

Devar Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5767

The Rabbis in the Talmud had a tradition that Isaac, our forefather, was born on the day of Rosh Hashanah and that is the reason they chose chapter 21 of the book of Genesis as the Torah reading for this Holy day.¹

Here are the first verses in Genesis 21:

"Hashem had remembered Sarah as He had said; and Hashem did for Sarah as He had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore a son unto Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken with him" (Genesis 21:1-2).

However, the rest of the story included in this chapter appears not to be in consonance with the holiness of the day. In the rest of the story we read about Sarah being angry at Hagar and her definite request to Abraham to expel the servant and her son. Abraham, with God's approval, does whatever Sarah commands him. Child and mother wander in the desert without water to drink and only the presence of God's emissary saves them from starving. God finally blesses Ishmael, and Hagar finds an Egyptian woman to be his wife. The chapter ends with an agreement between Abraham and the Philistines.

It is difficult to experience, after a first reading, the meaning and depth of the text. Moreover, it seems that the text lacks the beauty and the power that we would expect for a text being read on Rosh Hashanah.

¹ The Sages arranged that both stories be read on Rosh Hashanah (our story in chapter 21 and the Binding of Isaac in chapter 22). This remains the custom in Orthodox and Conservative synagogues, which assign chapter 21 to the first day and chapter 22 to the second day. Reform synagogues, observing a single day of Rosh Hashanah, read only chapter 22.

What can we learn from Hagar and Ishmael's wanderings? How can this story relate to us? How can it enrich our lives?

Let's explore the verses one more time:

"So Abraham awoke early in the morning, took bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them on her shoulder along with the boy, and sent her off. She departed and strayed in the desert of Beer-Sheba. When the water of the skin was consumed, she cast off the boy beneath one of the trees. She went and sat herself down at a distance, some bowshots away, for she said, 'Let me not see the death of the child.' And she sat at a distance, lifted her voice, and wept. God heard the cry of the youth, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the youth in his present state. Arise, lift up the youth and grasp your hand upon him, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes and she perceived a well of water; she went and filled the skin with water and gave the youth to drink" (Genesis 21: 14-19).

Hagar strays in the desert. She can't find her way back, or forward. But Hagar can be any one of us. We also stray sometimes in the desert of life, searching for our own way and trying to quench our thirst for meaning. Like Hagar and Ishmael, we wander crying for help. Like the psalmist expresses; "I turn my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come?" (Psalms 121:1).

Hagar is far from any home, out of food and without any water to drink, in charge of her son, alone in the world. She doesn't know where she is going, and she can't find the way back to her previous home, and even if she could, she is not welcome there any more.

Hagar sits down at a distance because she can't find the strength within her to face adversity. "Let me not see the death of the child," she says.

We would like to tell Hagar, "Hagar, cheer up! Open your eyes! Don't give up! You will find something, sooner or later. You are a strong woman!" But Hagar lacks the strength. She sits down and cries. She cries because she can not find the right way to go.

Hagar could be any of us, any of us who go to work every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and have a wife and children. Any of us whose life looks fine on the surface, to everybody else's eyes, but in the depth of our souls, we cry because our spirits thirst for meaning.

At the beginning, Hagar distances herself from the problem. She sits down and pretends that reality is not real, that her son is not there. At the beginning, Hagar pretends that nothing is happening, but finally she opens her heart and cries. She says to herself: I don't even know how I will get out of this situation. She doesn't know how to use the right words to ask God for help.

Ishmael also cries. Ishmael the youth, can be a metaphor for our soul. Our soul that cries; I want to get out, but I don't know how. I am thirsty, but I can't find water to quench my thirst. The Rabbis explain that the reason this passage is read in the synagogue on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is to teach us that "though all the gates of prayer might be closed, the gates of tears never are closed²."

And God listened to Ishmael's voice, to the voice of the youth. "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the youth in his present state," said God.

The Torah is telling us that God "heeded the cry of the youth in his present state." God didn't recall Ishmael's past when he was a mocking adolescent. God didn't recall the sins of Ishmael's past when, according to the Rabbis, he was guilty of idolatry, adultery and murder. God heeded the cry of the youth in his *present* state, when he and his mother needed Him.

² Berachot 32b

God is telling us this morning, at this precise moment, "I listen to your cry in your present state. Regardless of your past and your future, I am connected to you and hear you." You may think that you don't deserve God's attention, that God does not care about you, that He is too busy paying attention to more religious and observant Jews this day. You may think, "What can I get from crying to God for help? I am not a good Jew, I rarely come to the synagogue, I am not familiar with the prayers and my Hebrew skills are very poor." However, the Torah reading of one of the most holy days in the year is telling you: "Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the youth in his present state." What counts at this moment is not your ability to pray. It is your soul crying, your spirit trying to connect with the Spirit of all spirits. It is your voice telling God, "I am thirsty."

Some people think they should leave their problems and troubles out of the synagogue. They may think the synagogue is a place to disconnect themselves from their daily affliction. But the Torah is telling us that the opposite is true. You can bring your problems and affliction to the synagogue, your cry is welcome here, your fragility and your search for meaning have a place among us. If this is not the right place to cry, to pour out your soul, where is?

Like Hagar, we need help too. We gather here this morning to recognize our fragility and to cry out for help.

Finally, God opened Hagar's eyes "and she perceived a well of water." Her eyelids were too closed. The water was there all the time, the solution was somewhere close to her, but she couldn't see it. God didn't throw her water from heaven, but helped Hagar to find her way to the well. And then, she was able to continue in her own way, she was able to start a new life and to help her son also find his own way.

Hagar's story won a place within our texts. A place we don't always appreciate. The Rabbis, however, thought her story was so important that

they decided to include it as the reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, when the synagogues are filled with Jews.

Our Rabbis believed that her story could be our story too. Hagar's story is not the story of a strong heroine. It is the story of a person crying for meaning, crying for directions for her life.

It is also the story of God, Who listens to each of us from our present state in life. What counts is where we are today. God does not ask us to be saints in order to listen to our voice; neither does he request us to bring a list of the commandments we fulfilled last year. You might have alienated yourself in the past from God, your family, your friends and your Jewish heritage, but if you feel you have strayed, if you want to start changing, God will listen to you from your present state in life.

This is a deep message that tells us about our relationship with God, but it can also bring a new light to the relationships we have with our family and friends. We now know that it is possible for us to understand our parents, our children, our spouses and friends, in their present state in life. We can learn that it may not be possible for the people who are close to us to open their eyes and see that the solution to their problems is right in front of them. Some people have had experiences so different from ours that they have a different perspective on life than the one we have. We don't need to share their perspective, but we can certainly try to put ourselves in their shoes. We can try to respect them, to care about them and even to love them, in their present state in life.

This is the message I wanted to share with you this morning of Rosh Hashanah, this morning when we feel most fragile, when crying is not such an impossible task and when we open ourselves to God.

Today we bring our tribulations and fears and, with humility, ask God to help us find an echo of His presence in the world. Our soul is crying for meaning. May our prayers come before You, O God. Please, do not ignore our supplication.

“The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor” (Esther 8:25) – so may it be for us.

May God bless all of you and your families with health, joy, sustenance and peace!

Shanah Tova Umetukah!