

*Rosh Hashanah Morning 5774*  
*Temple B'nai Israel, Amarillo, TX*

This day marks the conception of the world. We also begin a new year and in the coming weeks, a new cycle in the reading of the Torah. Each year we read the same stories, and each year we have the opportunity to learn something new from the text—to glean new insight and to hear the wisdom we need to hear for this particular moment in our lives. I'd hate for any of you to miss a word of it, but I have a secret to share with you: we probably cannot all read all of the Torah in a single year. So, with that in mind, I'd like to offer some thoughts on one of the oft-missing Torah stories from the reading cycle, especially within the Reform movement. It is a story traditionally read on this morning of Rosh Hashanah on the first day, but it is not to be found in the prayer book in front of you. It is the sad, complicated, and deeply moving story of Hagar and Ishmael.

Hagar in the Torah is a character out of the ancient tradition of storytelling. A maidservant never in control of her own fate, a woman who rises and falls at the hands of her famous masters, Abraham and Sarah, the founders of the Jewish people. When Sarah is unable to bare children, she tells Hagar to go to Abraham and create children in her place. In the portion that is read traditionally on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Sarah miraculously gives birth to a son with Abraham named Isaac. The two boys are brothers, but Sarah becomes jealous and protective of her son. One day, after she sees Ishmael and Isaac playing together in some seemingly offensive way, she forces Abraham to cast out his son Ishmael and Ishmael's mother Hagar. They wander in the wilderness, their water skin runs dry, and Ishmael nearly dies from thirst. Hagar, desperate and alone, cries out to God. Ishmael is not meant to be a part of the narrative of the Jewish people directly, but God still hears their suffering and responds. Hagar learns that Ishmael is destined to rise up from this time of despair, and to become the father of another great nation.

In looking at the literary framework of the Bible, it makes sense to read the story of Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael on the first day, learning about Isaac's miraculous birth. On the second day, we then read of the *Akedah*, the story of a more mature Isaac going with his father up to the mountain, coming close to dying by his father's own hand in a trial of faith. The Reform movement opted to change this narrative arc to better suit the needs of the reforms they made for the high holy days. Initially, the intention was to have only one day of Rosh Hashanah. Therefore, we had to read the story of the *Akedah*, a pivotal and dramatic moment associated with the high holidays to be sure. When some congregations restored the second day, the Torah reading selected was that of Bereisheet, the first story of the Torah recounting the days of creation. At the beginning of the New Year, those congregations that observe the second day of Rosh Hashanah read about the creation of the world, a perfectly logical choice. That being said, I would like to suggest that by eliminating the presence of the

traditional first reading, we miss an important moment for deeper connection to *teshuvah* or repentance in the arc of the High Holy Days period.

The Akedah and the story of the banishment of Ishmael and Hagar share many striking parallels. Both stories include the beloved son traveling into the wilderness, Ishmael with his mother Hagar and Isaac with Abraham. Both stories include an incredible act of faith in God that is ultimately rewarded by granting leadership of a nation. Each story features a vision that the protagonist had not seen before and God had to reveal—for Hagar it was the life-saving vision of a well of water and for Abraham the ram in the thicket to prevent the sacrifice of Isaac. The piece I believe is worthy of attention is the theme of great suffering. Both feature different mothers who must endure the pain of watching or knowing that their child will be in harm's way. Abraham is forced to do what someone else tells him to do, his wife and his God, both powerful sources of authority. The task involves the charge to give up his sons, each precious and beloved by their elderly father.

However, this parallel does not come up to the surface in Reform settings immediately because we are unable to draw the comparison. Not only do we miss the story, but we miss out on the additional opportunity to connect the texts of our tradition and the process of repentance and reflection we engage in during the high holy days. When I read these two texts side by side, I see that not only did Isaac and Abraham undergo a traumatic trial, but so did Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar and Ishmael are cast out of their home and they suffer deep pain as a result. In engaging in true effort to repair our relations with others, we must remember this same conclusion. In the past year, we all have been hurt. How many times have we experienced disappointment, shame, pain, hate, trauma, isolation, and suffered as a result? Far too many. Our initial instinct might be to find a way to cast blame, to point fingers and identify those who have wronged us. Though other people have and will continue to be a part of our suffering, we need to remember that we share one thing indisputable trait in common: our humanity and the human emotions that come with it.

Only when we admit this point can we dig deeper into the opportunity we have in the period in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, to grant a clean slate. If we forgive but do not admit that the other may have suffered as well, it seems a bit superficial. By casting our light into the darkness that others have created for themselves and others, each of us can grow and learn from these parallels of suffering.

This past year when I was living in Israel, I was honored with the challenging invitation to visit Hebron, the holy city where our Patriarchs are buried, in the Cave of Machpelah, as a member of a rabbinic student delegation. After much internal personal debate, I felt obligated to go and see it for myself, as a Jew, as a person passionate about human rights, and as a lover of the land of Israel. The politics of what happened to Hebron in the last century, let alone the

last thousand years, are far too complex to do justice to in a few minutes. Politics aside, the facts are this: The religious and political significance of Hebron is important to Arabs and Jews in Israel. Extremism and tribal hatred abound—nobody likes the other side. Gates, locks, fear, and soldiers are constantly needed to keep the people who live there from exploding into a bloody state of chaos. In spite of efforts on both sides, the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael are still living this way. They are neighbors and both peoples are now part of the narrative of the Jewish people. They live completely apart from one another and will not admit to seeing the profound suffering on both sides.

In my short day in Hebron I asked myself many questions: How do I share this story? What are my obligations, now that I have spoken to Israeli soldiers, Palestinian shopkeepers, and religious Jewish settlers about the wrongs done to them? How can I understand the divisiveness and the grief I myself will never experience on a daily basis? I still don't have all the answers. In the tradition of the rabbis of old, I would like to offer my own midrash to you this morning, my own way of understanding the ancient and the present parallels of suffering:

We are taught that after a long and fruitful life, Abraham died and was buried beside his beloved wife Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah. To see to his burial and grieve for their father, Isaac and Ishmael both return home together in a final act of familial love. Perhaps the women came together as well. When the spirits of Sarah and Hagar looked down upon their children, they were astonished and overcome. That which had divided them for so long no longer mattered. They both cared for a man who did his best to take care of them. They were both mothers, and experienced the impossible love of motherhood. Sarah banished Hagar not once, but twice, thinking only of her own jealousy and grief. Hagar brought life to a barren home, creating hurt and anguish. She survived twice as well, and the God who answered Sarah's prayers answered her as well. What did it all matter now? And so, the two women, bonded unwillingly in mutual anguish, sat together and wept for Abraham, for their sons, for their sins, washing away the suffering they created.