

## **SERMON – Rosh HaShanah Morning 5779 (2018)**

Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, Vermont

### ***BEFORE TORAH READING –***

I know that in this synagogue and in most Reform synagogues, where we celebrate only one day of Rosh HaShanah instead of two, we usually read that most famous of Torah stories, “The Akedah” the Binding of Isaac and near sacrifice by Abraham.

But the traditional first day story is also in our Machzor, and this year I felt it was much more resonant with what is happening

- in the world,
- in our nation,
- between us -

I’ll say more – much more- in my sermon, (rabbis love to talk!) but I wanted to ask you to listen and look for a few things:

1. Who do you most identify with in the story? Why?
2. When have you been Sarah? Abraham? Hagar? Ishmael?
3. What might the actions – or inaction- of each of those characters teach us?

### ***NOT QUITE THE HANDMAID’S TALE –***

So I want to ask again – In the story of Sarah and Hagar

1. – Who do you most identify with in the story? Why?
2. When have you been Sarah? Abraham? Hagar? Ishmael?
3. What might the actions – or inaction- of each of those characters teach us?

I want you to turn to the people next to you, or behind or in front, and make small groups of three or four, and share your answers to one or two of those questions.

### **SARAH -**

I think SARAH is one of the most complex and interesting characters in the entire Torah. While the rabbis make her a model of modesty and virtue, I think she is so

much – well – human than that. Like all of us, she is sometimes brilliant, sometimes funny, often insecure, and at least here – cruel.

Here is a woman whose husband told her one day – we are leaving everything we know and going somewhere, - I don't know where. You're coming with.

Here is a woman who when God tells her she is going to be pregnant at age 90, laughs in his face, and then makes it clear that Abraham no longer is up to that task.

And Sarah desperately wants to have her own child, and in an age without fertility treatments and IVF, finds another solution – a surrogate- Hagar, whom Abraham will sleep with but the child will be hers.

This of course inspired one of the most chilling reflections of sexism and the exploitation of women's body in our society – THE HANDMAID'S TALE.

But the Torah tale is more complex than that.

We start off with the joy of Sarah finding herself pregnant against all odds, and giving birth to Isaac, whose very name means "Laughter." I think Sara's reason for naming him that is fierce: she knows people will be laughing at her behind her back for having a child at such an age, so rather than shrink from up, she names him "Laughter".

But then, once Isaac is weaned and she sees Ishmael, Hagar's child through Abraham "playing" with her son, she becomes enraged and suddenly insists that Abraham expel his other son, the one Sarah insisted they have. You can almost hear Abraham going, "But Sarah... But it was you...and I knew at the time this would end badly." But Sarah is unfazed.

Exactly what it is that makes Sarah so angry is not at all clear. The Torah tells us that she sees "The son of Hagar the Egyptian, who she had born to Abraham, "mitzachek."

Mitzachek is the same root as "Yitzchak" Isaac. And as I said, it's main meaning is 'to laugh.' So the plain meaning of the text is that Sarah saw Ishmael laughing. Why on earth would that make her so upset?

The rabbis argue about this a great deal.

Was it just the sight of Ishmael laughing at Isaac that set Sarah Off?

The word “M'tzachek” can also mean “to play”, so it could mean Ishmael was playing with Isaac. Some rabbis suggest this is sexual, and that is what set Sarah off. The rabbis also suggest that at this time, both Isaac and Ishmael were teens, and Ishmael said he was teaching Isaac how to hunt, but really he was using Isaac as target practice for his bow. That would make a mother quite angry.

But to me, there is a more subtle, human flaw at work here. Sarah wanted a child, and wanted it to be hers, but when she finally had a child of her own, she saw her child as more precious, as better than ‘that Egyptian’s kid.’ When she sees the two boys playing together as brothers and equals, it triggers something in her and she wants it made very clear that her son is superior to Ishmael. Notice how she suddenly calls Hagar “the Egyptian”, and Ishmael isn’t Sarah’s son, but Hagar’s.

And isn’t this impulse to separate ourselves from those we see as inferior happening all around us today? Isn’t Sarah’s impulse to expel those she sees as ‘less than’ playing out all around us? Seeing “the other” playing with her kids as an equal upsets her sense of privilege.

WE are all Sarah. Humans are groupish, and seem to have a need to see some people as below us, beneath us, less than. Our egos, our bravada and sense of security is built on some very thin emotional ice, and it doesn’t take much for our less evolved fears to take over and blame “those people” for our problems, instead of looking in the mirror and see what we have done to create the situation.

This is not just white America. I remember in New York when I was working with a lot of Hispanic deaf people, each specific nationality would always characterize one of the other nationalities as ‘those people’ and beneath them. The Cubans looked down on the Puerto Ricans. The Puerto Ricans looked down on the Dominicans. The Dominicans looked down on the Hondurans, and so on.

And when I was in India, the different castes look down on the other casts beneath them, and lighter skinned people look down on darker skinned. Everyone in India there are large tubes of bleaching crème called things like ‘Pale Beauty.’”

And in the Jewish community, we know that German Jews, the original Reform Jews, looked down on Shtetl Jews from Eastern Europe. That they all looked down on Middle Eastern Jews. And now the Orthodox look down at the Conservative and Reform, and the those born Jewish can look down on converts, etc. One of the great challenges in Israeli society is overcoming the tendency of one group of Jews to say another group isn't legitimate.

