

# FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER CONSERVATIVE YESHIVA

## TORAH SPARKS

### Rosh Hashanah

September 16-17, 2023 | 1-2 Tishrei 5784

**Torah Day 1:** Genesis 21:1-34; Numbers 29:1-6

**Torah Day 2:** Genesis 22:1-24; Numbers 29:1-6

**Haftorah Day 1:** Samuel 1:1-2:10 **Haftorah Day 2:** Jeremiah 31:1-19

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### Sarah, Hagar, and God

#### Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

#### *Parashah*

On Rosh HaShanah, we read the stories of parents and children. While our liturgy instructs us to imagine God as our father, our Torah readings provide the most disturbing examples of what it means to be a parent. In our reading for the first day of Rosh HaShanah, we read the stories of two mothers, Sarah and Hagar, each navigating how to separate their love for their children from their inability to provide for their children.

There is not much written about Sarah's relationship with Isaac - the entirety of the story appears in this one chapter in just a few verses. We read of Sarah suckling Isaac, Isaac being weaned, and Sarah asking Abraham to exile Hagar and Ishmael for the sake of Isaac.

Afterward, we will never see Sarah and Isaac together again. Sarah, our very first matriarch, the paradigmatic mother, provides us with a peculiar example of what mothering means. For Sarah, mothering is loss. For Sarah, parenting is realizing that a child is and can be more than she is.

The first image of Sarah as parent is her radical amazement at the ability to nurse. She is an old woman, and yet miraculously, her breasts flow with milk. We read her laughter-filled exclamation, "Sarah is suckling sons!" The emphasis in the text is on breastfeeding, on Sarah providing nourishment to Isaac. The image we receive of Sarah as parent, the only bit of information we have about her relationship with Isaac, is that she fed him, that she provided for his needs with her own body. Later texts will run wild with this image, partially in order to solve the problem of why Sarah is said to be suckling sons, plural, when she has birthed only Isaac. We read stories in the Talmud (Bava Metzia 87a) and in various midrashim (e.g. Bereshit Rabbah 53:9) of Sarah exposing her breasts which "gushed forth like two springs" so that the children of all who doubted that she was Isaac's birth mother could suckle from her. Sarah's ability to nurse becomes proof of her status as mother.

Yet just as quickly as this image is given, it is taken away. Just as Sarah is finally happy, laughing and content, secure in her status as mother of Abraham's child and recipient of God's promise, all of this is threatened. Immediately after we read of Sarah the nursing mother, we read of the weaning of Isaac. Sarah has one verse worth of connection with her son before he outgrows her. We read "the child grew and he was weaned." Sarah disappears from the story, she is not even the active agent in the weaning of her son. From this point, he is in

Abraham's hands. Sarah watches Ishmael playing Isaac from afar, she sees but is no longer able to intercede on behalf of her son. Rather, her requests for Isaac go to Abraham. Sarah may know her child best, may have his best interests at heart in a way that even God will acknowledge, but her days as Isaac's provider are over. He has grown up. He needs a mother but he does not suckle. Sarah lets him go.

Hagar provides a completely different model of motherhood. Her story shares striking parallels to that of Sarah. She too will become unable to provide for her child. But her reaction is totally different. Whereas Isaac outgrows Sarah and progresses beyond needing her as a milk-machine, Ishmael is never allowed to outgrow Hagar. Hagar holds on desperately to her identity as provider for Ishmael. Hagar keeps Ishmael, who is no longer a child in our story, completely dependent on her. When Abraham sends them away from the camp, Hagar gives up on Ishmael when she runs out of subsistence for him. When there is no water left in her waterskin, she casts Ishmael off to die, retreating from him, closing her eyes, and crying. This image of Hagar as mother is in stark contrast to that of Sarah. Sarah is granted flowing milk for her child, so much so that it is almost comical. Sarah chooses to wean the child, to stop providing substance for Isaac because she trusts that he can support himself. Hagar, however, never has enough and cannot trust that there will be enough. She has never been able to provide for Ishmael. The defining image of Hagar is that of a mother with an empty waterskin closing her eyes so as not to see the death of her child. When God then opens her eyes to the abundance of water all around her, Hagar resumes her role as provider. She gives drink to Ishmael. She will go on to get a wife for Ishmael. Hagar cannot let Ishmael go and cannot let go of her own identity as mother-provider.

Sarah's love for Isaac allows her to let go. Hagar's love for Ishmael requires her to hold on. As we imagine God as parent and ourselves as child during these days, both models become attractive. I want a God who allows me to grow, to change, to do teshuvah. And I want a God who holds me tight, binding me, providing for me.

## How We Can Write Ourselves into the Book of Life

**Rabbi Daniel Raphael Silverstein**

*Insights from Hassidut*

*Rabbi Daniel Silverstein teaches Hassidut at the CY and directs Applied Jewish Spirituality ([www.appliedjewishspirituality.org](http://www.appliedjewishspirituality.org)). In these weekly videos, he shares Hasidic insights on the parsha or calendar.*

Click below to watch the video:



## The Shofar on Shabbat

**Rabbi Joshua Kulp**

*The Halakhah in the Parashah*

Rosh Hashanah of 5784 begins on Shabbat, which as is well known, means that the shofar will not be blown until Sunday, the second day of Rosh Hashanah. But why not? What is wrong with blowing a shofar on Shabbat?

