

# THE TORAH READING FOR ROSH HA-SHANAH

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Why is the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah Genesis 21, *The Lord took note of Sarah*? On the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, millions of Jews gather in synagogue, and hear the story of how God fulfilled a promise that Sarah would have a child (Isaac), how Sarah persuaded Abraham to exclude Hagar and her son (Ishmael), and how Abraham negotiated with Abimelech over water rights. On the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah we hear Genesis 22, the following chapter, in which God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, whom He then spares.

## PUZZLE

Why was Genesis 21, *The Lord took note of Sarah* chosen as the reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah? One standard answer is that Rosh Ha-Shanah celebrates the creation of the world, so we read of the creation of the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup> If this was the reason for the selection, a more appropriate Torah reading would be the Creation story in Genesis chapter 1 or 2, or the story of the renewal of the world after the Flood in Genesis chapter 8 or 9.

A midrashic answer<sup>2</sup> is that Sarah conceived Isaac on Rosh Ha-Shanah, but there is no evidence that this Midrash antedated the choice of the Torah reading.

A related explanation is that Rosh Ha-Shanah is about birth.<sup>3</sup> If this was the reason for the selection, there are any number of births to read about in Genesis or elsewhere in the Torah.

Some hold that Rosh Ha-Shanah is about beginnings. If this was the reason for the selection, we could read Genesis 12, *The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.'*

A traditional answer is that *pakad* (took note, Gen. 21:1) means "remember," and the *Musaf Amidah* for Rosh Ha-Shanah contains *zikhronot*, a series of verses which are "memories."<sup>4</sup> However, the allusion is tenuous. The words *pakad* and *zakhar* are perhaps synonyms, but they are not the same.<sup>5</sup>

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Furthermore, the term *va-yizkor* is actually used to describe Rachel as being able to conceive (Gen. 30:22), making it a more appropriate reading if this was in fact the reason. It is also not clear whether the liturgy or the Torah reading came first, or why the Torah reading would be dictated by liturgy.

Another possibility is that the real reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah was the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac, in Genesis 22. This is currently the prescribed reading for the second day, and its inclusion of a ram caught in the thicket might allude to the *shofar*, the sounding of which is a central feature of Rosh Ha-Shanah. The preceding chapter, Genesis 21, was perhaps added only as a preface.<sup>6</sup> However, this explanation cannot be accepted.

Rosh Ha-Shanah originally had one day, not two. If the binding of Isaac and the sacrificial ram were the connection, Genesis 22 would have been selected for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, not the second day.

In short, none of these answers is persuasive. Usually, the choice of a Torah reading is fairly clear, but here we are left with a puzzle.

#### CLUES

According to Leviticus 23:23-25, the first day of the seventh month is a rest day, commemorated by the sounding of blasts. Biblically, the first day of the seventh month is certainly not the "New Year," nor is it a major festival. The Biblical "New Year" was the first day of the spring month later called Nisan, as stated in Exodus 12:2: *This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.*

By the era of the Mishnah (around 200 C.E.), the first day of the seventh month was described as Rosh Ha-Shanah, and a tractate of the Mishnah begins by explaining how this day is considered the most important "New Year." Eventually, Rosh Ha-Shanah was considered to be the day of either the creation of the world or the creation of humanity, a day of judgment, the onset of a period of repentance, the coronation of God as King, and the beginning of the *Yamim Nora'im* ("Days of Awe" or "High Holidays").

The Mishnah<sup>8</sup> prescribes Leviticus 23:23-25 as the Torah reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah. The choice of this short pericope in the Mishnah would appear to have been made before the marked<sup>9</sup> increase in the meaning and importance of Rosh Ha-Shanah. The Tosefta<sup>9</sup> states that on Rosh Ha-Shanah the Torah reading is Leviticus 23:23-25, but adds that there are others who maintain

that the reading is Genesis 21, *The Lord took note of Sarah*. Assuming that the *Tosefta* is later than the Mishnah,<sup>10</sup> a variation in the assigned reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah appears to have arisen some time after 200 C.E.

