Vision in the Desert: Rosh Hashanah, Day 1 5787 / Sep 12, 2026

It's the season of confession and reconciliation. So I need to admit to a piece of professional malpractice. I realized recently that even though this is the sixth time I've led holiday services here in Poughkeepsie -- I have never, not once, told an IBM joke. That ends today -- though I bet you've all heard it:

A man in a hot air balloon realizes he is lost. (This was before GPS.) He reduces altitude, and spots a man on the ground. He descends a bit more, and he shouts, "Excuse me, can you help me? I told a friend I'd bring my balloon to his kid's birthday party today. But I forgot my maps and I'm completely turned around. Can you tell me where I am?"

The man on the ground shouts back, "You're in a hot air balloon, 30 feet above the ground, and your location is 41 degrees north by 74 degrees west."

The balloonist shouts down, "Oh - you must be an IBM technician."

"I am - how did you know?"

"Well," says the balloonist, "everything you have told me is technically correct - but it's totally useless, and I'm still lost"

The man on the ground calls back, "And you must be an IBM manager."

"I am - how did you know?"

"Well," he says, "you don't know where you are or how to get where you're going. You made a promise which you have no idea how to keep, and you expect me to

solve your problem. If you think about it, you are in exactly the same position you were in before we met - but now, it's somehow my fault."

Disorientation is part of the human condition. Sometimes, being lost is a joke. But sometimes, it can be deeply unsettling, even frightening.

Two years ago on Rosh Hashanah morning, I spoke about fear and how to confront it, bolstered by the resources of our tradition. And we had plenty of fear to confront. We had arrived at the end of a Jewish year that began with the attacks of October 7, and continued with the war in Gaza, the plight of hostages, the surge of antisemitism. We felt the ground shifting beneath our feet and didn't know where to find our footing.

The past two years have only heightened our disorientation. The infrastructure and norms of liberal democracy — elements that made America a uniquely welcoming place for Jews — are under constant assault. International alliances are in chaos. (Canada? Seriously?) Antisemitic conspiracy theories are one of the few things the extreme left and extreme right share. And now we're told to welcome - or fear - developments in AI that will revolutionize our lives - or destroy civilization. Who can say?

It is easy to feel disoriented; dislocated; face to face with generational challenges we never imagined, particularly all at once.

One of the resources I spoke about two years ago is the story we read early this morning from the Torah — the story of Hagar. I want to return to it now, because I

think there's something in Hagar's story that speaks to the kind of disorientation we're living through right now - and how to find our way out the other side.

Hagar's story doesn't begin in this morning's reading. It begins a generation earlier. To understand what happens to her in the desert, we need to remember what happened to her before she got there.

Hagar is an Egyptian slave in Sarah's household. When Sarah cannot conceive, she gives Hagar to Abraham as a surrogate (Genesis 16:2) — Hagar has no say in this arrangement. When Hagar becomes pregnant, Sarah feels threatened, and the Torah tells us *vat'aneha* (Gen. 16:6)— she abused her, oppressed her. That word should make us sit up and take notice. Because it's the same word the Torah uses to describe the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt, our paradigm for profound abuse. (Ex. 1:11 is the first of many instances). That stark language may be part of why the medieval scholar Nachmanides doesn't mince words (Nahmanides on Gen. 16:1): “Our mother Sarah sinned in this oppression, and so did Abraham in allowing her to do this.”

Hagar flees into the wilderness, and is met by an angel who shows her a well of water. The angel recognizes her suffering, promises that her son will become a great nation, and urges her to return home. Hagar is profoundly moved that God has taken notice. She does something that few others in the Torah do: she gives God a new name. “*El Ro-i*” - the God who Sees Me. And she names the well - *Be’er leChai Ro-i* - the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me. (Gen 16:13-14)

Given strength by that encounter, she returns home. But the oppression continues, for years — through Ishmael's birth, through his childhood. For more than a decade, Hagar lives in a precarious situation: at the same time, she is both the mother of Abraham's son, and Sarah's resented servant. Dependent on people who hold power over her, never knowing what Sarah's resentment and Abraham's inaction will bring. Anyone who has lived in an abusive situation — or knows people who have — will recognize the pattern. Learning to read every room. Watching for the sudden shift in tone, the change in body language, the seething silence that means something different from yesterday's comfortable silence. Like a rabbit or a deer, becoming an expert at sensing even a hint of danger and reacting instantly. And that vigilance keeps you safe. But it comes at an enormous cost. It narrows your world to a single question — *am I safe right now?* — and crowds out the ability to see almost anything else.

