

DORSHEI DERECH DVAR TORAH
FIRST DAY, ROSH HASHANAH TASHAP 5780

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Introduction. Shana Tova – and welcome to the infancy of the year 5780, Taf, Shin, Peh.

We have a tradition of vocalizing the letters whose numerical values comprise the Hebrew year. Sometimes this convenience results in nonsense syllables, but this year the letter Peh gives us two options:

- Poh – where *poh* means *here or now* – or even the here and now;
- and the second option is *Peh*, with *peh* meaning mouth or, as I'd like to consider it: giving voice; if you will – taking action.

We know that every moment is now, is poh – is here – but the poh that we are called to this year is different – it is a poh/now from which we must speak. What is the quality of a now from which speech is vital? And how do we distinguish those Pohs, these nows, from the other nows in which our speech will not be a contribution? In other words, how do we, in these challenging times facing this country and the world, evolve to the point of responding to our *Poh* – to our here and now – with a *Peh* – that blesses and brings out the qualities of holiness, and by holiness I mean alignment with goodness, that only we are blessed to bring out?

In her beautiful Rosh Hashanah poem, *The Head of the Year*, Marge Piercy puts *Poh* – the here and now – like this –

*It is not too late. It is early
and about to grow. Now
Is the time to do what you
know you must and have feared*

*to begin. Your face is dark
too as you turn inward to face
yourself, the hidden twin
of all you must grow to be.*

In Piercy's poem, arriving in the here, arriving *poh*, is something we must do, it is something we are programmed to do, it is a constant and consistent calling. It is also a calling we are programmed to fear. Further, to arrive, we must turn inward. And although there is a high likelihood of darkness in that inward facing, there also is hope. – There is the possibility of expansion, of inevitableness of growth and serving good; this conception of poh is the inward journey toward the ultimate goodness.

Here is how Piercy talks about *peh* – about the outpouring of arriving at now...

*What will be wants
to push through your fingers.
The light you seek hides*

*in your belly. The light you
crave longs to stream from
your eyes. You are the moon
that will wax in new goodness.*

Again, Piercy sees our response to arriving at now as inevitable – it will push through our fingers, she is definitive that it is good (light) – and what has come as a result of our arrival is definitive – it is new goodness.

New Goodness. Enticing. What is this journey to here, to poh – and how do we arrive? And when we get here – when we get to poh, then what? What does it mean to embody peh – to embody our mouth and speak through to goodly aligned action?

Poh and Peh. In his commentary on *Lech Lecha* in Netivot Shalom, the Slonimer Rebbe gives these two details about the calling of *Poh*, the obligation to Here and the Peh that can result.

1. First, the Slonimer asserts every person's poh, every person's *here* is unique.
2. Second, the Slonimer reminds us that getting to a peh that positively affects the world begins with working on our characters. In his words: *“Every challenge in the life of a person, material or spiritual, good or bad, all of them are given in connection with the repair of the world, for only by way of these challenges are they able to achieve their destiny.”*

Each of us has starting *here*, a starting *Poh*, a repair to make internally that will lead us to a destiny and corresponding task in the world – a resulting *Peh*. Each person's journey to *poh/* to here is unique. What it is that results when one arrives – one's *Peh*, one's outpouring – is also unique and intimately linked to the way the challenge was met. For the Slonimer, our worldly destiny is intimately linked to our individual tikkun, to our individual repair. What and how we work out the challenges that our lives present to us are intimately linked to the repair we can affect more broadly.

To summarize, the Slonimer sees life as a series of exquisitely and individually designed challenges that each of us is meant to surmount in order to affect a tikkun, both personally and for the world. As long as our species is alive, we will have challenges, we will rise to meet them, although our *middot*, our characters, will be challenged – and when we are successful, we will affect our tikkun, our repair more widely. As we overcome the tests of our lives, as we arrive at their correction, we arrive at our destiny in the world. This is, according to the Slonimer, the way of our human lives.

We must pause here to take in the expanse of the Slonimer's optimism. He asserts that the tests are for our benefit; they are why we are alive. Overcoming them is how we arrive at our destiny and make our contribution to the world. Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, the 16th-century kabbalist, develops this idea further. In his *Tomer Devorah*, about how we human beings can bring goodness into the world, Cordovero provides a step-by-step program for how we can sustain our belief in the ability of human beings to repair ourselves and the world. It is this work that has constituted my poh moments in the past years, and this dvar is the resulting peh.

Let's go deeper into this idea of *Poh*, here and now, and its link to *Peh*.

Poh and Peh Illustrated. The Slonimer suggests three kinds of *Poh*, three kinds of here that we experience in our own unique way. Each *Poh* is followed by a corresponding *Peh*, which is an outgrowth of the consciousness of that *Poh*.