The Mishnah does not give a reason for its designation of Leviticus 23:23-25 as the Torah reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah, although the reason seems obvious since that pericope describes the holiday. The *Tosefta* does not give a reason for either the original assignment of Leviticus 23:23-25 or the "alternate" assignment of Genesis 21. Neither the Mishnah nor the *Tosefta* prescribes a Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, which appears to demonstrate that a second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah was not yet observed.<sup>11</sup>

An important clue is provided by Eric Werner,<sup>12</sup> who compares the lectionaries (prescribed Scriptural readings) for the early Synagogue and the early Church. It appears that Christians were not sure of the date when Jesus was born (because no date is given in the Gospels), and there were several possible dates in circulation within the early churches until the fourth century C.E., when December 25 was fixed as the date for Christmas.

The ordained Scriptural reading for the day(s) which early Christians associated with the birth of Jesus was Genesis 21, *The Lord took note of Sarah*.<sup>13</sup> Even more intriguing, I Samuel chapter 1, which describes the birth of Samuel to Hannah, was also prescribed in the early Church for this day.<sup>14</sup> Now I Samuel chapter 1 is the *haftarah* (synagogue reading from the Prophets) on the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah. It parallels the Torah reading of Genesis 21, *The Lord took note of Sarah*, because both readings describe the miraculous birth of a son to a childless woman. Finally, the *haftarah* reading for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah is from Jeremiah 31. Werner's comparisons show that a passage from Jeremiah (although it is Jeremiah 32, the chapter following the one prescribed by the Synagogue as the *haftarah* for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah) was also assigned in the early Church to a putative date for the birth of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> In short, Werner concludes, Rosh Ha-Shanah and Christmas are parallel holidays in the early development of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.

#### A POSSIBLE ANSWER

What explanation can be given for such a correspondence between Syn-

agogue and Church as far as these Scriptural readings are concerned?

One possibility is that the Jewish lectionary came first. This is the more traditional approach. According to this interpretation, Jews understood Rosh Ha-Shanah to be not only a New Year, but also the time of (re)birth, creation, and of barrenness becoming fertility. The choice of Genesis 21 seems appropriate, as it speaks of the end of Sarah's barrenness and the birth of the successor to Abraham. The early Church adapted this understanding to the putative birth date of Jesus. This would then be an example of Christian "borrowing" from Jewish practice.

Although this adaptation seems logical, it still does not account for the fact that the Mishnah originally recorded Leviticus 23:23-25 as the Torah reading for Rosh Ha-Shanah. Nor does it explain why Genesis 21 was specifically chosen for Rosh Ha-Shanah. As noted above, if Jews understood the first day of the seventh month to be a general "birthday," they could have selected other appropriate Torah readings, such as the creation of Adam and Eve, the birth of their children, the births of children to Jacob and his wives, the birth of Moses or, indeed, the Creation of the world.

Based on the content of Genesis 21, we may speculate instead that the designation of this chapter as the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah was a response to the early Church's selection of this reading, rather than the other way around.

Christians picked Genesis 21, *The Lord took note of Sarah*, because they saw it as foreshadowing the birth of Jesus, the miraculous fulfillment of the promised birth to a woman who should not naturally have borne a child. The word *pakad* ("took note of") may be translated as "visited" rather than simply "remembered." This "visitation" could also be used to suggest a Divine parenting for Isaac. As with many biblical births, there is no reference in Genesis 21 to Abraham and Sarah having intercourse. However, the context and word flow can be interpreted here to suggest that God had some direct interchange with Sarah: first God visits her, then she becomes pregnant. In fact, there is a puzzling doublet in the very first line of Genesis 21: *The Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken* (Gen. 21:1). What is the difference between the first half of the verse and the second half?<sup>16</sup> Christian reinterpretation might explain that God actually impregnated Sarah, foreshadowing the visitation of Mary by the Holy

Ghost.<sup>17</sup> While Abraham's age itself would (from a modern understanding of biology) prove no barrier to Sarah's conception, Christians detected a suggestion that God rather than Abraham was Isaac's father.

If these were the reasons for the Christian choice of Genesis 21 as a Scriptural reading for the putative date of Jesus' birth, rabbinic Judaism may have adopted the same reading as an anti-Christian polemic.

