God HEARD the cry of the boy! God saved the boy from the banishing
Introduction to Torah Reading Rosh Hashanah First Day 5778
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We are about to read the Story of the banishing of Ishmael, a story that often feels
painful and challenging to read. In this story, Sara sees her son Isaac play with
Ishmael -- Abraham’s other son -- and she asks Abraham to “Cast out that slave
woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with
my son Isaac”\(^1\)

Rabbis over many generations have given different interpretations of why we read this
on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, rather than the Genesis story or any other
readings that would connect us to this day’s theme of the creation of the world.

Instead of focusing on why we read this text, today, I want to focus on the question,
how can we read a story of banishing a child and his powerless mother as an
inspiring story, especially in the context of the times in which we are living in this
country, where banning those who are different from us, expelling those who we feel
threatened by and afraid of, has become central to the discourse of many.

Rabbi David J. Fine suggests the the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh
Hashanah (chapter 21) and the torah reading of the second day of Rosh Hashanah
(chapter 22): “are not two different chapters but rather different versions of the same
story. In both chapters Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son. In both chapters he rises
up early in the morning in order to fulfill his task (21:14; 22:3) And finally, in both
chapters the son is saved by an angel of God calling forth out of heaven (21:17;
22:11.15) The angel, is sent, in both cases, by a merciful God agreeing to lessen the
severity of the original decree which Abraham set out to fulfill”\(^2\).

Perhaps understanding these stories as the failures of Abraham, not once but twice--
his willingness to sacrifice his children-- is a way to read this story today.

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\(^1\) Genesis 21:10
\(^2\) Rosh Hashanah Readings, Edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, page 115
Perhaps Abraham -- who earlier did challenge God in Sodom and Gomorrah -- gave up too early in challenging God in these later stories of his family dysfunction.

In America today, we continue to struggle with policies that offer harsh solutions to problems that seem to be rooted in fear of strangers. I am thinking of the muslim ban, the building of a wall, the reversal of DACA, and the new restrictions on the entrance of refugees to this country.

In assessing these policies, perhaps we ought to look at and be guided by GOD’s actions, rather than Abraham’s.

In each story, the angel interrupts the act of exile or violence. And the angel is sent, by the same God who gave the initial instruction to banish or kill the child… is the Torah trying to teach us that even God can make an initial mistake? Perhaps. But the Torah may also be teaching us something deeper and more complicated. Perhaps banishing Hagar and Ishmael to the desert seemed like a good solution to the tension between the two wives. Maybe the sacrifice of Yitzchak was a good way for Avraham to prove his devotion to God. Perhaps the Torah puts those proposals into God’s mouth in the first place in order to teach us that even the right solution needs to give way before human suffering.

In genesis 21:17-19 we read:

God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.
Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”
Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.

Godself, HEARD the cry of the boy!, God saved the boy from the banishing. As God promised to Abraham, God helped Ishmael to survive when he was in danger of perishing in the wilderness.

Islamic tradition identifies Ishmael-- not Isaac -- as the child of the Akeda, and Isaac as the rejected son. When we are reminded of the different interpretations of these narratives by two different peoples, we realize that these stories are not about Isaac and Ishmael, nor about the good boy and the bad boy. These stories are about human beings responding to fear and conflict by demonizing the other, by banishing and expelling people, by creating distance, by sacrificing what might be most dear to us.

God models a different way to be. God teaches us we need to HEAR the cries of others -- the most vulnerable and marginal -- and BE WITH them. Perhaps the reading of this text is about paying attention to how God reacted and helped by saving the children, rather than sacrificing them.

On this Rosh Hashanah I invite us to remember that we are called to walk in God’s path and we are partners in God’s creation so it is up to us to HEAR the cry of the ones that suffer and are vulnerable and BE WITH them.

Shana Tova