Then comes the morning described in our parashah. Sarah has now become a mother to Isaac in her old age, and he is weaned - probably around age 2 or 3. One day, Sarah sees Ishmael playing with him — or perhaps mocking him, the Hebrew is unclear — and she snaps. She demands that Abraham drive Hagar and Ishmael out. Abraham, reluctantly, complies. He rises early in the morning. He gives Hagar a bit of bread and a skin of water, loading them on her shoulder along with the child. And then he sends her away. After all she has been through, Hagar, and her son, are banished into the wilderness.

And here the text does something remarkable, and totally unlike tomorrow morning's story of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. The Torah is deeply sympathetic to Hagar - we get emotional details of her experience that are nothing like the terse account we'll read tomorrow. Step by step by step by step, we read the stages of Hagar falling apart.

First, disorientation. The Torah says *vatei'ta* — she wandered, she strayed — in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva. (Gen. 21:14) Notice: this is before the water runs out. She isn't yet in physical crisis. But she is lost. She has been expelled from the only place she knew - granted, it was a hostile domestic environment, but now she's in the wilderness, with no landmarks or map. She doesn't know where she is, or where to go. So she wanders.

Then the water runs out. And here is the second step — an out-of-character response to the person closest to her: her son. She places her child under a bush and then sits down at the distance of a bowshot, *mineged*. (Gen. 21:15-16) Now, *mineged* can simply mean "opposite," at a distance. But the word can also carry a sharper meaning - "opposed." And a bowshot isn't how you measure land. It is a weapon's range. It is the distance you maintain from a foe in battle. Is Hagar, in her anguish, unconsciously turning her own child into the source of her suffering? *If you had never been born, none of this would have happened to me.* We can't know for certain. But it fits: when the world becomes threatening enough, we start to see even the people closest to us through the lens of threat. Closeness becomes danger. Love becomes liability.

The third step: resignation. As Hagar retreats from her son, she says, *"Al er'eh b'mot hayeled"* — "Let me not look on as the child dies." Listen to what she's done here. She hasn't just expressed fear. She has written the ending of the story. She knows how this ends. Ishmael *will* die. That is settled. All she can control now is whether she watches. This is not deep grief, or anguished protest. It's the numbness that comes when a person believes there is no hope. When the range of possibilities collapses to a single outcome, and the only remaining choice is how much of it you can bear to watch.

And finally — the thing that makes the rest of the story possible — her cry. "Hagar lifted up her voice and wept." She has no plan. She has no prayer, no address for her grief. She simply cries - and at a distance, so does her son.

And it is only then that the angel speaks: *"Mah lach, Hagar? Al tiri."* "What's with you, Hagar? Do not be afraid." And then the instruction — *"Take the boy by the hand."* Re-engage with the person you've distanced yourself from. Don't stay at long range. And then — only then — *"God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water."* (Gen. 21:17-19)

The well was there all along. The angel didn't create it. But Hagar couldn't see it — because years of oppression had trained her to scan only for danger; because the shock of expulsion had stripped her of every familiar landmark; because anguish had turned her own child into a source of pain she couldn't bear to face; and because she had already decided how the story ends.

Her field of vision had shrunk until all she could see was glaring sun and swirling dust. Even though a well of fresh water was right there - waiting to be seen.

Like Hagar, in the last few years many of us have experienced these stages of narrowed vision.

1. Vigilance

The surge in antisemitism from unexpected places has left us on edge. Attacks on visibly Jewish people in public have taken their toll - according to recent surveys, in the past year, 40-50% of American Jews have taken some action to hide or downplay their Jewish identity in public spaces.

October 7th and its aftermath have taught Jews to scan constantly — new alerts, social media, which friends have ghosted me, which public spaces feel dangerous. This is what abuse does: it trains the nervous system to stay on high alert. That kind of hypervigilance is rational for short-term threats, but over time it's also exhausting and narrows our vision. When you're scanning for threats, you literally cannot see anything else. The cost for us: we're so busy watching the horizon for danger that we've lost peripheral vision. American Jews have sometimes pulled back from engagement with the larger community; and as bad-faith attacks on Jews and Israel have increased, we have grown quicker and quicker to circle the wagons - to assume bad faith must be behind **any** conflict or critique.