Today, we read the story of Hagar. Let's look at that story to illustrate the three versions of *Poh*. It is the final version that I hope we emerge into this year.

The Beginning Poh: Rising to the Challenge. There is the *Poh* moment that begins the journey, where our unique character enters into a challenging situation exquisitely designed to bring out what seems at the time to be the best of us but, in retrospect, brought out the worst of us.

As we enter Rosh Hashanah, we already know of Hagar's beginning *Poh*. In the previous parsha, we learn Hagar is Sarah's slave. She is clever, she is pretty – and she knows, somewhere deep inside of her, that being a slave is not her destiny. She uses her *middot* – her character traits – to ingratiate herself to her mistress. And she figures out how to catch the eye of her master so cleverly that her mistress never sees it. She senses the stress the couple is under about not having an heir. And she conducts herself in such a way that Sarah feels certain that she is capable of 'giving' Hagar to Abraham as a concubine; that Sarah is capable of being a bigger being.

Although the Torah doesn't say as much, I can imagine Hagar working at building Sarah's view of herself as 'big' enough to be able to pull off having her husband sleep with her slave. Sarah had a simplistic trust in herself, her husband and her slave. OR maybe Hagar was not so crafty; maybe she loved Sarah, loved Abraham and felt their sadness at not having an heir. OR maybe she is raped by Abraham. We cannot know. Whatever it is about or Abraham's, Sarah's and Hagar's characters that brought them to this moment, the challenge put before them is that Hagar is bedded by Abraham and becomes pregnant with Abraham and Sarah's heir.

Think about it: Each character in this story has a unique poh moment. And each has faith. The Slonimer talked of this faith: "*They are given the faith that they are able to fulfill their destiny.*" Without that faith, no one would actually move into this first *Poh*. Think of the impossible position they have all put themselves in.

And what is Hagar's first Peh, her outward expression of landing in this spot? We know from Sarah's entreaties to Abraham that Hagar became less subservient. Although the Torah is silent about Hagar, we can imagine a quiet satisfaction, an inkling of a feeling that yes, indeed her life is meant to work out..., yes, she was not meant to be a slave her entire life.

And this puts us in the first *Peh*, the expression of this first *Poh*. This *Peh* is the character of the person that emerges as a result of the challenge and that, absent this challenge, these parts of their character might have been dormant their entire lives. It is only as a result of this unique challenge that Hagar's character, her pride – perhaps arrogance – comes forward.

This is the culmination of the first *poh/peh* moment. She has made it; she knew she was not meant to be a slave her whole life. She, not Sarah, bore Abraham a son. She is safe, guaranteed a place of honor. She is the mother of Abraham's son. And she flaunts what she now is.

The Middle Poh/Peh: Giving into Despair. It is important to notice that the Rosh Hashanah reading begins only after this first *Poh/Peh* moment. Could this be a gentle nudge from our tradition? –that part of our *Cheshbon*, part of accounting for our year, is looking for examples of these first *poh/peh* moments in our lives? After all, we've spent the year being faced with challenges and meeting them to the best of our abilities. Rosh Hashanah gives us a reason to identify where we have had the first *poh/peh* moments. Rosh Hashanah offers the possibility to repair those challenges we've met with parts of our character that need repair/ that need Tikkun – perhaps we met the challenge with arrogance, judgment, indifference Whatever, today's Torah portion, beginning in the middle of the story, beckons our introspection.

It is at this time of the second *Poh* that we meet Hagar in today's reading.

The unimaginable has happened. Sarah, at age 90, has a son of her own. This is a huge shift in Hagar's position in the clan. She is now in a dangerous position. Her son stands in the way of Sarah's son's *yerushah*, inheritance. Where once she was secure in her position in the 'family,' now she has less than no standing. Despite the fact that Hagar did everything she could to secure a place for herself and her son, she finds herself out in the wilderness, bereft, caught up in her misery, not able to see what is right in front of her. And in this second *poh*, the *peh* is simple. She and we are meant to give up in despair. For Hagar, it means being faced with watching her son die. So, she lays Ishmael down and prays to God that she not witness his death. At a certain point in the challenges that face us, when we've tried all of our wily ways, the only way through is to give up, completely surrender. This giving up is the second kind of *Peh* – of the second kind of *Poh*; it is the acknowledgement of the mystery, of something greater than us at play. In modern times, Alcoholics Anonymous calls this giving up, the only gateway to moving out of addiction.

Resolution Poh/Peh: Where we can affect our Tikkun/Repair. Which brings us to the final *Poh/Peh*, the resolution.

