

Who Will We Become?
Rosh Hashanah 5787
Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio

On Rosh Hashana it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed:
how many will pass away from this world, how many be born into it,
who shall live and who shall die,
who shall reach the ripeness of age and who shall be taken before their time
who by fire and who by water...who by terror and who by bullet,
who at Bondi and who in hospital,
who shall be wounded and who shall be saved,
who shall be touched and who shall be unscathed,
who in their body and who in their soul,
who shall be afraid and who shall be defiant,
who will be scarred and who will be healed,
who shall find comfort and who shall be weary,
who shall find strength and who shall be broken,
Who? Who are you? Who am I? Who are we?

Who went to Bondi and who stayed home,
Who always goes and this year did not
Who never goes and this year did.
Who stepped to the left when they could have gone right
Who walked one path when they usually walk another
Who fell to the ground and who ran
Who reached safety and who did not
Who made a choice which led to life and who made one which led to death
Who? Who are you? Who am I? Who are we?

When we said the words of the *unetaneh tokef* prayer last Rosh Hashana, who could have known that only a few months later a new prayer would be written? The original, was penned by Rabbi Amnon of Mayence, in the depths of his suffering, in the tragedy of his torture and death at the hands of his oppressors. He was tormented in his soul for the choices he made, he was tortured in his body for those same choices. He asked who am I? Who am I to be given this choice?

On the grass at Bondi, a new prayer. We asked: who am I? Who am I to have survived? Who am I that I was there? Who am I that I chose not to go? Who am I that I was spared?

We just read from the Torah, the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael, banished to the sands of the desert to die. Hagar, overcome, unable to watch her son's life

end, places him by a plant and steps away, tears pouring onto the sands, fear and horror at the fate which would befall them both. She looked into the eyes of death, she saw what she thought would be her and her child's final moments.

Tomorrow, from the Torah, we read the story of Isaac. He too looked into the face of death, as his father bound him and raised a knife, ready to offer him as a pure, unblemished sacrifice on the altar of his God. Isaac looked into the face of death, the face of his father and the angels cried tears into Isaac's eyes, so he would not see.

Who by abandonment and who by his father's hand?
Who shall live and who shall die?

Hagar, in the depths of her pain and torment, looked up, her eyes opened and she saw a well, life-giving water, a source of hope. They would not die. Abraham is directed to the thicket, he looks up and sees a ram caught by its horns, the angel's voice tells him to save his son and offer the ram in his stead. Isaac too, will not die.

When we have suffered deep loss, at the funeral, we tear our clothing. We hear the sharp ripping of fabric, the sound of the tearing of the fabric of our lives, our hearts shredded with pain, and in the depths of that moment we say: *Baruch Dayan ha-emet*, blessed is God, the righteous judge. We are called to no longer ask why? Who? what if? and instead, to let go of what will never be known, the questions for which we will never have an answer.

We have torn our shirts to shreds, our hearts broken, we have looked death in the eyes, we have been tormented by asking who? Who lived and who died, who wounded who scarred, but now we must say *Baruch Dayan ha-emet*. We will never know the answers to the question of "what if?" So now we are called by our tradition to let go of those what ifs, those unanswerable questions and instead look forwards, ask a different question: not why, not what if, not who lived and who died but instead: who are we now and who will we become?

Isaac and Hagar looked death in the eyes, they faced their mortality and they moved forward into who they would become. Those moments changed and shaped them. Hagar's tears opened her eyes. Isaac's eyes were drenched with angels' tears and both were led to see in ways they did not before. We too have been changed. Bondi touched each and every one of us, our eyes do not see in the same way and now we are faced with the question of who we will become? And Hagar and Isaac help to guide us.

Hagar, the servant who asked: who am I to carry Abraham's child, the future of this people? Who am I to be cast out to die? Who am I to be abandoned to my fate? Now asks: who will I become?

