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The Reading on Rosh Hashanah

Our Rabbis ordained for us to read what is now named Genesis Chapter 21 on the first day of Rosh Hashanah and chapter 22 on the second day. If you read along with the 'layners,' you may have been shocked by the terse style in which a story of such enormous events, as the birth of one of the sons of the powerful sheik, and the abandonment and near death of another son is reported. The whole chapter reads like a newspaper account on "A day in the life of the Sheik, or the Governor, or the President." And you may have asked yourself, why did the Rabbis want us to start the new year with two such terrifying stories about our revered ancestors and the beginnings of our history as a people? Why did they present the stories without commentary? Certainly, their structuring of the Ten Days of Awe, around sin, prayer, forgiveness, peace and Tzedakah is very different from Abraham's experience of God!

In order to begin answering this question, we have to understand much more about Abraham and about Sarah and Hagar. We have to know much more about their relationships. I've been thinking about them for years as the Rabbis tell us to do, and I've been using the tools of my trade – which is psychotherapy. The details which the Torah provides for us are very rich, so let me start.

However I can't resist telling you how I got involved in thinking about this question. I loved Sarah – without really knowing her – simply as my spiritual ancestor. And I wanted to redeem her of her complicity in a murder. I'm afraid I couldn't quite do it. What I came away with is understanding her – still loving her, not as a powerful leader of our people, but as the abused wife of one. Our Tzedakah Collective supports four shelters for abused wives, some including children. Unfortunately there was no such shelter at Sarah and Hagar's time.

Our story is mostly about Abraham trying to understand what God wants him to be or do, and his frequent misunderstanding of the message, which at least twice in his life brings him to the brink of disaster.

But to understand all of this we have to go back to the beginning. Abraham, the son of an important tribal leader in Haran, Mesopotamia, is told by God to leave his homeland and his father's house and to go with his young (think 'teen-age') wife Sarai and all his belongings, including servants and livestock to a land that God will show him. Abraham obeys wordlessly and they wander for a while till they arrive in Canaan where they settle. Canaan is a good land, most of the time, and Abraham establishes himself there and wins the respect of his neighbors. He is admired as a man of peace and a defender of justice. The invisible God, whom Abraham believes in, addresses him, and eventually, Abraham also addresses God. The guiding message from God to Abraham is that he with his wife Sarah are in a covenant with God and that they will be the founders of a great nation, and that Abraham will be a blessing to the world -- a powerful promise from a powerful God.

The land of Canaan often experiences famine as we learn in all three of our forefathers' stories. During those famines they have to go down to Egypt if they don't want to die of hunger.

In the first of these travels, well on the way to Egypt, Abraham addresses Sarah (Genesis 12-12,) saying: "Look, I know you are a beautiful woman, and so when the Egyptians see you and say 'She's his wife' they will kill me while you they will let live. Say, please, that you are my sister so that it will go well with me on your account and I shall stay alive because of you.' Sarah apparently accepts without saying a word; (what else could she have done in the middle of the desert?) and the expected happens: Sarah is taken into Pharaoh's house. We aren't told what happens to her there, but we are told how Abraham fared in the meantime, and I quote: "and it went well with Abram on her count, and he had sheep and cattle and donkeys and male and female slaves and she-asses and camels." We also don't know how long it takes Abraham to become a rich man while Sarah is the property of Pharaoh, but finally thanks to God's interference and Pharaoh's fear of God, Pharaoh tells Abraham to take his wife and all his accumulated wealth and just get out.

Back in Canaan Abraham grows into a very rich and powerful tribal leader, known for his absolute honesty, his love of peace (even when he has to suffer material loss in the process,) his desire for justice and his dedication to God, whom he experiences as just and merciful.

But what about Sarah? As we know, victims of abuse rarely blame their abusers; they're much more likely to see themselves as worthless, contemptible, and cheap. All we are told is that Sarah is unable to conceive and to bear Abraham a son. She obviously knows how important a son is to Abraham because God's blessing for Abraham depends on it. Feeling as unworthy as she does, and no doubt believing that God has no longer any use for her, she offers her young Egyptian servant Hagar to Abraham as a wife and Hagar easily conceives and begins looking disdainfully at her mistress – or Sarah experiences it as disdain. Her self-respect rises for an instance and she complains to her husband. But Abraham refuses to get involved, telling her to deal with it as she sees fit, and Sarah makes life so miserable for Hagar that she has to flee from her. But God appears to Hagar in the desert, asking her to return to her mistress and suffer what she has to suffer, and God promises her a son who will be a founder of a nation. (Notice that God never speaks to Sarah. You have to have some sense of your own dignity and worth to hear God.) Hagar returns and bears a son to Abraham, and he calls him Ishmael. Ishmael is circumcised, making him part of the blessing to Abraham.

