

# In Search of the Present Tense

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R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel

When my *abba*, my father, was a young child, growing up in Romania, on one morning, his grandfather, *zaide* Mendel, took him to participate in the ceremony of *pidyon haben*—redeeming of the firstborn. As some of you may know, this is a ceremony in which parents symbolically purchase their firstborn child from a *Kohen*, from someone of the priestly lineage, going back to Aaron the High Priest. *Zaide* Mendel was a *Kohen*, he was also a simple man, a hat maker. But on this particular day he looked like the high priest, dressed in white and wrapped in a beautiful *talis*. Upon arriving to the house, *zaide* Mendel was greeted with awe and admiration. He was immediately summoned by the rabbi.

As the ceremony began, my father recalls how a silver tray was passed among those present, and each person in the house placed a piece of jewellery, a precious stone, or a golden coin, upon this tray. At the climax of the ceremony, the tray was handed to *zaide* Mendel, to my father's great amazement.

Later in the morning, as my father and his *zaide* walked home, my father, a mere child, turned to his *zaide*, and with innocence, he asked: "*Zaide*, where did you put the gold?" Baffled by the question, *zaide* Mendel smiled softly and said: "I gave it back. It's a ceremony, I gave it back."

Growing up in Romania, under communist rule, my *abba* knew not to ask any more questions, and yet the question remained with him.

"*Zaide*, where did you put the gold?"

My father spent long afternoons walking around the house, looking and searching, hoping to find a hidden tray of gold.

My father, who tells this story from time to time, always concludes it the same way: “For many years, as a child, I looked and I looked, and you know what, sometimes I’m still looking.”

Rosh Hashanah is a time of prayer and meditation. It is also a time for seeking and searching. We all have a tray of gold. We all have something we are looking for. We are all in search of something.

Yesterday I spoke about how to share our prayers. Today I will speak about how to focus the path of our search.

Today our central question is: *What* are we looking for?

This is a critical question. For if we are unable to identify that which we are looking for, then we may never have the ability to find it. Indeed, we may even stumble into it, not realizing that it is the very thing that we were meant to find.

So what *are we* looking for?

This morning I would like to suggest one approach, a single insight that may guide and focus our search on these days of seeking.

Before we search for the things that we no longer have or the things that we don’t yet have, why not, first search for the things that we already have, seek the people we already love, and find the homes and communities we already built.

It sounds like a simple suggestion and yet it seems like we often forget to do it. What prevents us from appreciating our lives, as they are, right now?

I believe that there are two things that often prevent us from seeing things as they are: the past and the future. So many of us are looking for the past, and so many of us are looking for

the future. And while both the past and the future can be powerful sources of inspiration, they too often obstruct and prevent us from seeing our lives in the present tense.

For some of us appreciation of the present must begin with a courageous spiritual act of letting go of the future and letting go of the past.

This is a central message in Rosh Hashanah's Torah readings; in the story of Hagar and in the story of the binding of Isaac.

Let's begin with Hagar and Ishmael.

The Torah painfully describes the casting away of Hagar and Ishmael. It is a devastating, heartbreaking scene. Hagar is on the verge of losing almost everything. Driven to the dessert, paralysed by hunger and fear, Hagar is forced to abandon Ishmael under the shade of a tree. "*Al ereh be'mot hayeled*" — "Let me not witness the death of this child" is Hagar's desperate cry.

Fortunately, an angel appears before Hagar, assuring her that God has not abandoned her and her child.

And the next verse is literally eye opening: "*Va'yifkach E-lohim et eineya va'tereh beer mayim*" — "God then opened her eyes and she perceived a well of water." Now notice, the verse does not read that God made a well of water appear, rather it describes how Hagar was suddenly able to perceive a well of water that was already there.

The well was already there. What prevented Hagar from seeing the well?

I would like to suggest that Hagar was blinded by the past.

If you recall, Hagar was already cast away once before, and once before she was saved by God's grace. After returning to the home of Abraham and Sarah, she had hoped that this

time it will be for good. But now Hagar finds herself in the desert once again, rejected, hungry, and alone with her child. I bet that Hagar thought to herself: why survive again and how many times will this series of rejections reoccur? The pain of the past blinded Hagar and prevented her from seeing the wells of the present.

How often is our sight of the present skewed by pains of the past, by failures and rejections long gone?

Abraham too was blinded.

In the account of the binding of Isaac the Torah again offers a devastating scene. Father and son, Abraham and Isaac, climb the mountain upon which the child will be sacrificed. With great intensity Abraham binds his son to the altar and he begins to sharpen the blade. But once again an angel appears and he fortunately instructs Abraham not to offer Isaac.

The next part is critical. We read in the Torah: *“V’yisah Avraham et einav”* - Abraham lifted his eyes and behold Abraham saw a ram caught in the thicket. *“Va’ya’ar ve’hineh ayil achar ne’echaz basvach bekarnav”* – a ram which could be offered in place of the child.

Here we must note again, that a miracle did not make the ram suddenly appear in the thicket. Rather, like Hagar, Abraham was suddenly able to perceive something that was already there. *The ram* was already there.

What prevented Abraham from seeing the ram?

I believe that Abraham was blinded by the future.

Abraham’s entire life, entire spiritual career, was devoted to the future—to the creation of the Jewish people. The Torah tells us that Abraham was tested ten times in his life. Time and time again, Abraham proved that he would do anything to guarantee the future of his religious mission.

I would argue that Abraham was so committed to this vision that he lost sight of the present; he lost sight of his beloved Isaac. Abraham thought to himself: If sacrificing my son would prove once and for all the depth of my devotion, then surely I would do it. The promise of the future blinded Abraham to the point that he was prepared to sacrifice the present, to the point that he failed to realize that by sacrificing the present, he would end up sacrificing the future as well.

How often do we make sacrifices in the present for the sake of an intangible future? Investing in the promises of tomorrow instead of appreciating and nurturing the gifts of today?

Both Abraham and Hagar offer extreme situations. Nevertheless, we can each recognize aspects of the stories of Abraham and Hagar in our own lives. At some point or another...at some point or another, we are all Hagar. We all get lost in the desert. We all search for waters in wells that dried long ago. We all search for something in a non-existent past. At other points, we are like Abraham, moving ahead, walking confidently towards the future, while losing sight of our present path and reality.

Please don't get me wrong. Both the past and the future hold great treasures for us. Both the past and the future teach and challenge us to strive to greater heights, to hope for better days. Yet the past and the future can be utterly detrimental if we fail to grasp, to see, and to appreciate the blessings of today.

It took great courage for Hagar to see that well. It took deep spiritual strength for Abraham to recognize the ram. That I believe is one of the greatest challenges of this day. What will it take for each one of us to find in our own lives the things that we already have?

This Rosh Hashanah, as we reflect on the past year, and as we plan for the year to come, let's take a moment to focus on today.

We all have a well, or a ram. We all have a tray of gold. Look around this room. Look at your community, your family, and your friends. Here is the tray of gold. Here are the things that we already have. Here are the blessings of today.

May God bless us to seek and find the things that we already have, the people we already love, the community we have already built.