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The Future

The past, said L. P. Hartley, is a foreign country.
But the future is an undiscovered one.[1]

The Torah portion we read today is full of talk of the future. Sarah rejoices in the future represented by the birth of her son, Isaac, after years of yearning and waiting. "Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me."[2] Very soon, though, she begins to fear for her son's future and, implicitly, her own, in a household in which there is another wife and another potential heir. "She said to Abraham, 'Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son, Isaac."[3] Abraham worries about the future of his son when Sarah demands that he be sent away. "The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his."[4] Hagar despairs of a future for her son and for herself when they are left alone in the wilderness, their water gone. "She went and sat down, by herself, at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, 'Let me not look on as the child dies.' So she sat at a distance and cried out and wept."[5]

The people in this story feel so many different things when they contemplate the future: joy, fear, worry, despair. For each of them, the future is so hard to face, so full of possible pain and tragedy. They are so like us, so human. The deep anxiety they hold in their hearts, that the future might contain unimaginable suffering, disappointment, and even death, too often leaves no room for the possibility that the future might instead—or in addition!—hold equally unimaginable happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction. What does God offer these people, who are so torn as they look ahead? Here's what God does NOT do: God does not create miracles or magically resolve their problems. Nor does God minimize their fears or deny their pain. Instead, God reassures each of them about the future by reframing how they see it, by giving them the gift of a new perspective on how their lives might go on.

For Sarah, God reframes what she sees as an enduring, existential threat to her joy as a temporary setback, a fear that will fade as Abraham accedes to her wishes and, painfully, separates the different parts of his family. "God said to Abraham, '…whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says.'"[6] For Abraham, God shifts his perspective to offer an image of a future in which both of his sons, although separated, will be able to thrive, when his constant anxiety about his legacy will be assuaged, and God's promise of continuity will be fulfilled. "'[God said]…through Isaac's offspring …your name shall be continued for you. [And also] as for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your offspring."[7] For Hagar, God literally changes her point of view, allowing her to see that in the dry wilderness where she

[1] From "A Word of Torah: On not predicting the future" by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. The Detroit Jewish News, December 16, 2021.
[2] Exodus 21:6. All translations are from Mahzor Lev Shalem.
[3] Exodus 21:10.
[4] Exodus 21:11.
[5] Exodus 21:16.
[6] Genesis 21:12.
[7] Genesis 21:12-13.

could imagine only that she and her son would die alone, there is actually plenty of water to sustain them both.[8] This literal shift in perspective is paralleled by a spiritual one. God opens Hagar's eyes to a future in which she is always accompanied rather than perpetually abandoned, and in which, with her help and nurturance, her son can prosper. "Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."[9]

Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the new year, calls on us to turn our gaze to the future, and while we may be carrying joy, excitement, or wonder on this day, those positive emotions may well be crowded out of our hearts by fear, worry, regret, sadness, or even despair as we look ahead. There is so much uncertainty in our world and in our own lives. We don't know, we can't know what lies in front of us. As Cheryl is fond of saying about COVID, "I've given up predicting the future," and these last years have certainly brought us all futures we never imagined. So how do we cope, when so much is unknown? Whatever we believe or don't believe about God, if God did not produce miraculous fixes or magical resolutions for Sarah, or Abraham, or Hagar, it's a good bet that we're probably not going to be seeing all of our worries vanish into thin air either, as much as we might hope for it. How, then, can we face the future that is rushing toward us at every minute, impossible to predict or to control, yet so important to us? I want to offer that, as in the Torah, how we frame the future can have a powerful impact on how we understand it, how we feel about it, and how it affects us. To go further, the framing we put around the future can even alter its shape and quality, can truly make it different than it would otherwise have been. Today I want to invite us to see the future through three different perspectives offered by Jewish texts, to imagine and dream about how changing our point of view and adjusting our frame of reference might change us and, just maybe, change what happens next.