The reading on Rosh Hashanah begins some years after these events, and tells of the almost miraculous birth of Sarah's son Isaac, when both Abraham and especially Sarah are quite advanced in age.

We see Sarah on the one hand rejoicing in her motherhood after having all but despaired of getting to that point, and on the other hand, feeling that people were making fun of her, seeing her as this old, neglected woman, ridiculous in the role of suckling an infant. (The word קנא expresses her changing emotions and her insecure frightened happiness.)

After all the joyous celebrations, life returns to every day and Sarah returns to her depression (to use a modern word for – no doubt – an age-old condition.) She notices with delicate sensitivity everything that convinces her that life isn't worth living; she no doubt, notices that her husband doesn't enjoy being with her as much as he had in the

past few years and that he more often visits Hagar. And then, one morning, looking out of the tent, she sees Ishmael – a big, strapping, self-confident boy, laughing at the more passive and scared little Isaac. (Again, we have this verb מצחק, which can easily be translated here as laughing with, or playing with, or making fun of.) Sarah becomes very anxious and her anxiety turns to anger when she approaches Abraham, making it clear that she wants Hagar and Ishmael driven out of their home and the slave girl's son to have no part in Abraham's inheritance.

Now, at the climax of the story, this is what I believe goes on. Abraham is deeply disturbed by Sarah's demand. He feels that it is evil. He thinks of himself as a responsible father committed to protect his child (why else did God choose to make of him a great nation?) and he is also aware of loving his first-born, but what can he do? Sarah sounded so angry and so determined. He vaguely senses that part of her anger is directed at himself and it stirs some almost forgotten memory in him, of years ago, a memory of great guilt that he hasn't allowed to come up in a long time and that he resists thinking about. His ruminations are interrupted by God's voice telling him not to let his distress over Hagar or his son keep him from his obligation of the moment, which is to do as Sarah tells him. And God reassures him that his son by his slave girl will also be the founder of a nation.

(Every time I read this message of God to Abraham, I am amused. Because while Abraham is conscious only of distress over losing his son, God, like a perceptive psychoanalyst, tells him: "I know you'll miss your young lover as well as your son, but, nevertheless, you owe it to Sarah to respect her wishes.")

God's words have the effect of awakening Abraham's memory and with it the whole burden of his guilt. He remembers how beautiful, trusting and loving Sarah was; how he had betrayed her trust and had exposed her to unknown humiliation; and how he never even asked her about her experiences in Pharaoh's harem. He recalls how he had prolonged their stay in Egypt because it allowed him to acquire more and more wealth; how insensitive he had been to her suffering over her being childless; and how ready he was to accept God's covenant with him, even if it excluded his wife Sarah. He also remembers his joyous lovemaking with Hagar, and that makes him feel even more guilty because of Sarah. (As a contemporary religious Jew and as a couples-therapist I also

wonder ‘Did it ever occur to him to ask Sarah to forgive him?’) All of these thoughts tortured Abraham throughout the night and he could hardly wait for the morning to fulfill God’s message.

What happens next is told in one brief sentence, which makes the enormity of Abraham’s crime even more horrifying. It says: “And Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, placing them on her shoulder, and he gave her the child, and sent her away...”

This is far beyond what Sarah asked him to do; it is in fact consigning his wife and child to cruel suffering and a terrible death – without any explanation and without asking them to forgive him. This is terrifying, followed immediately by a, perhaps even more horrifying story of the binding of Isaac, the Akedah.

Why did the Rabbis of the first and second century choose these two readings as the introduction to the “Ten Days of Awe?” I’m certain its not because our earliest ancestors are considered role models for us. The Rabbis’ religion was much more influenced by the words of the prophet Micah: “God has told you what is good and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.” It is with a sense of humility that the leaders of nations or communities as well as their citizens are asked to gather at a place of worship. We look at our deeds honestly and responsibly, we ask for forgiveness of whomever we have wronged as well as of God, and we will be forgiven. We are all responsible for each other.

In this spirit I can only guess that the Rabbis chose these terrifying chapters about our father Abraham as a warning to us, saying that a fanatic zeal to do God’s will, coupled with narcissistic disregard of other people can come very close to destroying the world.

We can no more accept a Muslim fanatic’s conviction that the Western world – including Israel – must be brought to its knees by terror or destruction, than we can an American leader’s¹ assertion that God wanted him to be President. And to speak to our Jewish situation, we dare not accept some Jewish fanatics’² belief that God’s promise of 3000 years ago has to be fulfilled by us at the cost of displacing a people who have equally strong claims to that land.

Let us hope that as Americans and as Jews, the Ten Days of Awe can help us focus on how we have failed in meeting the needs of fellow humans – including those nearest to us – and pray that they and God forgive us and we can dedicate ourselves to תשובה, doing much better next year.