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RETURN

Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe

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Day One

Faith

"For the sin we committed before You by throwing off the yoke of heaven."

On the first day of Rosh HaShana, our Torah reading is dominated by an unlikely character, a foreign servant woman who becomes a key player in the fertility struggle of Abraham and Sarah: Hagar. Her appearance takes us off guard. She receives not one chapter in the unfolding of Genesis, but two. The story of her promotion to wife and then first mother, followed by her sudden banishment, is painful and uncomfortable to read. She seems to be a pawn in a story far greater than herself. Her story strangely occupies a large emotional space in Abraham's narratives of faith, and it is reviewed on one of our most solemn liturgical occasions.

Hagar is introduced as an Egyptian maidservant with a name that means "stranger"; everything about her is remote and distant. She comes from elsewhere and occupies a low station in Abraham's household. Midrashim about her former position as princess notwithstanding, the text presents a woman with no status whatsoever. Hagar is introduced

in our story only after Abraham has already toyed with possible solutions to his problem of an heir. Sarah's infertility is mentioned early on, when we first meet the future matriarch: "Now Sarai was barren, she had no child" (Genesis 11:30). By the time Abraham is tasked with creating a nation, the reader already understands the challenges ahead. As a first solution, Abraham takes his nephew Lot with him, and his name is mentioned in Abraham's travels to Canaan before Sarah's is. He is clearly regarded as the likely heir until the two parties have property skirmishes and separate. Abraham then asks God if his house servant Eliezer should be his heir, but God rejects this option. In Genesis 15, Abraham is told explicitly that the solution to his problem will come from his belly, literally: "None but your very own issue shall be your heir" (15:4). The child is to come from him. It will not be Lot. It will not be Eliezer. But the child will not necessarily be the offspring of Sarah, either, since it is Abraham's "womb" and not Sarah's that God specifies.

Perhaps Sarah overheard this conversation or it was reported to her; whatever precipitates her action, she decides at this juncture to take fate into her own hands. She gives her maidservant to Abraham. She does not perform this as an act of generosity to help her husband fulfill the divine promise of Genesis 12 that Abraham will father a nation. Each nation begins with one. And Abraham, try as he might, cannot come up with the first one. Genesis 16 explicitly states Sarah's motive in her own words: "Perhaps *I* shall have a son through her [lit. "be built up through her"]" (16:2). Abraham will get an heir, she reckons, as part of some larger divine scheme, but she chances not being part of this majestic, historic tale. Sarah has to act to guarantee her own place. Maybe, just maybe, she can have a son through surrogacy, solving her emotional anguish and also cementing her historic significance as the mother of a nation.

Sarah gives her maid over as a wife rather than a concubine, a term in rabbinic parlance that implies a wife but one without the financial security of a marriage contract. In doing this, Sarah changes Hagar's status monumentally, moving her from a subordinate figure in the household to one almost on par with herself. When Hagar gets pregnant and then ridicules Sarah, Hagar has, of her own accord, shifted the power balance again, lording her new position in the house as first mother over her former mistress. In actuality, Hagar could have belittled Sarah with-

out much effort. Seeing Hagar's growing stomach is signal enough for Sarah to experience inadequacy. Phyllis Trible describes the changing scales of power in the Sarah/Hagar story beautifully in her book *Texts of Terror*:[1] a woman of little significance is suddenly moved to center stage, pushing aside the female protagonist who could not deliver.

Sarah's indignity at her sudden change in position is a source of outrage. She turns to Abraham with her humiliation: "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between me and you!" (16:5). Sarah had thought she was helping the family with this arrangement, but she comes to realize the mistake of it all. In Sarah's failed attempt to build herself up through Hagar, she is ironically made small though her. The Bible commentator Rabbi Meir Leibush (1809–1879), known by the acronym Malbim, understood Hagar's dismissal of Sarah as linked to the fact that Hagar conceived immediately; one might think Hagar was more righteous than her mistress. Sarah blames her indignity on Abraham; perhaps his own happiness at becoming a father was too much for Sarah. Hagar's arrogance – or her very existence – becomes Sarah's new blight.[2] Sarah creates a challenge for Abraham. Rather than position herself against Hagar, Sarah gives Abraham a choice. He must choose a life with Sarah and her infertility, which means letting go of God's larger vision of Abraham's future, or choose the leadership role God determined for him, which he must pursue without her. Sarah can no longer see a way for Abraham to have his national, spiritual dream and to keep their relationship intact when she could not provide an heir.

Abraham, wise patriarch that he was, responds to Sarah's humiliation: "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right" (16:6). This is Abraham's clever way of telling his wife that this plan was her idea, not his. He had no emotional attachment to Hagar; just as she easily shifted from being Sarah's maid to Abraham's wife, Hagar can shift back to her old role without Abraham being invested in her change of status. Then Abraham tells Sarah to do with Hagar as *she* deems right, returning to Sarah all the power she once had over this woman. There is irony in this statement. Sarah afflicts her maid, not knowing how to return this woman, pregnant with her husband's heir, back to her former

role without the use of verbal or physical violence; we are unsure how exactly to read the postscript: "Sarah treated her harshly, and she ran away from her" (16:6). Having tasted a modicum of freedom, Hagar is not prepared to redress the new imbalance and return to the indignity of servitude.