I: The future is like the past

That which has been is that which shall be,
And that which has been done is that which shall be done;
And there is nothing new under the sun.[10]

We live in a culture that valorizes the present, seeing this moment as the best, most advanced time that has ever been. Even the trends, the language, and the clothing of just a few years ago can seem hopelessly out of date. In our context, this famous verse from Ecclesiastes can seem fatalistic or even depressing. How impossible, how intolerable, really, to just be replicating our reality, repeating our actions, day after day after day, like Bill Murray in "Groundhog Day" waking up to the same news broadcast every single morning. Nothing new under the sun?! Shouldn't every day be brand new, with the previous day's achievements and cares, knowledge and worries, thrown on the dustbin of history? How can we, why should we, live in the past?

The ancient Jewish wisdom literature of which Ecclesiastes is a part takes a different perspective. It asks us not to live in the past but to learn from it, and the first thing it asks us to

[8] Genesis 21:19.
[9] Genesis 21:18.
[10] Ecclesiastes 1:9

learn from it is comfort. Human beings are, as far as we know, the only creatures on earth that understand that our time here is limited and that it is quickly passing by us at every second. And so we find comfort in seeing how this current moment echoes previous ones, how our current obsessions and conflicts, our struggles and worries, parallel those of earlier ages. Just as children can feel reassurance in hearing the same stories over and over again – sometimes taxing adults far beyond our capacity to read those stories just one more time – adults can feel reassured by hearing the stories of similar times in the past, helping us realize that we are not the first people to feel anxious about these particular issues. To say that there is nothing new in our current time is to give us the idea that others have faced these same anxiety-provoking situations – and they have survived! However important our crisis of the moment seems, when people faced it in the past, it was not the end of their world, and it will not be the end of ours. The past gives us comfort by modeling the resilience of the human spirit in the face of continuous, serious, and far-reaching challenges.

The second thing that we can learn from the past is the possibility of making progress, precisely because we often encounter the same things more than once. As we often notice when we puzzle over the timelines they give us, the ancient rabbis see time not as an endless progression in one direction, the classic arrow shot from a bow, but instead as a series of cycles that build on each other and that we can learn from, a spiral that allows us to look back to the past, not to replicate precisely the same mistakes, but instead to change our approach the next time around. The rabbis identify Esau, the brother who contends with Jacob, not only with the nation of Edom that troubles the Israelites later in Torah, but also with the Babylonians who conquer the Israelites centuries later and the Romans who oppress the Jews centuries after that. And they see the sometimes conflict-ridden relationships between Jacob's sons in the book of Genesis replicated in the tensions between the tribes later in Torah and then again in their clashes hundreds of years later. The ancient rabbis make these connections not to collapse history or to kill hope but to open up the chance for *tikkun*, for repair, as we see similar situations and issues arise, and as we see opportunities to handle them differently. It is no surprise, then, that the rabbis use the word *t'shuvah*, "return," to describe our attempts to do things better during this upcoming cycle of the year, or that they define true and complete *t'shuvah* as facing the same difficult situation again but this time making a different choice about how to handle it.[11]

We can learn comfort and the possibility of progress not just from the texts and stories of the Jewish past but also from our own pasts, the experiences of our own lives. Each of us has faced the unknown before, and each of us has seen the future reveal itself, sometimes as blessing, sometimes as farce, sometimes as immense challenge, sometimes as tragedy. And although what we had to live through was sometimes infuriating, sometimes deeply painful, sometimes inspiring, and sometimes extraordinarily difficult, our world did not end. We may have been deeply shaken, and we may not have thought we could move through it all, but we did; we were equal to everything that came our way, and although it was sometimes so painful, we survived.

[11] "What identifies the true master of *t'shuvah*? Rabbi Yehudah said: For example, when an opportunity to sin comes to their hand not only once but twice, and they are saved from committing it [the second time]" (Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86b). Compare with Maimonides, Mishneh Torah Hilchot T'shuvah 2:1.

