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Ba'asher Hu-Sham: No Day But Today

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Hello. I'm Rabbi Alex Weissman from Congregation Agudas Achim in Attleboro, Massachusetts. I'm excited to share some Torah with you all as we prepare for Rosh Hashanah. I'm in my dining room in Providence, Rhode Island. Probably for obvious reasons, it's been a difficult year. And you don't need me to explain to you why this year has been difficult. It's been difficult for all of us in different ways as we've navigated the various kinds of brokenness this year.

But one thing I do want to say about it is, I want to share some wisdom from both Rabbi Lisa Goldstein and Adrienne Maree Brown. And one thing they talk about, separately, although they share in common, is the idea that we live fractally, we live in a fractal. And what I mean by that, is that whatever's happening inside of us, whatever's happening in our hearts and minds and psyches, is also playing out in our relationships, in our communities, in the wider world and so, too, the other way around, right? So whatever's happening in the wider world is also happening within us in some way. And we can't live in a broken world without experiencing some of that brokenness ourselves.

So what this means for us, as we approach Rosh Hashanah, is that many of us, myself included, are approaching Rosh Hashanah having lived not as our best selves in 5780 I know that more than usual I've lost my temper, I've spaced out during meetings, I've contributed to food waste more than usual. I'll spare you the rest of my personal *vidui*, my personal confession. That's between me and God and anybody that I've wronged over this past year.

But I do share a little bit of this because I think many of us are in the same boat, of having not been our best selves in 5780, the Hebrew year that's coming to a close. And I think especially when there is so much external brokenness in the world, I know my mind can be consumed by external brokenness and ignore my own personal spiritual growth and transformation. So for me, Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity to hold both of those "brokennesses" together. To both look externally and think about what I want to change, what I want to heal, and also to reflect internally about who I am and how I can be a better person this year. And this year, more than most, I find myself a little overwhelmed by beginning that process.

When I reflect on some of those least proud moments of this year, it seems more daunting. So I'm faced with a question of how to do *heshbon hanefesh*, how to do that soul accounting, during such a hard year, a year that seems interminable, it seems overwhelming, more broken than usual. And Rosh Hashanah is also known as *Yom Hadin*. The Day of Judgment. It's our

judgment day. And whether we believe that that judgment comes from God, whether it comes from our community, our relationships, or just from our own selves, it's an opportunity to face that judgment in a way that is honest and clear and committed to being better.

So to start with Torah, and I want to think about the first Torah reading that we do on day one of Rosh Hashanah, Genesis 21. And it's a really heartbreaking story. Some of us may be familiar with it, but it involves Abraham and Sarah, they're living with Hagar and Ishmael. And Sarah feels worried about Hagar and Ishmael in their home and asks Abraham to send them away. Abraham feels uncertain about this, but after consulting with God, God assures Abraham that things will be fine. And Abraham gives them some bread and water and sends them into the wilderness.

Now one thing to know about Ishmael, is that he's mixed. In terms of if he's good or if he's bad, at least as our tradition understands him. Sometimes we have good guys and bad guys, and Ishmael's a little bit complicated, but I'll say generally our tradition imagines him as a bad guy. And we could talk more about that some other time, but just to know that that's generally how he's understood.

So back in our story, back in our moment in the desert, Hagar and Ishmael are in the desert. They run out of water. And in one of the most devastating moments in the Torah, Hagar, knowing that they're out of water and both she and her son are bound to die, places Ishmael, her son, under a bush and walks away, so that she doesn't have to see her son die of thirst. And they both weep.

The text reads, "God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel 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." And it's that last phrase that I want us to pay special attention to. The cry of the boy where he is. If you hear Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, this phrase will sound like [sings] "*ba'asher hu-sham.*" So that phrase, *ba'asher hu-sham*, is what I want to spend some time with today.

God decides to send them an angel, and show them where there's water so that they do not die of thirst. And there's a *midrash* that is curious about this decision. So it imagines the angels asking God, why should Ishmael have water? Since his descendants will destroy the Israelites by thirst, right? Why do something good for this person who we know in the future is going to be a bad guy? Again, as our tradition imagines him.

And God replies, "But now he is innocent and I judge him according to what he is now, *ba'asher hu-sham.*" I judge him according to *ba'asher hu-sham*, what he is now. And what our tradition extrapolates from this, is that on Rosh Hashanah we are not judged for any sins, imperfections, transgressions that we have yet to commit or embody. We are not being judged for the future.

This might not be such a relief, to not be judged for the future. This might seem intuitive. But as this tradition has evolved over the years, there's a teaching about this that gets a little more radical. Alei Shur, who's a 20th century rabbi born in Germany, raised secular, became ultra-Orthodox, and moved to what was then Palestine, expands on this teaching. And says, not only are we not judged for what we are going to do in the future, but we are not judged for what we've done in the past. All right, *ba'asher hu-sham*, where we are in this moment is what we're going to be judged for.

This is a radical, innovative read of the text that lets us try to be present, right? So as we think about all those imperfections, transgressions over the past year, what Alei Shur is teaching us, that Ishmael and God teach us, is that what is most important is *ba'asher hu-sham*. Who we are, how we are on the day of Rosh Hashanah itself. This doesn't mean that we forget *teshuvah*, that we don't try to make amends with people, that we don't try to commit to doing better the entire year. This is another layer of spiritual practice, so that whatever you're doing on Rosh Hashanah, whether you are streaming services, whether you decide to spend the day in the woods, whatever it is that you do, try to be the best version of yourself on this Day of Judgment.

Yom Hadin, this Day of Judgment, again, wherever that judgment comes from, let Ishmael be your model, that in this moment when we are in our own desert, in our own wilderness, we are weeping, we are crying out, we are uncertain of our future. Rosh Hashanah, *Yom Hadin*, this Day of Judgment reminds us that there is no day but today, *ba'asher hu-sham*. Wherever we are on Rosh Hashanah, that is where we are.

So, for *Yom Hadin*, for the Day of Judgment, may we all be blessed with the presence and patience to make our judgment day, and every day, one where we strive to be the best people we can be, *ba'asher hu-sham*, wherever we are. *Shanah tovah*.