



## **ROSH HASHANAH** **The Faith of Survivors**

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There is something striking about the personalities whom our tradition places before us on Rosh Hashanah.

In the Torah readings, the Haftarot, and even in the prayers surrounding the sounding of the shofar, we encounter individuals who have endured extraordinary hardship. These are not people who have traveled through life untouched by suffering. Quite the opposite. Again and again, we meet people who have experienced their own Gehinnom — their own moments of darkness and profound uncertainty.

Sarah knows the anguish of childlessness. Year after year, she lives with longing, disappointment, and the painful question of whether the future she desperately desires will ever come to be.

Hagar is banished from her home and sent into the wilderness, where she reaches the horrifying moment in which she believes that she is about to watch her son die before her eyes. Unable to bear the sight, she moves away and cries.

Yitzchak experiences something almost unimaginable. The beloved son for whom Avraham and Sarah had waited so long is bound upon an altar, with the knife raised above him. The Torah tells us very little about the psychological aftermath of the Akeidah. Yet it is difficult to imagine that a person could pass through such an experience unchanged. Yitzchak emerges, in a very real sense, as a survivor of a near-sacrifice.

Like Sarah, Hannah too knows the pain of childlessness, year after year of longing and unanswered prayer. She, carries that pain into the sanctuary, seeking comfort and connection with God, only to be misunderstood by Eli, the spiritual leader of the generation, who initially mistakes her silent prayer for drunkenness.

There are also the Bnei haGolah, the exiles living in the diaspora who carry the trauma of shattered national life, having witnessed the devastation of their families, destruction of their communities, and the abuse of their wives and children.

And then, immediately before the sounding of the shofar, we recite Psalm 47, a psalm attributed to the sons of Korach. They emerged from a family story of rebellion and



catastrophe. Their very presence within our liturgy reminds us that a shattered past need not determine the future.

What do all of these personalities have in common?

They have all suffered. They have known fear, loneliness, disappointment, and loss. Their worlds have been shaken.

And yet none of them allows suffering to become the final chapter of the story.

Despite the darkness, they continue to seek a relationship with God. Despite their questions, they continue to believe that life possesses meaning and purpose. Despite what they have experienced, they refuse to surrender the moral and spiritual commitments that give their lives direction.

This is one of the deepest messages of Rosh Hashanah.

Faith is not reserved for people whose lives have unfolded according to plan. Religious commitment does not require us to pretend that pain is not painful, or that trauma leaves no scars. The heroes of Rosh Hashanah are not untouched people. They are wounded people who continue to walk forward.

They teach us that the question is not simply what happens to us. The question is what we choose to do with what has happened to us.

That message speaks with particular power to our generation.

Across the Jewish world, both collectively and personally, so many of us have been confronted with vulnerability and mortality. We have seen lives overturned in a moment. We have watched families experience unimaginable loss. We have discovered, once again, how fragile the assumptions upon which ordinary life is built can be.

There is no religious value in denying any of that pain.

Rosh Hashanah asks something different of us.

It asks whether, after confronting the fragility of life, we can still choose to live with purpose. Whether, after witnessing darkness, we can still choose to bring light. Whether, after experiencing disappointment, we can still pray. Whether, after discovering how uncertain the future can be, we can still commit ourselves to building it.

Sarah does.

Hagar does.

Yitzchak does.



Hannah does.  
The Exiles do.  
The sons of Korach do.

Their lives are not defined only by what they endured. They are defined by what they became after enduring it.

Perhaps that is why these are the people whom Jewish tradition brings into the synagogue with us on Rosh Hashanah. As we stand before God and contemplate the uncertainty of the year ahead, we are reminded that human beings possess an extraordinary capacity to rebuild, to believe, to create, and to recommit.

Not because we have escaped difficulty, but sometimes precisely because we have passed through it.

The shofar does not call us back to a world without scars. It calls us to take those scars with us and nevertheless move forward—to reconnect with God, to recommit ourselves to the Jewish story and our people, and to embrace again the moral responsibilities for which we were placed in this world.

The personalities of Rosh Hashanah remind us that even after one has walked through a personal Gehinnom, a meaningful future remains possible.

Perhaps, after everything we have experienced, creating that future is not merely possible.

It is our responsibility and opportunity.