This is actually a complicated issue with a long history of halakhic disputes that have continued almost to our day. But right off the bat I want to note that when Rosh Hashanah is two days, as it has always been since the end of the Talmudic period (and perhaps earlier), the question is slightly less critical than it might have been originally, for the shofar will be blown on the second day. But if originally Rosh Hashanah was observed for only one day, then refraining from blowing the shofar on Shabbat would have completely eliminated a positive commandment from the Torah.

The issue is addressed originally in Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 4:1:

If Yom Tov of Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat, they would blow the shofar in the Temple but not in the country.

After the destruction of the Temple, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai decreed that it should be blown [on Shabbat] in every place where there was a court.

According to the Mishnah, the shofar was originally blown on Shabbat in the Temple (there are two interpretations of “the Temple—I am following that of the Rambam) but not outside thereof. After the destruction, R. Yochanan ben Zakai enacted that it should be blown anywhere that had a

court. The reason for this is in my opinion calendrical. Musical instruments and loud sounds are generally not supposed to be made on Shabbat (an issue I am not delving into here, for more see [here](#)). But there is a mitzvah to make such a noise on Rosh Hashanah. In a place where one knows that it is Rosh Hashanah because that is where the calendar is set, the mitzvah to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah overrides the prohibition on blowing shofar on Shabbat, and thus the shofar can be sounded. But in other areas, it might not be known if the current day is the first day of Tishrei and not the last day of Elul. In such places, the mitzvah is uncertain and therefore the shofar would not be sounded.

Both [Talmudim](#) search for a more substantial reason why there would be a place that does not blow the shofar on Shabbat. After all, this is a mitzvah from the Torah. How could one simply not observe this mitzvah? To answer this puzzle, they note a small difference in the wording between the two places in the Torah that refer to blasts being sounded on Shabbat. [Leviticus 23:24](#) refers to Rosh Hashanah as a day of “memorial of blasts.” In contrast, [Numbers 29:1](#) refers to a “day of blasts.” This contradiction leads to the conclusion that at times we remember the blasts—when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat. And at times we actually sound the blasts—when Rosh Hashanah falls on any other day. However, both Talmudim also notice that this solution “over-solves” the problem. If there is a verse which states that the shofar is not sounded when the holiday falls on Shabbat, then why is it sounded in the Temple or in places that have courts?

While the Yerushalmi does not come to a definitive answer, in the [Bavli](#), Rava answers that the problem is that mandating the blowing of the shofar on Shabbat could lead to carrying in the public domain, a prohibition that would not be waived in order to enable hearing the shofar.

This is actually quite a radical statement—out of fear that one will transgress, a positive commandment is ignored.

In the post-Talmudic period, the question arose—can the shofar be blown on Shabbat in a place in which there is a major court? After all, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai made a decree that this is exactly what should be done, and there is nothing in either Talmud to suggest that his decree no longer applies. R. Yitzchak Alfasi (known as the Rif), the 11th century N. African rabbi who was probably the most influential posek in halakhic history, indeed ruled that in his court, the shofar would be blown on Shabbat Rosh Hashanah. But alas, his was a lone voice and no other recorded medieval or early modern posek, even the [Rambam](#), ruled that the shofar may be blown on Shabbat in our times. There is no doubt that this is evidence of both resistance to change and a lessening in the perception of rabbinic authority, two phenomena that often go hand in hand. In theory, the shofar should be blown in courts that enjoy high authority. But once entrenched, the custom to not do so was almost impossible to uproot.

This issue was revisited with the return of large numbers of Jews to the Land of Israel in the early 20th century. [R. Akiva Yosef Schlessinger](#), a student of two great rabbis in Hungary, emigrated to Palestine, where he tried to instill the blowing of the shofar in Jerusalem on Shabbat Rosh Hashanah. In his opinion, the original ruling of the Mishnah had not changed. While there are many reasons that he advocated for this change, from a meta-halakhic perspective it is clear that such a change would signal the halakhic, religious and perhaps even cosmic significance of Zionism. Israel is not just any country and Jerusalem is not just any city. Jerusalem is the city of the Temple, the place from which Torah goes out to the world. The shofar's call to God cannot be stifled on Rosh Hashanah

in this place, even if the day is also Shabbat. But again, this was a lone voice and today, in traditional circles no one blows the shofar on Shabbat.

Examining the history of this fascinating halakhah highlights moments of great halakhic innovation and audacity as well as moments of timidity. R. Yohanan ben Zakkai was perhaps the greatest halakhic innovator in Jewish history, and through a series of takkanot (rabbinic enactments), he ensured that Judaism survived the cataclysmic destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. By enacting that the shofar should be sounded in every place that there is a court, R. Yohanan ben Zakkai clearly sent the message that the authority of the leaders in these courts was no less than that enjoyed by the leaders in the Temple. In the eleventh century the Rif sent such a message in North Africa—his authority was no less than that enjoyed by the Geonim in Babylonia, who had led the Jews for the five hundred years following the end of the Talmudic period.

While it might be easy to criticize the other voices for their timidity, there is a value to this halakhic approach as well. By the time of the Rif in the eleventh century, the custom to not blow the shofar on Shabbat had been firmly entrenched. To tell people all of a sudden that this year we can blow the shofar on Shabbat would have been jarring. And the message that Jewish practice remains stable even after the return to the land of Israel is perhaps equally important to the message that it must change. Just as there are two days of Rosh Hashanah, there are two sides to this debate as well.