

# THE GOD WHO SEES ME

R. Goldie Guy

How do you imagine yourself standing before God on Rosh Hashanah?

For many of us, the primary relational metaphor we find ourselves engaging with on Rosh Hashanah is of God as judge. The *piyyut* Unetaneh Tokef describes the solemnity of this day, as God decides our individual and collective fates:

אָמַת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא דָּין וּמוֹכִיחַ וְיֹדֵעַ  
וְעַד וְכוֹתֵב וְחוֹתֵם וְסוֹפֵר וּמוֹנֵה.  
וְתִזְכֹּר כָּל הַנְּשָׁכָחוֹת, וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת  
סֵפֶר הַחַיּוֹנוֹת. וּמֵאֲלֵיו יִקְרָא. וְחוֹתֵם  
יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ.

*It is true that You are the One Who judges and reproves, Who knows all and bears witness, Who inscribes and seals, Who reckons and enumerates. You remember all that is forgotten. You open the book of records and from it all will be read; in it lies each person's insignia.*

וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע. וְקוֹל דְּמָמָה  
דְּקוֹה יִשְׁמַע. וּמַלְאָכִים יַחְבְּזוּן. וְחִיל  
וּרְעָדָה יֵאָחֲזוּן. וְיֵאָמְרוּ הִנֵּה יוֹם הַדִּין.  
לִפְקֹד עַל צָבָא מְרוֹם בְּדִין. כִּי לֹא  
יִזְכּוּ בְּעֵינֶיךָ בְּדִין.

*A great shofar will be sounded and a thin silent voice will be heard. The angels will be alarmed; dread and fear will seize them as they proclaim: "Behold the Day of Judgment, on which the hosts of heaven will be judged!" For they too will not be judged blameless by You.*

וְכָל צָבָא עוֹלָם יַעֲבִירוּ לִפְנֵיךָ כְּבָנִי  
מְרוֹן. כְּבָקָרֹת רוּעָה עֹדְרוֹ. מַעֲבִיר  
צֹאנֹו תַּחַת שִׁבְטוֹ. בֶּן תַּעֲבִיר וְתִסְפֹּר  
וְתִמְנֶה וְתִכְתֹּב נֶפֶשׁ כָּל חַי. וְתִחְזַק

קִצְבָּה לְכָל בְּרִיּוֹתֶיהָ. וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת גְּזֵר  
דִּינָם:

*All creatures shall parade before You as a herd of sheep (benei maron). As a shepherd herds his flock, directing his sheep to pass under his staff, so do You direct to pass, count, and record the souls of all living, and decree a limit to each person's days, and inscribe their final judgment.*

The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 18a), in a discussion of Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2, offers three interpretations of the ambiguous phrase "*benei maron*." The process of judgment on Rosh Hashanah portrayed in Unetaneh Tokef—that we pass before God as a flock of sheep—follows one interpretation, attributed to an anonymous group of Rabbis in Babylonia. According to Shmuel, however, it means that we march before God in an orderly fashion, like soldiers, while Reish Lakish evocatively suggests that we each pass by God, one by one, as those hiking a narrow passageway.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the very *mishnah* in question cites a verse that perhaps most closely resonates with this interpretation of Reish Lakish:

**משנה ראש השנה א:ב**  
בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בָּאֵי הָעוֹלָם עוֹבְרִין  
לִפְנֵי בְּנֵי מְרוֹן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "הַיּוֹצֵר  
יָחַד לִבָּם, הַמַּבִּיִּן אֶל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם."  
(תהלים לג)

**Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2**  
*On Rosh Hashanah, all creatures pass before God like benei maron, as it is said, "The One Who fashions their hearts*

*together, Who understands all their deeds" (Tehillim 33:15).*

This verse characterizes God's judgment on Rosh Hashanah and refers to God as the One who created us, created our hearts and minds, and therefore understands our actions. Accordingly, it would seem that as we walk before God on Rosh Hashanah, God does not judge us, so much as witness us.<sup>2</sup> We stand before God as if there's no one else on earth—and God sees each individual in their totality. We stand in front of God, a God who not only considers our actions, but looks into our hearts and understands our motivations as the One Who formed our hearts within us.

Following this understanding of "*benei maron*," Rosh Hashanah becomes a day for God to witness, see, and understand each of us in our complexity—a contained moment in which we are present with God and held by God in our wholeness, our messiness, and our multiple truths. We are invited into a space to be present with God, exactly as we are.

