

Tshuva and the Stranger.

Last year, we spent a sabbatical year in Israel. Although we spoke the language, we had a place to live, a salary to live on, and extended family to help us there were still a lot of things to adjust to. For example, when I got on the bus the first time, it wasn't clear how to buy a ticket. There were neat stacks of coins in a plastic container next to the busdriver but there was no place to put the coins.

So I asked the bus driver: "Eich meshalmim?" *How do I pay?*

The bus driver looked at me for a moment, and then said. "Im kesef," *With money.*

So I handed him a 20 shekel bill and asked "Cama odef?" *How much change do I get?*

And he said: "Lo yoter mi ma shemagiah lecha" *Not more than you deserve.*

I took my change with my piece of humble pie and walked on to the bus. Welcome to Israel.

In the parasha today, we have a juxtaposition of 2 very different sides of the same story: one is the miraculous birth of Isaac the unlikely beginning of the Jewish people. But the other side of that story is banishment of Hagar and Yishmael.

Isaac is born to an elderly Avraham and Sarah, after years of infertility and after a series of prophecies. We are meant to see this as a miracle. The Haftorah echoes this with the miraculous birth of Shmuel to Hannah..

But we also have the painful story of Hagar's banishment.

There had been friction before the birth of Isaac and in fact Hagar had run away previously. This time, Sarah is offended by something Yishmael does. We are told Yishmael "metzachek" (which is from the root "litzchook" like Yitzchak.) The meaning is a bit cryptic here. Perhaps we can read this simply as "teasing" or making fun of. Other commentators imply that there is the possibility of idolatry. Yet another reading may be that he is trying to take the place of Yitzchak. This is supported by Sarah when she tells Abraham to cast out Hagar and Yishmael

saying

לא ירש בן האמה הזאת עם בני, עם יצחק

"the son of that bondwoman shall not inherit with my son."

On a literary level there is a meaningful parallel in the role of the matriarch to the story of Jacob and Esav: in both cases, it is the matriarch who determines to whom the inheritance is given, in both cases it is given to the younger son, against what may be the tradition. In both cases, the matriarch does this against the wishes of the patriarch. But

God sides with her, and she ultimately prevails.

But analyzing it on the human level, there is no way to get around the fact that Hagar is treated terribly. Surely this is not the matriarchs or the patriarchs finest hour. Avraham objects a little and asks God but God tells him do as Sarah said and he does so. Avraham objects and even bargains with God much more over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sarah seems to be acting purely for selfish motives. Not only is she hurting Hagar and Yishmael – indeed she nearly causes their death – but she is also hurting her husband and she is causing a deep rift between Isaac and his half brother.

. Rashi has an interesting interpretation. He suggests that Ketorah, the woman who Abraham marries after Sarah's death is actually Hagar. Ok, maybe there was a happy ending. Either way it is clear that Rashi and other commentators are looking for a way to mitigate some of the bitterness of the story.

Other commentators also point out that Isaac and Yishmael come together to bury Avraham and by then they have healed the wound. Some modern commentators suggest that the wound has not yet healed.

Yaakov ben Asher (Baal HaTurim from the 13-14th century in Spain) suggests that Sarah's sin is directly related to the banishment of Bnei Yisrael from Egypt and the experience in the desert.

I am not sure that we need to view as sin and a punishment, cause and effect. But even if we can link the two experiences, that may enough to extract an important meaning from the story, and to understand why we are reading it on Rosh Hashanah as we begin the high holiday season.

There is at least one linguistic connection between the story of Hagar and the story of the Israelites in Egypt. The name Hagar is often taken to mean "wandering". But many commentators note that the name Hagar also alludes to the "Ger", the stranger.

The role of stranger is, quite familiar to Jews from an historical and oftentimes a personal perspective. Remarkably the first time Avram (before the covenant) is told about his offspring God first says to him:

תדע כי גר יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם.

Know that your offspring shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs. They will be enslaved. Thus, the Jews are introduced in the bible as a people who will be strangers, slaves.

Later in Deuteronomy an explicit link is made between the Israelite experience in Egypt and the treatment of the stranger:

לא תטה משפט גר יטום ולא תחבל בגד אלמנה.

You shall not pervert the justice due to the stranger, the orphan, nor take the widows clothes as a pledge

זכרת כי עבד היית במצרים ויפדך יהוה אלהיך משם
על כן אנכי מצוך לעשות את הדבר הזה.

You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore, I command you to do this thing.

The passage goes on to command us to leave excess grain in the fields, excess olives on the trees and excess grapes on the vine for the stranger, the orphan and the widow.

Thus, the collective experience of being the oppressed stranger is tied not only to our treatment of the stranger in our midst but also our treatment of the widow and the orphan. The foundation of justice is based on our own experience as the oppressed.

If you have ever been a foreigner it can be a disorienting and difficult experience. Everything from getting on a bus and paying, to opening a bank account to finding medications, it can all be difficult and sometimes humiliating (by the way its 5 shekel and 30 agurot and you're supposed to just hand the money directly to the bus driver – in case you were wondering.)

Being a stranger is difficult anywhere and there are subtle and not so subtle ways that we fail to be kind.. It happens in the US at all levels. Just yesterday, I was reminded of this by a colleague from Israel who is a doctor and who is trying to finish his training in the US. He is trying to find a spot in a residency. His test scores are excellent but he needs letters of recommendation and he was told dismissively that letters of recommendation from outside the US are given no weight.

A painful humiliation, once we get over the initial irritation or anger, can hopefully lead to humility. Once we get through the initial trauma it hopefully leaves us a bit more humble, a bit more empathic and a bit more sensitive to the stranger.

In my own experience, as a husband, a father and a friend, humility is the most important feeling to opening up for seeking forgiveness. If we do nothing else on Rosh Hashanah, hopefully, walking with a bit more humility today and in the next 10 days, we open ourselves up to the possibility of seeking forgiveness from others.

There are 2 ways of looking at Hagar's story: one way is to remember Hagar as the contrast to Sarah and Yitzchak. To remember that some of our fortunes are bound up inextricably in other people's misfortune. Another way is to think of Hagar's story is through our own connection as slaves in Egypt with Hagar. We have all been Hagar, and can all be Hagar at some point in the future.

We can choose to view the stranger from within or from without – and I would argue that both are important. As Isaac's children, we ultimately all walk in Hagar's shoes.

Shabbat shalom. Shana tova.