship was ill-fated. Upon Hagar's conceiving, Sarah soon demanded the expulsion of the pregnant Hagar and later, after the birth of Yishmael, she ordered Yishmael and his mother to be sent from their home again. Part of the complexity of Yishmael stems from his identity as both the son to Avraham and the servant to Sarah, since he was born to Sarah's maidservant. Here is our son/servant model that the paragraph in our machzor seems to refer to. But there must be more meaning in this prayer than this dual son or servant identity. Our machzor would not include the prayer of such a person unless it had significant theological import to us on Rosh Hashana.

A closer examination of Yishmael's exile from his father's home reveals why he was chosen as the model for this prayer. Let us review the facts of this story, found in Bereishit 21. It should be obvious that this story requires attention on Rosh Hashana, since it is the kriyat HaTorah of the first day of Rosh Hashana. In this chapter, the Torah teaches of the birth of Avraham and Sarah's son, Yitzchak. The parents recognize this long-awaited moment as a miracle from Hashem. Upon weaning Yitzchak, Avraham throws a large feast

in appreciation of the milestone. It is after this that we hear of concerning behavior demonstrated by Yishmael.

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֵת בֶּן הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה
לְאַבְרָהָם מִצִּיחָק.

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing.
Bereishit 21:9

We are not explicitly told what it is that Yishmael says to Yitzchak as part of his “laughter” or playing. Whatever it was, Sarah responded swiftly and firmly to Yishmael's actions.

וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרְשׁ הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֵת בְּנָהּ
כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת עִם בְּנֵי עַם יִצְחָק.
She said to Abraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

Bereishit 21:10

Her actions seem somewhat drastic for what seems to be a simple case of sibling rivalry. But her words to Avraham indicate that it was more than a joke. Whatever Yishmael said had implications on the inheritance of Yitzchak — her son and the true heir to Avraham. That is why she emphasizes Yishmael's exclusion from inheritance. Somehow it is imperative for her to remove Yishmael so that his plan to inherit instead of Yitzchak fails. What kind of joke could lead to such a conclusion? Why does Sarah take this so seriously? I believe the Torah already explained Yishmael's joke a few pesukim back.

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צָחַק עִשָׂוּהָ לִי אֲלֵקִים כָּל הַשְּׂמֵעַ
יִצְחָק לִי.

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

Bereishit 21:6

Yitzchak is a boy born to a 100-year-old father and 90-year-old mother after decades of a childless marriage. The idea that they could bear a child at this stage

in their lives was simply incredulous. The name “Yitzchak” means laughter, because of the sheer improbability of the miracle. When Sarah and Avraham named him Yitzchak (“he will laugh”), their laughter expressed joy and happiness. Yishmael also laughed about the birth of his younger half-brother. But his laughter expressed scorn and denial. It was too strange to be true. Sarah must have picked up the infant boy on the doorstep. He must have been the product of an unwanted pregnancy or an adoption from a local orphanage. Yitzchak was not really the child of Avraham and Sarah, joked Yishmael. That was Yishmael's laughter. That was his joke. Such a false narrative had no place in the house of Sarah. It threatened the legitimacy of Yitzchak's future and Sarah therefore demanded an immediate expulsion of Yishmael.

It is at this moment that the question of Yishmael's identity emerges. He was, after all, Avraham's son. Sons who misbehave can be punished but generally not banished. Yet he was also Sarah's servant. Servants who disobey are sent away. Avraham did not feel comfortable sending away his son. Hashem intervened to tell Avraham to listen to Sarah. Yishmael was deemed more servant than son.