2. Disorientation

Hagar wanders in the desert — the Hebrew is *vatei'ta*, she strays, even before the water runs out. She's in unfamiliar terrain. For us: the political and social map we relied on has been scrambled. Progressive alliances that once felt solid have fractured over new orthodoxies about the oppressor and the oppressed. Relationships with friends and family members came under pressure — people we thought we understood became unrecognizable to us, or we to them. And at home and across the world, the rise of blood-and-soil nationalism threatens what we believed about the inevitable currents of history flowing toward pluralism and coexistence. It's hard to know where we are, and certainly to know where we're going.

3. Treating one another as opponents.

Hagar sits a bowshot's distance from her own child — *mineged*, opposed. The person closest to her becomes someone she distances herself from, maybe even resents. In the same way, Jews and Jewish communities I know have experienced deep conflict over the events of the last few years. Trauma makes us hunger for moral clarity - which is important - but also for moral certainty - which can be weaponized against anyone who steps outside the bounds. So people keep their mouth shut because if they don't, they fear they'll be embroiled in purity tests within their communities — do you support every action of the Israeli government, or are you a "self-hating Jew"? Do you accept that Israel's goal is and has always been Palestinian genocide - or are you a "Zionazi"? We all too often have retreated into, and fallen victim to, a black-and-white, friend-or-foe consciousness that turns fellow Jews, fellow citizens, even family members into

adversaries. When the world feels threatening, we start sorting everyone into allies and enemies, and the circle of allies keeps shrinking - until its diameter can be measured by the range of a bowshot.

4. Resignation

Hagar, in her despair, says, "Let me not look on as the child dies." Hagar has written the ending of the story. She's not wrong to be afraid — the situation is grave. But she's made a decision about the future that stops her from being able to see the well that's right there. For us, it's cynicism and fatalism. "We know how this ends." "We're doomed." The sense that the dominoes are already falling - that antisemitism will keep rising, democracy will keep eroding, the Jewish future had a brief golden age but is now back to its historic state of siege. It's been said, "If you always assume the worst, you'll never be disappointed." That's true. But you also can't see the well of water that's in front of you.

Then, the angel speaks - and jars her out of her paralysis. *Mah lach,* Hagar — "What's with you?" The challenge interrupts her resignation. Then the angel tells her "take the boy by the hand" - she has to close the distance and connect with her son once again. And then her eyes are opened. She can give her child a drink of water. She can begin to take responsibility once more, as she considers what comes next.

For Hagar, and for us, the miracle isn't the well. It's finding the ability to see it. And it begins with awareness and connection.

The Israeli writer Adi Romem wrote recently[1]: “There is a Hebrew expression, *hakarat hatov*, usually translated as gratitude. But literally, it means something more interesting: recognizing the good. Before we can be grateful for something, we have to notice that it exists. That may be one of the spiritual disciplines our time demands most urgently. Not optimism that pretends everything is fine. Not gratitude used to silence grief. Not a sentimental insistence on finding a silver lining in suffering. Simply the courage to keep our eyes open wide enough to see the whole landscape.”

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we usually ask ourselves questions about what went wrong - who did I hurt? Where did I fall short? Romem suggests that particularly in times such as these, there’s another set of questions to ask. Questions like [paraphrasing and expanding her words] “What did I fail to notice? What have I not seen, because my vigilance, or fear, or grief has narrowed my vision? Whose kindness did I begin to take for granted? What love became so familiar that I stopped seeing it? Which sources of strength were beside me all along? Where, even during a terrible year, did possibility stubbornly continue to grow, or sprout for the first time in unexpected places?”

Maybe this is part of why we tell Hagar’s story on Rosh Hashanah: to remind us that however uncertain and disorienting life is, our key to redemption is the ability to see something new - something that perhaps has been in front of us all the time. If we strive to expand our vision, we may find untapped wells that we can share with one another. Possibilities hidden from view. Untapped strength. Unspoken support.

[1] “Blog: The wells we cannot see”, *Times of Israel, September 9, 2026*

We're invited, as the new year begins, to ask ourselves those questions. To open our eyes to what is new, or to see the familiar with fresh eyes.

If we do, we hope, we pray, that like Hagar, we can walk into the new year having refilled our skin of water to drink ourselves and to share with those closest to us. And may we ultimately go further, to raise a banner high over these unexpected oases in the wilderness, so that we can gather together others who also thirst; so that we may, together, find sustenance and hope.

Note: this sermon has been lightly edited for usage and punctuation since it was delivered, and detailed citations have been added. I want to give particular credit to Adi Romem, whose Times of Israel article came out after this was already written, but whose framing and language inspired me to revise the last few paragraphs.