This inverse story of Exodus, in which an Israelite enslaves an Egyptian, treats her harshly (using the same Hebrew terminology used to describe Pharaoh's oppression of the Israelites), and forces her to run off to the wilderness to escape, has a different end than our national narrative.[3] Hagar finds herself near a spring and encounters an angel. He tells her to return to her place of anguish even though she will suffer there, because she will birth her own nation, beginning with Abraham's first child, Ishmael. The child, the angel tells her, will be a "wild animal of a man; his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him" (16:12). The promise of a child of violence hardly seems a motivation to return unless, of course, Hagar believes that as a powerless slave, this is her best chance for her own future defense. Finally her defenselessness can become her empowerment; she has recourse to combat violence with violence, all to fulfill a larger vision of a nation: her own. The angel presages the message with what must have seemed a preposterous promise: "I will greatly increase your offspring, and they will be too many to count" (16:10). Oddly, Hagar is the only woman in the Hebrew Bible to receive the female version of Abraham's blessing of multitudes. This promise unlocks the mystery of why we read Hagar's story on Rosh HaShana, one of our holiest days.

To understand the promise, we have to telescope forward to the text of Hagar that is included in our *Maḥzor*: Genesis 21. Ishmael is likely seventeen, on the cusp of adulthood; his half-brother Isaac is being celebrated by his parents. Isaac, the miracle child, has been weaned, and Abraham makes a large feast. With Isaac's viability, the issue of who will be Abraham's heir comes into peak narrative tension.[4] Sarah, at the height of her happiness, sees "the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing" (21:9) and is reviled. Using a more subordinate Hebrew name for slave than was used in Genesis 16,[5] Sarah once again gives Abraham an unambiguous mandate: "Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the

inheritance with my son Isaac" (21:10). Neither son is called the child of Abraham; there is only the son of Hagar and the son of Sarah, pitted in Sarah's mind in an intense competition for succession. Now that Ishmael is an adult and technically fit to be heir, Sarah sees his playing as either an erotic danger (as posited in one midrash), a strange childish aberration for a young adult, or a status problem for her son. Banishing Ishmael would leave only one child behind, Isaac, as if the birthright were a matter of geographic accessibility. Where Abraham listened to his wife before without emotional investment, here the text renders his anguish: "Abraham was greatly distressed for it concerned a son of *his*" (21:12). Sarah may have easily cut out Abraham's role as father in discussing Ishmael, but Abraham could not. The child was also *his* child.

God tells Abraham to listen to his wife, and Abraham dutifully sends out Hagar and Ishmael into an unforeseen future in the wilderness. He gives Hagar bread and a skin of water, putting it on her shoulder – a last act of tenderness – and mother and son set off. Many medieval commentators on this story question Abraham's parsimony. When a slave was set free in the laws framed in Deuteronomy, he was entitled to more than this woman – who was first a slave and then a wife – received from her master/husband for her ignominious exit.

Then Hagar gets lost and her water runs out. In despair, she puts her child, now a man, under a bush, not wanting to see her son die, presumably of dehydration. She sits a bow's distance away and bursts into tears, but the angel this time only hears the weeping of the boy. The English rendering of the angel's words sounds compassionate: "What troubles you, Hagar?" (21:17). The Hebrew is more remonstrative: "What is the matter with you, Hagar?" These three Hebrew words contain the key to unraveling this text and Hagar's role in Abraham's story.

Hagar's behavior here provides an ancient literary foil to demonstrate the extent of Abraham's faith. Abraham is given a promise: to become a nation in a homeland. He is successful in his role as homesteader, amassing wealth and cattle, digging wells, fighting wars, and making covenants with neighboring peoples. But he struggles for more than a dozen chapters to make good on the pledge of a nation because he cannot produce even one heir. He finally has one child and then another, then banishes one child and then almost offers the other as a

sacrifice, making him once again almost childless. He turns to God for guidance and direction, even when he stares into the abyss of ambiguity. God points him to a sky full of stars on several occasions with hopefulness, and Abraham never doubts Him despite immense confusion. Sarah sarcastically laughs at the promise of a child past her childbearing years. She doubts. Abraham, too, laughs, but it is a different laugh. It is the laughter of joy and relief, the chuffing of optimism. Hers is the laugh of disbelief. His is the laugh of faith.

Hagar was given the same promise as Abraham, to be the progenitor of a nation, but when a simple physical obstruction stands in her way, she balks. She puts her child of promise near a bush, expecting him to die. When the angel comes to her, he opens Hagar's eyes, and she beholds a well. The text does not say that God created a well, only that her eyes were opened, and she saw it for the first time. A solution lay right in front of her, but she lacked the ambition, the inspiration, or the faith to see it. Abraham, even when his vision was clouded, held on tightly to the promise and found the faith to surmount every obstacle until he achieved God's word. Hagar let go too soon.