What is more, we have each sometimes faced similar challenges again and again along the spiral of our lives, and we have seen how we were able, not always but sometimes, to react differently the next time, to change our response, to not fall into the same traps twice, to embody *t'shuvah*, return, not to exactly the same place but to a slightly different place in this version of the challenge and of ourselves. Because we are human, we have a tendency to discount how much we have grown and changed. One way to call that growth to our attention is first to remember our past, as we are called to do today on Rosh Hashanah, also called *Yom HaZikaron*, the day of remembering. Today we can review in our minds all of the most challenging moments of the last year, all those times that really threw us, the things we didn't know how we would get through. Then we can reflect on how those moments sometimes or often echoed situations we had faced in the past, in other years, maybe even other decades of our lives. Then, and this is the crucial step, we can think about all the ways that we reacted differently when dealing with this iteration of the problem. Maybe we were more creative in finding solutions. Maybe we were able to reach out to others for help or support. Maybe we were just able live through it with more equanimity, more grace. If we can see our progress, we can believe that the unknown challenges we face in the future are not only within our capabilities but also will call out of us new facets of ourselves that will help us grow to meet the moment, whatever it is.

Sarah has her own past that she could have looked to and learned from, in which she already saw the seemingly miraculous way that God created hope for her out of nothing, a child at the age of 90, impossible joy out of despair. Abraham, too, had seen his own faith in the future waver, only to be reassured again and again by God's care and fulfillment of promises. Hagar had even had an angel speak to her directly before, when she was pregnant with Ishmael. She had already experienced divine intervention in her life, yet she understandably despairs of her future when she once again goes out into the wilderness, thinking she's alone. She, like all of us, forgets that, as Stephen Sondheim z"l wrote, "No one is alone," even in the wilderness, even in the woods.[12] We can understand Ecclesiastes to be urging us not to forget but to remember, to look to our communal past and to our individual pasts to gain comfort and to open ourselves to the possibility of making progress when we inevitably confront the same issues once again, to do things differently this time around.

II: The future is about change

After the holidays, everything changes
The regular days return, but transformed
The air, earth, the rain and the fire,
And you too, you too,
You will be changed.[13]

One of the reasons the future is so hard to face is that we know, deep down, that it threatens us with change, that it may and probably will require some transformation to get

[12] "No One Is Alone," lyrics and music by Stephen Sondheim, from Into the Woods (1987).
[13] *Hithadshut Aheret* ("A different kind of renewal"), lyrics by Naomi Shemer, music by Yuval Dor.

from who we are to who we will be. Change is hard, and changing ourselves is even harder. We don't want to adapt to the future; we want the future to adapt to us! In contemporary American culture, we are encouraged to think of ourselves as coherent, sovereign selves who remain constant in the face of a succession of experiences, experiences that may inform or enrich us but never fundamentally change who we are. We grow attached to ourselves, or at least to how we think of ourselves, the sense of self that we have built up over years. We might think of this as our Instagram or Facebook self (depending on your generation): a carefully curated portrait of selected images that make a pleasing, integrated whole, slowly aging but never really changing, maintaining a persistent core that we and others can rely on.

Although the idea of a self that never need change can be attractive, it blocks us from the possibilities that the future can call out of us. Take Abraham and Sarah, or, as we should more properly call them at the beginning of their journey, Avram and Sarai. These are two people who long for transformation. They are running from an identity – the childless couple, the family with no future – that they cannot bear. And yet they can't imagine that God's promises to them of a different future will actually require them to fundamentally change something about themselves. God says to Avram, "I will make your name great,"[14] but while Avram might have heard that as a promise for a great publicity agent, God has something else in mind. God literally makes Avram's name "greater" – or at least longer – by adding a letter to it, changing its meaning from "leader of Aram" to "father of multitudes."[15] Sarai's name also undergoes a similar transformation in meaning as God adds a letter to it. The Talmud explains: "Initially, she was a leader only for her own nation,[16] but afterwards she became a leader for the whole world."[17] Although it is Avram and Sarai's dream to have a family, this transformation is far from easy for them. As we see in today's Torah reading, they become players in a drama not of their own making, and their paths become complicated and fraught. The change the future requires of them means that they have to become different people than they previously were.