In each of us, is the seed of Sarah, that nagging insecurity that can snap into racism, sexism, homophobia, or any other way in which we dismiss some other group as beneath us, and that includes politically and spiritually.

On Rosh HaShanah, we need to take a hard look in the mirror, and see how that impulse manifests in us. Because no matter how evolved and WOKE we think we are, the impulse is there to see others as still asleep.

Our tradition recognizes this, and sometimes pushes back hard against it. For example, Talmud teaches us in tractate Sanhedrin:

*[the first human] was created alone so that the [human] families will not quarrel with each other, each one boasting of the heritage of their ancestor. (Sanhedrin 38a:9)*

Let's keep that in our minds this new year.

## **ABRAHAM**

And when have we all been Abraham? Passive. Upset, conflicted, not wanted to do what Sarah asks, knowing it is not fair and not right, but doing it anyway. And here we have God telling Abraham to do it anyway. But in the past, when God told Abraham to do something he knew was wrong, Abraham spoke up, argued back, bargained, but here nothing. And in the next he goes along with sacrificing Isaac. Would he have ever done that if not for this story coming first?

Here, after being "greatly distressed" about Ishmael the day before, the next line tells us that he GOT UP EARLY, eager to go along and get it over with. Giving them only a loaf of bread and a skin of water, he kicked them out into the desert, like the scapegoat that they were.

Abraham like so many of us, feels distressed, but in our way, go along with what is happening because we don't want to create more tension in our lives and our

homes, or because we become convinced by those around us that what we are doing is really right, and God is on our side? Or we are just tired of fighting.

When to let things go and when to speak up is often a difficult thing to know, especially when there is so much to speak up about, but surely kicking out children who have done nothing wrong, just because they are seen as 'other' is one of those times where we, as Americans, and as Jews need to speak up. One reason I wanted to read this story today was because of its resonance with what is happening with children and parents at our border. Surely calling children criminals and threats and separating them from their families is a time to speak up. Most often, in our history, we have been Ishmael and Hagar, not Abraham and Sarah. And we know from that history, that there are times when it is not acceptable to be silent, to passively go along with what the others around us are doing. Or not doing. We live in a time now where each of us will be responsible for how we answer that question and for our actions – or inaction.

## **HAGAR-**

And then there is Hagar, the woman who is used as a surrogate and here discarded. And like so many refugees who are mothers, she has to hear her child cry with hunger and thirst, and to see no solution possible.

To me, one of the most poignant moments in the entire Torah is when Hagar sets her child down at a distance because she can not bear to hear her child cries of hunger, and she says, "Let me not see the child die" and so she goes and sits and cries. She is paralyzed by grief, by anger, by fear, by trauma.

We live in a time where we see refugees around the world reenacting Hagar's cry.

But we also live in a time when so many mothers and fathers do not sit down and weep, but find complex, costly, and often illegal ways to get their children to safety. These parents are willing to risk their lives, and not see their children again if it means they might live and have a good life across the border that is shut to them.

And I see in Hagar's stopping and crying, in her giving up, a dramatic heart-breaking version of something we all do sometimes. We convince ourselves that

the situation is hopeless, that we are trapped, and there is no possible solution to be found. We convince ourselves that we are powerless, even though we know how powerful humans can be.

But look at the text here. It tells us that God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well of water. *Vayifkach Elohim et eineiha vatere b'er mayim.*

It wasn't there before, or was it?

I don't think of this as a miracle where God caused a well to appear. Rather, I think the miracle is that God caused Hagar to look up and see what was right there all along, but what she couldn't see before because of her anger and her grief.

We've all been in situations where the way out isn't clear, and where we convince ourselves we have no choice and no solution.

While certainly that is sometimes true, often it is our inability to imagine the solution in front of us that is the problem. It isn't that there is no solution; it is that we can't ourselves actually taking the step that is needed.

- This is true of people in bad relationships.
- It is true of people in jobs that are making their lives and their families miserable.
- And it is true in our politics here at home.

And so, like Hagar, we sit down and cry. Or watch TV. Or check our phones. Or post selfies showing how great life is.

As Bertrand Russell wrote, "*The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people so full of doubts.*"

But if we look up, if we open our eyes, if we keep the faith, often a solution will appear that seemed unimaginable before. These moments when things seem stuck, out of kilter, and irreparable, are times when despair is the greatest sin.

Whether we are talking about our politics, race relations, Israel, anti-Semitism, or climate change, sitting down and crying, while absolutely understandable, is not what serves us best. Being certain we are doomed means we are.

We are each Sarah, Abraham and Hagar. And we are each Ishmael, battered and shaped as children by historical forces far beyond our control or comprehension.

But on This Rosh HaShanah, I want to ask you to:

- Catch yourself when you start looking down on other people as less than, as illegitimate.
- Catch yourself when instead of speaking up and saying no, you go along to get along,
- And when you convince yourself there is no solution, that things can't change, look up, open your eyes, get up and keep moving. The well of living water, the wellspring of renewal and hope is always there if we can just find the courage to keep looking.