Hagar finds her voice. She stands before God and challenges: "let me not see the death of my child!" She demands God witness her pain and suffering. And God answers her with the voice of an angel. God hears and sees. Hagar, the slave, is the first woman in the Torah to have a direct answer from God. Hagar, whose body and life were not her own, becomes a force. She speaks with courage and names the place, *Be'er Lahai Roi*, "the place where God sees me." And then has the audacity to name God: *El Roi*, God who sees. Hagar is the only person in the Torah to give God a name.

Hagar faces death and asks: who am I? She answers: I am the one who will no longer be silent. I will claim my destiny, I will speak my truth, even to God. Hagar, an abandoned single mother, takes her future into her hands. She finds a wife for her son, she ensures his security and hers. She is no longer one who is at the mercy of others. After facing death, she refused to be a passive recipient of her life.

Like Hagar, we have called to be heard, to be seen and we have spoken our truth. We called for a Royal Commission and 20,000 submissions were made, the majority from our community. We have spoken out: we have done so quietly and loudly, openly and behind closed doors. We have taken out the memories and experiences and we have written oceans of ink, to tell our story. And then we listened. We have heard the experiences of others, been shocked by the distressing testimonies, we have cried rivers of tears and we have felt all of the emotions: anger, fear, hurt, pain, pride and even blessing. We have seen courage and vulnerability. We have been asked to open wounds not yet healed and we have done so: to heal our broken nation, to shine a light in the darkness and to hope for real change: to return to our values, to commit to the ideals of who we are as Australians.

Like Hagar, we have taken our pain and have turned it into change. We have called to be seen, to be known and understood and now the challenge is to move forward. To keep dreaming and imagining what could be and continue to use our courage and strength to advocate for change; to keep sharing our voices knowing that we will be seen and heard. So many have reached out to us in love, so many offering comfort and support. We can now join hands, together and walk into a different future, like Hagar, one we have shaped and dreamed. We can reshape the "what ifs" of Bondi to tell a new story, so the "what ifs" become hopes for tomorrow:

What if we can create a society where all are loved for who we are
What if we can shape a country which does not allow antisemitism, prejudice,
hate of any kind to be manifest
What if we can become the light for the nations, showing what can be created
when the problem of hate is brought out of the shadows, when we confront our
failings rather than excuse them or ignore them, and then together look for
solutions.

So, we now ask a different question:
Who by legislation and who by conversation
Who in community and who in the workplace
Who in the streets and who indoors
Who by creating safe spaces and who by opening spaces to others
Who with education and who with living proudly
Who with courage and who with fear

Each path is different, we are not alone, together we are raising our voices,
together we are demanding to be heard and we, like Hagar, with courage, have
been seen and now must see the path to the future. How are we are going to
move forward, shaping our destiny, holding onto our dreams of what can be,
and create the world in which we want to live?

Isaac, when faced with his mortality, also asks: “who will I now become?” First,
he takes time to heal. He goes to the place where Hagar was saved, to the well
she named “the place where I am seen.” Isaac too needs to be seen, to return to a
place of family, comfort and community. To become who he will be, he first
needs to be known, understood and embraced, like Hagar, he needs to be heard,
seen and healed and he does that in community. He feels the comfort of being
with those who know and understand.

As we too have returned to our sacred places. We have gathered in synagogues
and at Bondi, ground made holy with the blood of so many. A place made
sacred by our returning, by our tears falling on the sands and by the opening of
our eyes to the heroes of that day. Every single person who reached out to
another, who held a hand, who whispered words of love and comfort, to the
strangers who gave life, who cradled lives in their hands and brought hope. We
saw, through our tears, the light that shines even in the darkest of days. The
beauty within so many souls whose fear was channelled into love. Nobody was
alone, even as worlds and hearts were shattered, the quiet courage of every
single person who was there, pushed away the hate, showed the best of
humanity, the true spirit of life. We were brushed by the wings of angels, so
many angels, wounded angels, who brought healing even as they needed it
themselves.