Jews understood the import of Genesis 21 in exactly the opposite way to the Christian view. Genesis 21 may be considered a turning point, because Isaac is the first Jewish child born to Jewish parents. Paul, the founder of a "gentile" or "universal" Christianity, argued that Abraham was righteous because of his faith alone and not because he was ethnically a Jew.<sup>18</sup> Christians argued that since Abraham was chosen by God before he was circumcised, this shows that circumcision is unnecessary. Furthermore, Abraham was chosen before the Torah was given, proving that "the Law" is unnecessary.<sup>19</sup> In the Jewish understanding, Genesis 21 rebuts this argument. Isaac, ethnically a Jew is circumcised without delay. God, affirming Sarah, rules that Abraham's gentile child, Ishmael, must be excluded from the succession, because there will be no descent through that child: *The son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac . . . do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you* (Gen. 21:10, 12).

Prescribing Genesis 21 as the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah would thus be a Jewish response to Christian selection of the same passage, based on a diametrically opposed polemical reading of the same text. In the Jewish reading, the spiritual descent through Isaac is ethnic. This would also explain why prior births in Genesis would not be appropriate for the Torah reading on Rosh Ha-Shanah, even if Rosh HaShanah was understood to be the holiday of birth: all the prior births in Genesis were of gentiles.

The relationship with gentiles continues to preoccupy the rest of the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah. Abraham makes a great feast when Isaac is weaned, but apparently not when Ishmael is weaned (Gen. 21:8). Genesis 21:9 does not even mention Ishmael's name, reflecting Sarah's negative view of him, and the text refers to Hagar pejoratively as *ha-Mitzrit*, "the Egyptian," i.e. an alien. The negotiation with Abimelech, another gentile, shows Abraham in a positive light and Abimelech in a negative one.

The overall effect of Genesis 21 is the narrowing of God's spiritual direc-

tion. God has a special relationship with the Jews, not with the gentiles. While Rosh Ha-Shanah commemorates God as Creator and King of all people, the Torah reading emphasizes the special relationship between God and the Jewish people.

For Christians, Genesis 22, the sacrifice and survival of Isaac, foreshadows the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus; Genesis 22 was therefore adopted in the early Church for Easter vigil (Holy Saturday), not Christmas.<sup>20</sup> Once Rosh Ha-Shanah was observed for two days by Jews, Genesis 22 was apparently selected as the Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah simply because it follows the already-selected Genesis 21 for the first day of the festival. Nevertheless, for Jews, the dramatic narrative of Genesis 22 also stresses the unique relationship of God with the Jewish people.

The destruction of the Second Temple led to a transvaluation of Rosh Ha-Shanah from a relatively minor festival, associated with the biblical and sacrificial regime, to a major holiday, concerned with personal responsibility, repentance and judgment. These changes seem to have occurred in dialogue with Christianity. The "conversation" over the choice of a Scriptural reading appears to have been polemical. Through the Scriptural selection for public reading on this holiday, Jews highlighted their special relationship with God during a day which otherwise emphasizes God as Creator and King of all people.

#### NOTES

1. The Talmud (compiled around 500 C.E.) states that R. Eliezer held that the world was created in Tishrei (TB *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 10b. R. Eliezer's opinion is understood to mean that Rosh Ha-Shanah was the sixth day of Creation (when human beings were created), i.e., that the Creation actually began on 25 Elul (see Leviticus *Rabbah* 29:1; Numbers *Rabbah* 1:10; and cf. the contrary opinion of R. Joshua that the world was created in Nisan, TB *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 11a).

2. Sarah was "remembered" on Rosh Ha-Shanah per TB *Berakhot* 29a; TB *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 10b-11a; Leviticus *Rabbah* 73:1; See also E. Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1968), vol. I, p. 30; S. Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe* (NY: Schocken, 1948), p. 62 [Sarah was remembered "on high" on Rosh Ha-Shanah]. This does not necessarily indicate that Sarah conceived on Rosh Ha-Shanah, see L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1909), p. 121 [on Rosh Ha-Shanah, the angels asked God to remember Sarah]. For a midrashic source that antedates the Mishnah, see Jubilees 16:12-16, which states that God visited Sarah in the middle of Elul, Isaac was born in the middle of Sivan (which, it contends, was Shavu'ot), and Isaac was blessed so that he would not be reckoned with the gentiles in Tishrei.

3. M. Silverman, *High Holiday Prayer Book* (NY: Prayer Book Press, 1951), p. 100 [Gen. 21

was also selected because Rosh Ha-Shanah "commemorates the birthday of the universe and the rebirth of humanity"].

