

Day 1 of Rosh haShannah, 5780

Shannah tovah, everyone! A healthy, joyful, and abundant year to all of you.

Looking out at everyone here this morning, there are many of you that I've had the joy of getting to know over the past few months. Others of you, I have the pleasure of seeing for the first time today in honor of the holiday.

I don't want to take this moment for granted, so I'll formally introduce myself: I'm Rabbi Zehavi, and it's a joy and a privilege to celebrate this Rosh haShannah with you as your rabbi as well as to serve the community throughout the year. And I look forward to continuing to get to know each of you better in the New Year ahead.

It's a difficult task we have in this moment. I really just met you. Even those of you I have seen throughout the summer - we haven't known each other that long. And yet, since these are the High Holy Days, the Days of Awe, it's my job today to tell you that you've messed up, that you need to repair the damage you've caused this year. Or, we could put it a more positive way: that you can be the fullest expression of yourselves, that you can develop the kind of character you're capable of, but that it'll be hard work and that you'll have to face difficult truths along the way.

In this first conversation together, I don't really want to say that, and I'm guessing many of you don't really want to hear it - who does?! But it's Rosh haShannah, so what do we do?

I suggest we talk about other people and their problems! And I mean that seriously. The reading from the Torah this morning almost demands it.

Yes, one of the big themes of the first day of Rosh haShannah is the miracle of birth - Abraham and Sarah are blessed with a baby after a lifetime of childlessness, and in the haftarah, Hannah's prayers for a child are finally answered. And at the end of the service today, we'll join together to celebrate the miracle of each baby that was born in this community over the past year.

Rosh haShannah marks the rebirth of the world and an internal rebirth for each of us, so what better way to celebrate than offer appreciation for the newest lives in our midst.

But that isn't the topic that took up most of our reading this morning. Rather, Torah focused on something much darker: what happened after Isaac was born.

I'll give a summary: Before Isaac was born there was another child. Sarah had offered her servant, her Egyptian slave Hagar, as a kind of surrogate mother out of desperation after so many years of childlessness. Hagar bore a son, who was named Yishma'el, and became Abraham's first son. Now, after Isaac's birth, in a fit of jealousy, Sarah

demands that Abraham expel both Hagar and Yishma'el from the camp. She coldly refers to them as "that slave woman and her son".

God instructs Abraham to heed his wife, so Abraham sends his firstborn child and the child's mother off into the wilderness with barely any rations and with no clear destination. Predictably, they run out of water, before they even leave the vicinity of Abraham's camp. Yishma'el lies dying of thirst and Hagar turns away, so as not to have to watch her son suffer. And she cries.

The story of a miraculous birth has given way to the image of a child's needless suffering and near-death.

And then, an angel appears and points out to Hagar the well of water that was already beside her - Yishma'el is saved. The angel blesses Yishma'el that he will become a great nation and that he will overcome all obstacles and threats.

End scene.

Now, was that a happy ending? A reassuring ending?

For all of us, who are presumably playing on Abraham and Sarah's team, the tone is dissonant and disturbing. Which is why, in my opinion, whoever chose this Torah reading must have had real guts! In honor of Rosh haShannah, we could have read about the creation of the world, or any number of stories dealing with sin, repentance, and forgiveness, or a text about Israel's acceptance of the covenant, reminding us that any mistakes we make are in the context of a committed relationship with God.

Instead of any of those options, we read about our people's matriarch and patriarch sending members of their own family into the wilderness to their likely death. At a time when Sarah should have been celebrating Isaac's weaning, a joyful moment of fruition, she turns against the son born for her by her Egyptian slave.

And there are a great number of ways that the Torah makes Abraham look especially bad. When he expresses initial misgivings about Sarah's request, the Torah says that he hesitated *בְּנֵי אַיִלָּה עַל*, "on account of his son", i.e. not on account of Hagar, which makes this sound like a utilitarian consideration rather than an ethical or even relational qualm. At one point, he thought this child would be his inheritor. Now, he's reluctant to let go of him - who knows, maybe he'll need the child as a back-up.