And like Isaac, we have taken time to understand, to process, to be. To find hope and light with each other, to be cradled and held in the arms of community both our own and the Australian people. So many have opened their arms to us, holding and comforting. But like Isaac, who disappeared from the Torah for a time, we needed to be alone. And it is time for teshuvah, to return. We cannot shelter forever behind our walls. They are fortified and feel safe, but slowly, tentatively, we need to step back out into the world. It can be frightening and uncertain, there are dangers and we are hurting: our wounds are still raw, so close to the surface that the slightest touch could tear them apart again. We step with trepidation, not knowing what we will face: hypervigilant, the trauma of the past deep in our bodies, in our cells, our very essence. But like Hagar and Isaac, we need to find our way, to become who we will be despite the wounds, to find hope and healing and a future where we are not defined by hate, where we take our new vision, our what ifs, and we walk in the world with the possibilities of the what ifs.

After his time in the comfort of his safe, sacred place, Isaac returns home. He goes back to the world and we next encounter him in a field in the fading afternoon light. The Torah tells us: Yitzhak *lasuah be sadeh*, Isaac *lasuah* in the field. He *sasuah*, he connected with nature. He stood in awe and wonder at the beauty of the world around him. He appreciated the swaying grasses, the liminal light, time suspended, poised, not yet night but no longer day, a moment between worlds, a time of possibilities.

He *lasuah*, *yishpoch siah*, he prayed, he poured out his heart, he connected with spirit, with his history, he grounded himself on the earth, whilst also reaching for the heavens, holding both in his hands at the same time. He found beauty in the every day, solace and soul within the world and it soothed his wounds and healed his pain and gave him a path forward to who he would become: a man of spirit, a man who appreciates and notices the world around him, who finds blessings in the everyday.

And Isaac took that new vision and he went out into the world, now seeing what was truly important. Unlike his father, he did not aim to conquer and dominate. He connected with his past. He returned to Abraham's wells and re-dug them. When there was conflict, he made peace. It is said of him, that he and his wife Rebecca, played. They enjoyed one another, spent time together. Isaac was a man who found balance. Unlike his father he did not leave home and travel and journey, he held his family close. He was not an actor on the world stage, his stage was smaller, because his life had been poised on a knife's edge, and he was spared.

The angels have cried their tears on our eyes and like Isaac we now ask: who?
Who will we become?

Bronnie Ware, a palliative care nurse who has walked beside the dying, wrote of the five regrets people hold: the who they wished they had become:
they wish they had been the one who lived life true to themselves, not what others expected of them,
the one who had not worked so hard at the expense of others
the one who had the courage to express their feelings
the one who stayed in touch with friends
the one who allowed themselves to live with less fear and more joy¹

Isaac and Hagar looked into the eyes of their mortality and they lived lives without those regrets. Hagar let go of her fear, she allowed herself to dream and imagine her future and then she set out to make it happen. She found the courage to fight for what she wanted, to express her feelings even to God, to find her own way in the world and live without regret. Isaac found the strength and courage to see the beauty in the everyday, to make time to treasure his family, to be there for them, to connect with community, to find balance between striving and dreaming and nurturing relationships and discovering who and what is really important.

We now turn to who we are going to become, to be shaped by these moments so that we too can live without regret. Like Hagar, chase our dreams, find our voices and demand that we be heard. Find the places where we are seen and known and understood. Seek out people who will share our hopes and imaginings. Let our tears help us to look to the future with hope and strength.

Like Isaac, we return to and touch what is true, we find ways to link to the heavens whilst remaining grounded on the earth. And we shift our vision. We turn to look at our relationships, our friendships and our connections with one another. We find success in and beauty in ways which are simple and pure. And we try, no matter what is happening, to appreciate the goodness around us.

So, this Rosh Hashana, let us write our destiny in the Book of Life, our vision touched by angel's tears. May we find the magic in the everyday, hold close the values and people who really matter, live our lives with our feet planted on the earth and our dreams in the heavens.

¹ Bronnie Ware: "The Top Five Regrets of the Dying-A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing."