In the chapters preceding the Torah reading for the second morning of Rosh Hashanah, Hagar experiences this kind of relationship with God—God as the One Who understands, the One Who witnesses. In Bereishit 16, we are introduced to Hagar as the maid-servant of Sarai, wife of Avram. There, we read about the first time Sarai causes Hagar to run away to the wilderness. Sarai is barren, and decides to give Hagar to Avram in the hopes that Avram will have the child for whom they both long. But when Hagar conceives, Sarai becomes "lowered in her esteem" (16:4), and the relationship between the two women strains. Avram

<sup>1</sup> See Rashi on Rosh Hashanah 18a, s.v. במעלות בית מרון.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this theme and the proof-text in Unetaneh Tokef, see the essay by my colleague, R. Miriam-Simma Walfish, "God, Our Mother," in Hadar's 5782 High Holidays Reader, *Zokhreinu L'Hayyim: Memory and Promise*, available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/zokhreinu-lhayyim-memory-and-promise>.

grants permission to Sarai to handle the situation as she deems appropriate, and when Sarai treats Hagar harshly, Hagar flees.

In the desert, a *malakh* (angel) appears to Hagar. The *malakh* tells Hagar that, though she must return to her mistress, God has heard her suffering, and reveals a prophecy about her yet to be born son, Yishmael (16:8-12). Hagar responds to the news by giving God a new name: El Ro'i (16:13). Biblical commentators offer various ways to understand the name El Ro'i: the God Who grants the power of sight, or the God Whom Hagar personally saw. The Radak<sup>3</sup> offers:

ראי, רואה אותי

*Ro'i—[God] sees me.*

According to the Radak, Hagar's experience is one of being seen by God. My colleague and teacher, R. Avital Hochstein, writes:

*[T]he name that Hagar supplies, El Ro'i, describes how it feels to have her existence recognized, to be seen rather than to be invisible... the experience of being seen infuses Hagar with the sense of "there is value to my existence, my being."<sup>4</sup>*

After Hagar gives God the name El Ro'i, she explains the name by saying, "even here have I seen God after being seen." R. Hochstein reads this as a causal explanation: Hagar is able to see God,

after God sees her. And Hagar's newfound ability to see is not superficial; because God witnesses her and everything she has been through, Hagar can truly understand God's essence, and gives God a name reflective of that understanding. Being truly seen gives one the ability to see others more fully.

This mutual relationship of seeing and being seen by God is in the background of the Torah reading on Rosh Hashanah morning. In Bereishit 21, we read of Hagar being banished a second time into the wilderness, watching her child suffer as their water supply runs out, and leaving him aside when she can no longer bear to look (21:14-19). God witnesses her in that state of despair, and God understands her heart. Even though Hagar's prayer consists only of tears, God is El Ro'i; the God who saw Hagar's suffering now listens to Yishmael's voice, and responds.

The Haftarah on Rosh Hashanah morning (I Shmuel 1:1-2:10) reflects a similar theme: God sees Hannah's pain. Hannah comes to the *mishkan* (tabernacle) to pray, but shows up in front of God in an unconventional way. She does not pray aloud, she does not offer a sacrifice, but rather "pours out [her] soul" silently (1:15); only her lips move (1:13). She shares her pain in an intimate and private conversation with God (1:11). Eli, the priest in the *mishkan*, does not understand what he sees (1:13), but God sees Hannah and knows her prayer is sincere and holy. When Hannah later offers thanks to

God for her son, Shmuel, she refers to God as El De'ot, a God of knowledge (2:3). Rashi explains that Hannah here is naming her experience of God as a God Who knows what is in our hearts.

As we experience Rosh Hashanah, these three texts inform our experience, grounding us in our relationship with God on this solemn day: Hagar's encounter with God in the desert, who saw her suffering and saved her child from thirst; Hannah's wordless and desperate prayer in the *mishkan*, which was unheard by those around her but attended to and answered by God; and Reish Lakish's image of each individual passing before God on a narrow mountain passageway—singled out, vulnerable, and witnessed wholly by the God Who created us and sees into our hearts.

Each of these texts invokes unique names for God that frame our relationship with God all year but especially as we stand before God on Rosh Hashanah. This year, may we know God as El Ro'i, the One Who saw Hagar, and the One Who sees and holds all of us in our messiness and in our wholeness; as El De'ot, the One Who understood Hannah's pain in her heart, and answered her whispered prayer; and as Ha-Meivin, the One Who understands all of our choices—where we've been, where we are, and what we dream of becoming.

This Rosh Hashanah, may we merit the feeling of being seen and held by God in all of our beautiful complexity. ♦

3 R. David Kimḥi, France, 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

4 Quoted from her essay on Parashat Lekh Lekha, "She Called God by Name": Between Seeing and Hearing in the Meeting of Hagar and the Angel," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/she-called-god-name>. For more on this theme, see also R. Hochstein's essay on Parashat VaYehi, "Seeing in Genesis," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/seeing-genesis>; and R. Tali Adler's essay, "The God of Hagar," in Hadar's 5782 High Holidays Reader, *Zokhreinu L'Hayyim: Memory and Promise*, available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/zokhreinu-lhayyim-memory-and-promise>.