And then there's the way that child and mother are sent off. The language for how Abraham places the boy and the provisions on Hagar is language that would usually be used for saddling an animal. In the Hebrew, there's a ring of dehumanization.

Of course, we know from the results that the provisions are inadequate, and that the mother and child have no obvious place to go. And, strikingly, Hagar isn't provided any

animals. Everywhere Abraham travels, there are animals to carry both people and supplies. Hagar is expected to carry everything herself.

And just in case we thought that these details were incidental, that they weren't meant to be read the way I'm reading them, there's the rather banal end of the reading.

Has anyone wondered why we conclude the reading on day 1 of Rosh haShannah, of all times, with a dry negotiation over rights to a well? Well, this might be why: by carefully arranging a covenant with this king, Avimelekh, so as to maintain access to a well for his animals, Abraham demonstrates a much greater commitment to the well-being of his livestock than to Hagar and Yishma'el. The motivation for his negotiating position is identified as *על אוזות הבאר*, "on account of the well", the exact same phrase used for his utilitarian concern for losing Yishma'el as a successor. And, when Abraham and Avimelekh conclude their deal, the location is identified as Be'er Sheva'. Be'er Sheva' is precisely the place that Yishma'el almost died of thirst mere verses ago.

Torah is more or less demanding that we confront this horrific and embarrassing story. Abraham's concern for his animals' access to water is placed right next to his seeming indifference to the basic needs of his own child and its mother. And his stealth and aptitude as a negotiator is juxtaposed with his failure (at least in this instance) to negotiate with either Sarah or God. Our reading highlights Abraham and Sarah's callousness, their concern for inheritance and property over people, and their disregard for those over whom they have power.

I want to make clear, that none of this is meant to negate the importance, the merit, or the power of Sarah and Abraham in so many other instances. In the Prophet Isaiah's words, they are "the rock from which [we] were hewn", "the quarry from which [we] were dug. (Isaiah 51:1) As the People of Israel, they are our mother and father, and we have every reason to admire them and learn from them in other moments.

But we shouldn't overlook the very daring way that the Torah has presented their human failures and that our tradition has chosen to emphasize their wrongdoing on the day of our New Year.

When we look at what to make of this story, and what to learn from it, my first instinct is to put us in the shoes of Abraham and Sarah. Since they are our ancestors, it's almost automatic for me to consider them as standing in for us. But I wonder whether some of us experience this story differently.

Maybe some of us arrive at this Rosh haShannah feeling like Hagar, like we can't possibly continue to hold the struggle and anguish that life has dealt us. Like Hagar, maybe on this day we need an angel to comfort us and show us that the support and resources and fortitude we need are hiding in plain sight. Or perhaps, we are Yishma'el, feeling utterly vulnerable and rejected and spent, and wait for a blessing and reassurance that we can overcome every obstacle and adversary that life presents us.

And then, there are Abraham and Sarah. What motivated their uncharacteristic cruelty? Forces that each of us is familiar with: fear, scarcity, and competition. A moment of abundance for the couple gave way to feelings of lack and perceived threat. Maybe we need to be reminded that all of us are engaged in a constant process of learning, from successes and even more so from mistakes, many of which arise from the basic human impulse to fear.

Whatever our shortcomings and failures, even should they compromise our most cherished values, God will not abandon the covenant with us. God will not reject us altogether.

At the same time, we affirm that history will judge us, thousands of years from now, for how we care for the vulnerable and marginalized, for whether we dignify or dehumanize, for whether we allow fear and competition to overwhelm justice, and love, and compassion. We have the opportunity to bring healing and repair everywhere we have caused damage. And then, even when we fail to do so, generations of our descendants will draw inspiration from our merits as well as insight from our mistakes.

May this be a year that we experience God's compassion and blessing, like Hagar and Yishma'el. And, like Sarah and Abraham, may we recognize how difficult it can be to maintain our values, and honor human dignity in the face of fear, jealousy, and competition. But may we know, that when we make the right choice, God will carry us. And when we make the wrong choice, God will provide a path to lead us, and our descendants, back home.