4. This explanation appears to have its origin in TB *Yevamot* 64b, although Rabbah is merely quoted there as stating in the name of R. Nahman that three years of attempting to have children must elapse before a husband takes another wife, corresponding to the three "remembrances" of Rosh Ha-Shanah when God remembers childless women; it is also the day of *zikkaron* ("remembering"). N. Scherman, *The Complete Artscroll Machzor for Rosh Hashanah* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1985), pp. 407-408, points out that the *zikronot* include a verse that ends the *haftarah* reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah.

5. The difference between the words *pakad* and *zakhar* is even noted in the Talmud (TB *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 11a).

6. J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino 2d ed. 1960), p. 950 [the first day's reading "leads up to the Akedah chapter"]; *Pesikta Rabbati*, piskah 40 sec. 5, transl. W. G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 710 [the significance of the *shofar* on Rosh Ha-Shanah is that it reminds God of the horns of the ram offered up instead of Isaac]; TB *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 16a [the *shofar* is blown on Rosh Ha-Shanah so that God will remember the binding of Isaac and consider it for our merit as if we bound ourselves]; Genesis *Rabbah* 56:9.

7. Mishnah, *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 1:1.

8. Mishnah, *Megillah* 3:5.

9. *Tosefta*, *Megillah* 3:3.

10. Y. Ellman, *Authority and Tradition: Toseftan Baraitot in Talmudic Babylonia* (NY: Yeshiva University Press, 1994), pp. 1-6, concludes that the *Tosefta* was compiled in the Amoraic era, and summarizes the differences between Chanoch Albeck, who considered the *Tosefta* a much later composition than the Mishnah, and others who consider it closer in time to the Mishnah. See also *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (NY: Macmillan, 1971), 15:1283-5; and W. Bacher and J. Z. Lauterbach, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Tosefta."

11. Nor does the Talmud (TB *Megillah* 31a) give any reason for the readings for the two days of Rosh Ha-Shanah.

12. E. Werner, *The Sacred Bridge: Liturgical Parallels in Synagogue and Early Church* (NY: Schocken Books, 1970).

13. Werner, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-9, 86-9.

14. Werner, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-9.

15. Jeremiah 31 and 32 are both concerned with "new" or "renewed" covenants.

16. Unless it is translated as "and the Lord did *to* [rather than merely *for*] Sarah as He had spoken," what is added by the second half of the verse? Surely this is not just Biblical parallelism, since the line is not poetry. Is the Torah concerned that God might possibly not do what was promised? Was the promise in some way conditional? Critical scholars hold that the first and second halves of Genesis 21:1 are from different sources, but there is still a problem in that both halves refer to God as "the Lord." R. E. Friedman *The Bible With Sources Revealed: A New View Into the Five Books of Moses* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), p. 62, thus asserts that this is a rare use of "the Lord" by the P-Source prior to Exodus, and that "the Lord" was inserted for consistency with the first half of Genesis 21:1. According to Friedman, the first few lines of Genesis 21 combine P and J, while the chapter continues for the most part from E. See also E. A. Speiser, *Anchor Bible Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987), pp. 153-4.

17. It was even possible to claim that Sarah was a "virgin" if, as may well have been the ancient understanding, that term applied to women who were not currently having sexual relations or who were post-menopausal. Christians understood Sarah to "prefigure" Mary, see Galatians 3:15-16, 4:21-31 [Sarah is a figure of Jerusalem "on high" while Hagar is an earthly figure]; compare Luke 1:35, 37, which appears to be a midrash on Gen. 18:14. I have found no direct Christian source for Sarah's virginity. See E. Castelli, "Virginity and its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 61-88. However, the virginity of Sarah and the virgin conception of Isaac were directly suggested by the first-century C.E. Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo, *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies* in C. D. Yonge (transl.), *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993) p. 304, section II (7). I am indebted to Professor Adele Reinhartz for this reference. Note that Philo, though never mentioned in rabbinic sources, was cited in Christian literature. See TB *Yevamot* 64a-b for a later rabbinic suggestion that Abraham and Sarah were originally androgynous or that Sarah had no womb.

18. Romans 4:1-25.

19. Romans 2:17-3:33; Galatians 2:16, 3:6-7, 3:16, 4:22-31; Romans 4:16.

20. Werner, *op. cit.*, pp. 79, 87.