We read Hagar's story nestled into Abraham's on Rosh HaShana to point to our own choices within the framework of faith and trust. Do we have the faith to hold on to a vision of a better future or does that vision collapse the moment something stands in the way? How strong is our faith? How determined are we to live a life of promise?

Hagar acted as an ordinary mother would have – but she had been given an extraordinary promise. Rather than nurture it with extraordinary determination, she let it go, opting for tears of self-pity. Self-pity is an easy place to visit. Hagar did have a very difficult life. But she also received a blessing of abundance that required effort and belief. She could not see that because she was overwhelmed by her powerlessness. A well lay before her – a reservoir of blessing in the ancient Near East – but she was blind to it. And when we read how quickly Hagar gave up on a divine promise, we become more awed by the fact that Abraham never gave up despite problems much more significant than those faced by his wife's former slave. If we could not understand why Søren Kierkegaard called Abraham a knight of faith before we read Genesis 21, we understand the philosopher now.

Sometimes we fall in love with our problems. They become us. We cannot live without the drama. We are too restless to appreciate the abundance that God has given us and instead of bowing deeply for *Modim* (prayer of gratitude), we are stuck in one long *Taḥanun* (supplication of lowliness). Our problems give us something to talk about and someone else to blame. We see problems recurring when a situation does not change but do not necessarily take responsibility for changing it. We do not accept our own complicit role in our problems. It was easy enough for Hagar to blame Abraham for not giving her enough water to sustain her, for sending her away, for making her a helpless player in a narrative far larger than herself. It is easy enough to sit down and cry and become so entangled in a problem that we don't even think about how to change it. We can all do that. We blame others. We blame God. But it does not advance us. Blame was not going to save Ishmael, and it is not going to save us.

Faith demands patience in the face of a future that we cannot see and the determination to make good things happen. If we could know the future with certainty, we would not need faith. But because we cannot know, we have to trust in powers greater than ours to guide us. Our faith is not the passive faith of Hagar's tears but the active joy of Abraham's laugh. We admire his propulsion forward, his drive to create an ambitious, dream-worthy vision even if all of the particulars comprising that future were beyond his immediate understanding. Faith demands that we engage in a delicate dance of both relinquishing control to an authority above us and acting within our full human capacity to realize our dreams.

On Rosh HaShana we celebrate God's kingship by acknowledging God's authority. We recommit ourselves to being faithful servants of the king. A faithful servant does not wait for a better future but, in partnership, creates one.

LIFE HOMEWORK

Abraham's faith demanded a contradictory blend of patience and impatience. Sometimes we need more patience to actualize ourselves and to make situations better. Sometimes we need impatience to achieve the same ends. We allow a situation to stay the same or fester because we do not take charge of shaping it. Wisdom demands that we know when to be patient and when to be impatient. Rosh HaShana offers us the opportunity to think about our own state of faith in the coming year. Ask yourself:

- Where in your life do you need to be more patient? What will you do to express that patience in the future?
- Where in your life do you need to be more impatient? What will you do to express that impatience in the future?

PASSAGES FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, The Laws of Repentance* 1:3

At present, when the Temple does not exist and there is no altar of atonement, there remains nothing else aside from teshuva. Teshuva atones for all sins. Even a person who was wicked his whole life and repented in his final moments will not be reminded of any aspect of his wickedness, as Ezekiel [33:12] states: "The wickedness of the evil one will not cause him to stumble on the day he repents his wickedness." The essence of Yom Kippur atones for those who repent, as Leviticus [16:30] states: "This day will atone for you."

Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto, *The Path of the Just*, Chapter 1: "Concerning Man's Duty in the World"

The foundation of saintliness and the root of perfection in the service of God lies in a man's coming to see clearly and to recognize as a truth the nature of his duty in the world and the end towards which he should direct his vision and his aspiration in all of his labors all the days of his life.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *The Lights of Repentance* 8:8

> When the anguish, which is the pain of penitence brought about by the person's own spiritual state and that of the whole world, becomes very great, to a point of blocking the creative sources of thought, speech, prayer, outcries, feeling and song, then one must rise in a leap to seek life-giving lights in the source of silence. "The parched land will become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water." (Isaiah 35:7)

Text questions to think about while studying:

- How does the importance of faith affect the process of repentance?
- How does a broader vision of the future change the present?
- What kind of anxieties hold us back from change?

Notes

1. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 9–35.
2. For more on this, see Jo Ann Hackett, "Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel,* ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 12–19.
3. For mention of this narrative within others that also bear Exodus themes and language, see David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).
4. For more on this, see Naomi Steinberg, "The Sarah-Hagar Cycle: Polycoity," in *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 35–86.
5. For a discussion of the difference between a *shifḥa* and an *ama* in Hebrew, see F. Charles Fensham, "The Son of a Handmaid in Northwest-Semitic," *Vetus Testamentum* 19:3 (July, 1969), 312–321.