As an anthropologist, I know that human adaptability is thought to be the thing that gave us an evolutionary advantage over other creatures and enabled the creation of the human society we know today. And yet we resist adaptation so strongly! We cling to our old ways of doing things, even when they are not functional, even when they cause us harm. We spend, as my professors in college would say, so much effort trying to make today just like yesterday. All the while, we know that the future, like the waves pulling the sand out from under our feet as we stand on the beach, is constantly undermining our attempts to create stability. We know that tomorrow may force change upon us, even radical change. We hear it in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer that we will recite in a little while. Hunger, war, disease, fire, social upheaval, or, God forbid, the deaths of loved ones may drastically uproot our lives. Or we may face potentially positive but still challenging changes. We may move from job to job, go from work to retirement, welcome new children or usher older ones into independence, begin friendships, find new areas of interest, or widen our outlook on the world in previously unexplored ways.

[14] Genesis 12:2.
[15] Genesis 17:5; see also Babylonian Talmud Berachot 13a.
[16] Sarai, since it includes a possessive, could be translated as something like "my princess."
[17] Sarah, since it lacks a possessive, is here interpreted more broadly as "the princess."

How do we let go of who we were so that we can become who we will be? Again, Jewish tradition has something to teach here. This season of the year is as much about letting go of the habits and self-images of the past as it is about atoning for our sins, or maybe those are the same thing. Trees are our guides here; having gone from the bare branches of fall to the buds of spring to the luxurious foliage of summer, they are already letting their leaves go, ready to transform again, pointing the way toward the future. Of course, there is a core to us that makes us who we are, an essence of soul that is as unique as a fingerprint, an irreplaceable human specialness that we will never lose. As the midrash imagines it, God miraculously creates humans all from the same mold, yet we each end up unique, and we need to trust in that unique core to always be there. But there is so much else that we cling so tightly to that we really could let go of, really could leave in the past so that we could lightly, easily, without digging in our feet or holding ourselves back, adapt to the future. It takes courage, it takes resolve, and it takes a good deal of humility to pare away the accumulation of habits and burdens that we are carrying with us. But it is possible.

We can use the practice of *heshbon ha-nefesh*, taking an accounting of the soul, to help us do the work of letting go. It starts with looking deep inside ourselves. What are the things that we are holding onto in our lives that are stopping us from changing? What would happen if we let those things go? Even just imagining those things dropping off of us, like links in a chain that we no longer choose to be bound by, can be immensely freeing. We sometimes carry the weight of outdated habits, identities, and ways of viewing ourselves for years without reevaluating whether they are helping us, whether we could imagine ourselves without them, and what would happen if we could let them go. But it's not just the aspects of ourselves we would rather leave behind that we need to look deeply into. We also need to think seriously about what parts of ourselves may have been neglected, overlooked, left undeveloped because we never let ourselves imagine how we might grow into them. What have we never allowed to see the light of day, never allowed to bloom? What dreams did we bury or deny, preventing ourselves from being who we could be?

To face the future without fear, we have the opportunity, right here today, to open ourselves to change, to let go and to open up, to recover and to reimagine who we could be. As important as it is to gather our courage to do this for ourselves, it is equally important that we do this for each other, that we allow each other the space to change. We are so good at protecting ourselves from change that we often extend that protection to those we love as well. I can never forget passing by a parent with a toddler at a grocery store as the toddler was reaching out eagerly for a second piece of sample mango to eat. The parent was trying desperately to pull the child away, saying, "But honey, you don't like mango!" We are often so sure about who other people are, so attached to our image of them, that we don't open the space for them to transform themselves, to become different, to let go and open up in new and surprising ways. We need to help each other by relaxing our expectations, by being curious about who others might become rather than certain that they will always be what we think they are. This is true for parents, for children, for friends, for partners and lovers and acquaintances we meet on the street. Yes, if we leave open the space, others might surprise us with their growth and change, and while that could be upsetting and painful, it could instead or even at the same time be beautiful and uplifting, encouraging us to be as open to change in

ourselves as they are. A world of people exploring, transforming, open to change in themselves and in each other – what an amazing world that would be.

III: The future is in our hands

"But *t'shuvah*, *t'filah*, and *tz'dakah*
avert the harsh decree."

