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By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A rabbinic tradition has it that Rosh Hashana marks the date of the creation of Adam and Eve. It was on the sixth day of the week, Friday, and the sun was shining. But soon the sun began to set and the world darkened. Since this was Adam and Eve's first day on earth, they had never before experienced night. When darkness set in, they were terrified. Would this darkness last forever? Was the world coming to an end?

Then they experienced sunrise…and the return of light. It was the seventh day, Shabbat. A Midrash states that Adam was so grateful that he composed a Psalm, *Mizmor shir leyom ha-Shabbat.* "It is good to give thanks to the Lord and sing praise to Your name most High. To declare Your love in the morning and Your faithfulness at night."

The psalm's message: we declare God's love in the morning when the sun shines, when things are going well; but when it's night, when times are frightening, we rely on God's faithfulness to see us through.

Just as Midrash ascribes a prayer to Adam, the Talmud (Berakhot 26b) ascribes a prayer to Abraham. "Abraham instituted the morning prayer (*shaharit*) after witnessing the destruction of the wicked city of Sodom. Whereas Adam prayed after experiencing physical darkness, Abraham prayed after witnessing spiritual darkness. Both had to learn to overcome moments of perplexity and see the dawn of new and better times.

Interestingly, the Torah readings on Rosh Hashana are not about Adam and Eve. Although they were the parents of humanity, our attention on Rosh Hashana centers on Abraham and Sarah, spiritual founders of our people. The readings include the episode of the Akeida, the binding of Isaac. As the story unfolds, God prevents Abraham from sacrificing Isaac and blesses Abraham for his faithfulness. Abraham sacrifices a ram as a token of thanksgiving. Our sounding the shofar (ram's horn) on Rosh Hashana is reminiscent of the Akeida story.

The Torah reports that after the Akeida, Abraham "named that site *Ado-nai Yireh* (God will see)." Abraham's immediate response to the Akeida was that "God sees," i.e. God cares, watches over human life. When Abraham was walking with Isaac toward the mountain, he must have been filled with impending grief. He was entering a situation of "darkness" when the death of Isaac seemed imminent. But then "light" ensued. Isaac's life was spared. The future now looked bright.

But the name of the site was changed to *Ado-nai Yeira-eh*, "the mountain where God will be seen/experienced." In rabbinic tradition, this was the future site of the Temple in Jerusalem. The spiritual center of the Israelites would be exactly at this spot where God's providence shined on Abraham and Isaac. The message: we experience God when we've faced darkness and emerged into light, when we've overcome obstacles, when we've met obligations in spite of challenges.

On Rosh Hashana, we recall the events of the past year. We enjoyed many things for which we are grateful. But we also experienced dark and difficult moments, personally and communally. We have been distressed by the rise of anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, anti-democratic values. We have been troubled by the hatred and violence that afflict humanity. The message of Rosh Hashana is realistic…and optimistic. Life has times of profound grief and darkness. But the dawn will come, sunshine will prevail, God will be experienced in love and light.

Sephardic congregations introduce the evening service on the first night of Rosh Hashana with a poem by Abraham Hazan Gerondi, *Ahot Ketana*. The poem's refrain is: May this year and its curses come to an end; the poem concludes: may the new year begin with its blessings. *Amen ken yehi ratson*, May this be the will of God.

Tags

Rosh Hashana; Anti-Semitism; Optimism