When Hagar gives up, when she is out of wily ways to survive, when she has outlived her ego-driven coping strategies, the spirit of the universe comes forward, opens Hagar's eyes and provides her with the water that is right in front of her, the water to give to Ishmael.

It is important to note that when the Torah responds to Hagar, it does not say that God heard Hagar – it says that God heard the cry of the boy. Just as it is the suffering of the boy that brought God's response, it is the suffering of the others around us that also awakens God and calls to us. So, Hagar, when she arrives at this final *Poh* – when she is no longer coming from her ego – she is able to make a *Tikkun*, a repair, to something that is indeed critical to her: She is able to save her son. And the Torah closes the story by telling us that Ishmael lives to father a great nation and – get this – Hagar's final *Peh* is that she gets to choose her son's wife from her own people of Egypt! – a particularly hopeful symbol for me as the mother of two boys just off to college.

This journey into a *Poh* – a here – in which we are available and aligned and able to positively affect destiny is what I wish for all of us in this year of Ta"shap. We go about living – with all that is good about us and all that is not. And eventually we all land in that first *Poh*, a here, where it all seems to be working out for us, and then the second *poh*, where it all comes crashing down. Despite our sense that we've done the best we can, it doesn't appear to have worked out.

Let's be gentle with ourselves and remember: we were meant to fail at this; we were meant to act in these ways that are out of alignment with goodness. That this is the inception of our individual *Tikkun Olam*, our inception of what we are meant to repair in the world.

And what do we do then? Eventually, like Hagar, we will reach a time when we totally and completely give up. It is at this point – when she is in this *Poh*, in this now, when she gives up all hope of her agency being able to bring about salvation, that salvation appears – that moving through life becomes possible.

So, let us not be afraid of our despair; let us not be afraid of giving up when things aren't working... It is only after we give up that the water becomes visible – and the life Hagar knew from her dreams, as the mother of a great nation, choosing her daughter-in-law, becomes her life.

Like Hagar, we cannot know where the water is until we've given up. It is only after this giving up that our eyes are opened, that we enter into conscious partnership with good, and we are able to survey our now. It is only then that we see the water – that we see what is needed and can take the much-needed actions, speak our *Peh*. When the Source of Life comes to Hagar, her eyes are opened, and the water that was needed to survive is there – and there is the intimation that it has been there all along, but can be seen only when we are in this third *Poh*.

So, what does this mean for us in contemporary times? What do we do when we have been through our challenge, we've given up, and been awakened to the presence of water? What about water is a metaphor for our contemporary world? And then, what does it take to get to Peh – to get to our utterance, our response, our way of giving back to this life that has brought us to this moment?

The first step after giving up to despair is allowing ourselves to look around with new eyes. We know we are in a place where water is present if, as Rabbi Alan Lew points out, we know that “we all share the same heart. We penetrate each other far more than we are ordinarily aware. Ordinarily, we are taken in by the materialist myth of discrete being. We look like we are separate bodies... Physically, we can see where one of us begins and another of us ends. But emotionally, spiritually, it simply isn't this way. Our feelings and our spiritual impulses flow freely beyond the physical boundaries of the self, and this is something that each of us knows intuitively for a certainty.”

If we are all connected, then, when we arrive at our fully present Poh, we can use our senses to feel into the moment, into the here and now. We know we are part of the flow when there is no “efforting;” our actions feel like a part of some essential goodness that is bigger than we are. In our contemporary metaphorical language, we must look for the water that is present and give each other (all others) to drink.

As we prepare for this year ahead, what would it mean to begin with the certainty that the challenges before us, both personally and as a people, are exquisitely designed to bring out the worst and best of us, and that we are meant to meet the challenges that face us? That, although we can't see the water, we know it is still there – we just can't see it from the Poh we are in?

What would it take to believe that we are on the road to repairing the impact of humanity on the climate, that we have been sobered by this political climate, and that the best of us as a nation will win out? I believe when we arrive at the third Poh, and listen in for our unique Peh, we are asked to begin from this trust in ‘things working out.’ I also believe that we cannot know what we would do in this final Poh, until we arrive. And when we do arrive at this poh, we will each come to know our unique Tikkuns/repairs, our peh ... that what we have been working on in ourselves is meant for us to bring out into the world.

And so, tonight, as we dip our apples in honey, let's share this *kavannah*: Let's hold the apple as a reminder of the Garden of Eden, the apple as our decision to live in this world where we will be tested for the good of ourselves and the world. May we enter into the test, know the place of despair (and not dawdle there too long), and emerge capable of creating a better world. This year, may we embody the honey and bring our sweetness to the corners of our world that need it. So together we say – *Shana Tova u-metuka k'dvash. Ken yehi ratson!*