

THE TIME IS NOW

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And G-d remembered Sarah as He had said, and G-d did for Sarah as He had spoken. And Sarah conceived, and she gave birth to a child to Avraham, a son to his old age, in the time which G-d had told him." [Genesis 21:1-2]

Why do we read this Torah portion on Rosh HaShanah? How does it add to our observance of the Day of Judgement, our consciousness of G-d's Kingship, or our obligation to desist from sin and to return to Him and His ways?

The Talmud [Rosh Hashanah 11a] says that G-d "remembered" both Sarah and Chanah on Rosh Hashanah, answering their prayers to have children. Therefore the Torah reading on the First Day of Rosh Hashanah concerns the birth of Yitzchak, while the Haftorah concerns Chanah's prayer and the birth of her son, the prophet Shmuel. By reading these portions, we not only recall their greatness, but we inspire ourselves to pray as they did.

If we are searching, however, for a lesson in repentance from the Torah reading, it is easily found -- just from an unexpected source. In our parsha, it is Yishmael, the evil child whom Avraham was forced to expel from his home, who is our model.

"And G-d heard the voice of the child, and an angel of G-d called to Hagar from the heavens, and it said to her, 'what is your trouble, Hagar, do not fear, for G-d has heard the voice of the child, according to where he is now.'" [21:17]

The Torah uses an unusual expression -- "according to where he is now." These words teach us a profound lesson: G-d judges each person's current behavior and mindset, regardless of the past or future. A person is judged "according to where he is now."

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki explains: "[Yishmael] is judged according to his actions now, and not according to what he will do in the future. The ministering angels were accusing him and saying, 'Master of the World, someone whose children will kill your children with thirst in the future, to him, you raise a well?' And He answered them, and asked, 'Right now, what is he: a righteous person, or an evil person?' And they answered him, 'Righteous.' And He said to them, 'According to his actions now, I judge him, and this is "according to where he is now."'"

When it comes to a holiday such as Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, many people feel like hypocrites, or at least insincere. "How can I go and ask forgiveness, what I am just going to go back

to the same behavior tomorrow?" To a certain extent, this sentiment is correct. If a person is planning to commit a crime tomorrow, then he can hardly go before G-d today and claim to regret all the evil he has ever done.

This is only true, however, where the person is actually planning to do this. If a person genuinely feels regret, and wants to change, and resolves to change, then the fact that she has been making the same resolution for the last 15 years -- and breaking it -- isn't relevant. What is relevant is what she is thinking now.

Even if you have been confronting the same character flaws, the same misbehavior, the same problems every year -- that doesn't matter. What does matter is that you resolve to solve these problems once and for all, and pray throughout Rosh Hashanah that G-d give you the strength and support to meet your goal. Don't worry about what happened last year, or the year before. The time is now.