

The new month of Tishrei began last night. This time of the hidden moon, Rosh Hodesh, is a magical time, a time of unlimited potential - veiled in darkness and the glimmer of distant stars.

It is the moon, waxing and waning, that makes us aware of the passage of time – the regular rhythms of change from low tide to high, from darkness to light. Soon, when the Full Moon arrives, she will shine through the open roof of our sukkah as we celebrate in joy.

But now – in this quiet time of reflection, on our journey of return, we gather to find ourselves, and to open our eyes to a future yet to be revealed.

The words of Torah that we read today, we read on Rosh HaShanah every year. And this year we are again presented with the challenge of seeing something that was not previously revealed to us, even though it has always been there.

Before we reach today's verses, however, a recap of some preceding events is helpful. God tells Avraham that he will be the ancestor of a great nation, as numerous as the stars of heaven. However, Avraham has no children and Sarah is too old to conceive. Sarah decides that she could perhaps help the process and brings her servant Hagar into the picture as a surrogate. Hagar becomes pregnant and feels important and empowered while Sarah feels demeaned. In her unhappiness and jealousy Sarah lashes out at Hagar until Hagar runs away. But an angel comes to Hagar and tells her to return, that she is bearing a son - that she will be the mother of a great nation. The angel also tells Hagar her son will be a "wild donkey of a man." He will prosper, but he will also constantly be at war with others and they with him. Hagar returns and has a son, who she names Yishmael, meaning "God hears."

In the verses read today three angels visit Avraham and predict that within a year Sarah will give birth. Sarah laughs – *litzachek* – how could this possible be? And the angels caution – may your laughter be only from joy – not in jest. And Yitzchak – named for Sarah's laughter – is named for this laughter of pure infectious joy – and the deep awareness of the miracles that come by walking the path of Hashem.

Time passes and Sarah sees that Yishmael is an unsuitable influence for Yitzchak, and an unsuitable person to inherit any leadership position within their tribe.

Sarah is particularly disturbed by Yishmael's laughing – using the same root word – *litzachek*, not in joy, but in cruelty, by mocking and teasing. Sarah demands that Avraham send both Hagar and Yishmael away. Avraham loves this son, but he reluctantly does as she says. Curiously, Torah notes that he sends them away with only one skin of water and a little food.

They wander aimlessly in the wilderness of Beer Sheva, and soon are close to perishing. Hagar cries out in despair, sitting apart from her son. And Torah says, God heard the voice of the boy, and then shows Hagar a well of water so that they might survive.

So much about this story raises questions. Why were Sarah and Hagar not able to put aside their personal hurts for the good of the tribe? Why have Yishmael's worst tendencies not been curbed and soothed by his parents? Why does Avraham provide so meagerly for Hagar's and Yishmael's survival? Why does Hagar create so much distance from her son in a moment of joint peril? Why, in a land called Be'er Sheva, the place of seven wells, can water not be found? And why do the Sages emphasize that God responded to Yishmael's tears, and his wordless cry.

It is the last of these questions that I would like to focus on today.

Yishmael is prone to violence and mockery and treating others callously. It is his behavior, and not Hagar's, that directly threatens the tribe, that ultimately causes their expulsion. Yet it is his "silent cry" that God hears – *v'yishma Elohim et-kol hana'ar*. Yishmael – God hears. And God answers – with love.

There is a principle set forth in Talmud - *ahavah mekalkalet et ha'shurah* – which means, love upsets or disrupts the order.

Love is what is necessary to truly hear the voice of another – even if it is coming from an unlikely place – and even it is unspoken. Ahavah gives us a way to provide water to the thirsty, to respond with kindness, to lift the fallen. Love has the power, like the moon, to alter the tides, and to change the boundary lines of sea and shore. Love produces radical change.

The Sages add to this – *sin'a mekalkalet et ha'shurah* – hate also upsets the order.

Essentially, every action is balanced by an opposite and equal reaction – for every swing of the pendulum towards hate, there can be somewhere a corresponding swing towards love – they are, in a certain sense two sides of the same flawed coin of humanity.

Divine love is unceasing. "Ani l'dodi v'dodi li. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. " These words are etched upon our hearts. "V'ahavta et Yah Elohecha" we chant every day, reminding us to be loved and to love.

The question that is being asked here is: how can we love more! How do we love someone whose fists are raised in rage? How do we learn to listen – to hear the silent cries of desperation?

We cannot prevent hate, injustice, and unkindness, from entering the world. And there are even moments when we perhaps must allow ourselves to feel hate – to understand its parameters – what is driving it – if only to generate the pendulum swing back towards love.

We can hate the idea of us or our loved ones dying of Covid – and so we respond with science and love. We can hate what is happening in America, and we can respond by voting, by protesting – in the name of love. We can hate that our mother earth is suffering, her lungs filled with smoke, her forests in flames, we hear her silent cry – and so we must respond – with a great upswelling of love for our miraculous blue green home and all the creatures who dwell upon her.

God hears all cries – even those that are silent. And God shall respond with love - even to those who do not know any other way other than to be at war with the world.

And so that is our task. To love the stranger. To love someone who does not look like us or think like us, who does not act like us. It is love that will disrupt the order – love that will turn enemies into friends, injustice into justice – death into life.

We are not only Yitzchak, born of joyous laughter, but also Yishmael – God hears. How do we open the silent wells of our souls, brimming with tears, to reveal the prayers of our heart?

We can start - simply by blessing. In blessing, we open the gates of prayer, In blessing we are sending our love, all of our holy sparks, floating towards heaven

In blessing we utter six simple words that open the flow of divine energy – as our beloved Reb Marcia teaches in The Path of Blessing.

The Sages have helped us by making this day one that is filled with blessings. Blessings affirm our connection, our love, our devotion to God. Our blessings confirm that we live in a world of miracles.

When we pray – we release the knots in our souls. We reach towards God for guidance, for help, and for comfort. R' Avraham Joshua Heschel said, "Prayer begins where our power ends."

When we are powerless, in despair, when we do not even know what to say, our silent prayers are still heard.

And the wells of salvation shall appear - where we could not see them before.

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And so we bless this new year in gratitude and with love:

May it be a year where love triumphs to upset the order.

May we discover solutions that bring people together and not farther apart

May it be a year in which we applaud our successes and learn from our failures.

- a year of healing, for all peoples and for the Earth.
- a year of reading Torah, of studying and learning together
- a year of simchas, and lives well spent
- a year in which our love gives us courage and wisdom to act with love, for the good of the many, for the future for all.

Shanah tovah!