We know the rest of the story. Hagar and Yishmael wander in the desert for a while until their supplies are depleted and they are hopelessly lost. At such a time Hagar leaves her dying son under a bush knowing that he will shortly expire. She prays for him, and he too prays for his own life. It is at that moment that Hashem answers. But Hashem does not answer the prayers of Hagar.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶת קוֹל הַנְּעִיר וַיִּקְרָא מִלְּאָף
אֲלֵקִים אֶל הַגֵּר מִן הַשָּׂמִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה לָּךְ
הַגֵּר אֵל תִּירָאִי כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶל קוֹל הַנְּעִיר
בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא שָׂם.

God heard the cry of the boy, and a messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is."

Bereishit 21:17

Hashem hears the prayer of the lad himself. Why? What about his prayers were so compelling right now?

One can imagine what Yishmael must have been thinking throughout this narrative. He just made a few jokes at the expense of his half-brother, but Sarah would not let it go. You can imagine him begging his father not to send him away, but to no avail. He could not prevail as a son. He suffers as a refugee and has no place to go. As the rations disappear, his mother, all he has left, also abandons him under a bush. He is left by both his parents to die an ignoble death. As he lay there with his vision starting to blur, one thought must have crossed his mind — "This is exactly what I tried to claim about my brother Yitzchak." Yishmael had spread a rumor that Yitzchak was an orphan left on the doorstep, an unwanted pregnancy, abandoned by both parents. Now he was abandoned by both his parents, Avraham and Hagar. At this crucial epiphany, Yishmael grasped the damage he had done and the pain he had inflicted by his rumors about Yitzchak. Only once he experienced it for himself could he feel the shame fully and beg Hashem for mercy. Hashem answered that prayer of heartfelt shame and contrition.

To approach our Father in Heaven and earn the right to call Him our Father, we must first respect and honor other Jews as fellow children of Hashem.

Perhaps this is why we read this section as the Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashana, and why the paragraph of Hayom Harat Olam appears in our machzor. We, too, stand in front of Hashem on Rosh Hashana at a time of great uncertainty about our future and much shame about our past actions. We did not live up to our calling in the last year. We did not take our mission seriously enough. We, like Yishmael, beg our Father to have mercy on us and not reject us. But we also beseech Hashem that if we do not merit to be rehabilitated as a son, that as a servant our judgement be made clear as day to us, so we, like Yishmael, can truly repent and ourselves. That is exactly what the paragraph of Hayom Harat Olam presents as our two arguments of defense on our Day of Judgement. This may explain why in L'David Hashem Ori, Tehillim 27, the midrash (*Vayikra Rabbah* 21:4) describes Rosh Hashana as *ori* — my light. It is a day we hope to see the light of clarity in our lives so we can move forward.

I believe the relevance of this story has even more import for Rosh Hashana 5785. In Tanakh, the Jewish people

are called both children and servants of Hashem. We address Hashem as Avinu Malkeinu — our Father, our King. What is the determining factor that might shift us from being Hashem's child to being Hashem's servant? Is there a way to control which model of relationship we are in? How can we have Hashem in our lives as a parent and not a master?

Perhaps the distinction also goes back to this story with Yishmael and Yitzchak. Yishmael lost his rights as a son when he undermined the legitimacy of Yitzchak as a son. One cannot be considered a son if one's brother is not a son. Once we reject their legitimacy, then we downgrade our relationship, too. Without extrapolating this to Israel and other nations, this is a telling lesson for Jews today. To approach our Father in Heaven and earn the right to call Him our Father, we must first respect and honor other Jews as fellow children of Hashem. Although the last 11 months of war have been incredibly challenging and painful, one of the beautiful nuances to emerge is the *achdut* of Jews — across country divides, across religious divides, across political divides and across cultural divides. That spirit of *achdut* we have seen and expressed is what allows us the divine mercy we so desperately pray for on Rosh Hashana. May we all be deemed children of Hashem in our eyes and in His eyes, and may that lead to a true and complete salvation.



See more shiurim and articles from
Rabbi Trump at [www.yutorah.org/teachers/
Rabbi-Ya'akov-Trump](http://www.yutorah.org/teachers/Rabbi-Ya'akov-Trump)