The metaphor of Rosh Hashanah is all about the Book. You know, the Book of Life that, according to *Unetaneh Tokef*, God opens on this day. In a beautiful phrase, the prayer says that the Book "reads itself," transmitting to God the knowledge of all that we have done, the record we have created by our actions, an affidavit signed by our own hand. And then God judges us, here on *Yom ha-Din*, the Day of Judgment, and writes down our fate, determining our future for the coming year. That's it – written, signed, sealed, and delivered, our future is determined by God's judgment of our actions, written down in the Book of Life, and impervious to mortal power. Or is it? After a beautiful poetic rendition of this process of final judgment, when even the hosts of heaven are judged, *Unetaneh Tokef* ends with a surprise: *U-t'shuvah u-t'filah u-tz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zeirah* – "*T'shuvah*, *t'filah*, and *tz'dakah* avert the harsh decree."[18] In other words, through *t'shuvah*, our attempts to do things differently this time around the cycle, *t'filah*, our deep introspection about how we can change, and *tz'dakah*, our righteous actions in the world, we human beings actually have the power to overrule whatever fate divine judgment has decreed upon us, and to change our future!

It is an amazing thing that in the whole courtroom setup that the rabbis draw for us, with us as the defendants, the angels as the prosecution and (we hope) defense attorneys, and God as the judge, we are actually the ones with the most power to determine what happens! It all depends on us! That's why our choices matter so much, because they, not the past, not other people's opinions of us, and not even the ruling of the divine court, are what sets our future direction. This is a lot to take in, a lot of responsibility being put on our shoulders, and it perhaps understandable that we resist. We point to all of the things we can't control, all of the forces arrayed against us, all of the weight of our past missteps that hem in our actions and constrain our path. And of course it is true that we don't control everything or maybe even most things that shape our lives. But we still have so much power that we don't acknowledge, power to reconsider, to reframe, to contemplate, and to act, even within constraints, in ways that have the capacity to reshape our individual future and maybe even our collective future on this planet.

Of course, there is paradox here. We can be judged by God, found wanting, and have a harsh fate imposed, yet we can still avert that fate by changing what we can change: our thoughts, our perspective, and our actions. We imagine an all-knowing God who sees even what is hidden from us, yet we somehow have the capacity to act in ways that don't match

[18] This is my literal translation; how to understand these words is the subject of some dispute, since some feel that they are theologically problematic. Does God really change the fate only of those who do these three things but harshly judges all others? For that reason, some use the grammar of the phrase to argue that only the harsh part is modified by our actions; the decree of our destiny stands regardless. Mahzor Lev Shalem substitutes this softer version: "But *t'shuvah*, *t'filah*, and *tz'dakah* have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny."

even God's expectations. As the ancient sages write in Pirkei Avot, "All is foreseen, yet free will is given."[19] Our fate has been written, yet we can change it. We tend to shy away from these paradoxes, trying to land on one side or another rather than embracing the creative tension between them. But, as GJC member Wendy Smith teaches us,[20] living in paradox can be immensely enriching and meaningful, helping us to grow and develop. On this day we contemplate what our fate could be, given the patterns and habits that have guided us through the past year. But we also imagine how our fate could be different, how we could disrupt that pattern and weave a new one, how we could give up old habits and create fresh ones that would lead us to a different future.

It is not easy to feel our vulnerability as we face the future while at the same time embracing the idea that the power to shape and change that future is in our hands. We need to learn from the past, both the Jewish past and our own individual pasts, to find comfort in the repetition of cycles and the possibility of change as we come around to encounter similar challenges for a second or third or even fourth time. We need to understand why change is hard and to allow ourselves and others the space to transform and renew ourselves, letting go of what we do not need to hold and opening up to what we have not allowed to be expressed or developed. And we need to dive into the paradox that Jewish tradition offers: our fate has been written, and we can change it; our past actions matter, and we can transcend them. If we do all three of these, then maybe we face the future without fear, singing with the psalmist:

Adonai is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear?
Adonai is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?[21]

L'shanah tovah tikateivu – may we each have the strength and the courage to face the future and to write a new year for ourselves, a year of sweetness, of blessing, of joy, and of peace.

[19] Pirkei Avot 3:15.
[20] See for example Wendy Smith and Marianne Lewis, Both/And Thinking: Embracing Creative Tensions to Solve Your Toughest Problems, Harvard Business Review Press, 2022.
[21] Psalm 27:1.