

Scarcity and Humanity
Rosh Hashanah Day 1
September 30, 2019

On this New Year's Day, we chant our myth of ancestral creation of the Jewish people. As in many of our Biblical family of origin myths, there is dysfunction, deceit, aggression and jealousy.

Where did we come from? Who did we come from? Does this tell us where are we going? These themes - looking back to see where the last 365 days have taken us and planning for the future, narrate the spiritual work we do during these *Yamim Nora'im*. Today is *Yom haZikaron*, another name for Rosh Hashanah, the day we remember. What? Where? Who?

Long after the Garden and the Flood a promise is made to Abraham and Sarah that they will create a people with a new kind of covenantal relationship to the Divine. Together, they form the first family, although they are not the only adults or parents in this nucleus. Hagar is a slave who is owned by Sarah and Abraham as part of the spoils they are given by Pharaoh. According to *Bereshit Rabbah*, the midrashic text on the Book of Genesis, Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter. She was brought away from her community in a way that could be generously drashed as a work opportunity, and is more directly described as human trafficking. She is culturally if not racially different, and she is only part of Abraham's household by her position as Sarah's property.

Abraham and Sarah are immigrants, if not refugees, too. They too flee dangerous spaces in pursuit of promised expansion. *Arami oved avi* - My father was a wandering Aramean. These are the wandering ancestors. The word wandering gives an air of romance, the word *oved* means one who crosses borders, who doesn't not have a permanent place to be. Before this story, Abraham and Sarah had gone to Egypt to seek asylum because their homeland was plagued by insufferable famine. They settle across the border, later purchasing property. While they are nomads, they create a clan and a larger more protected place to live.

Sarah, who experiences infertility, fears that the security she and Abraham have amassed is at risk. Family progeny was the only way to keep wealth built by her husband. Hagar is their surrogate to create a child, and when Isaac is born to Sarah later, Sarah deems Hagar as expendable. Ishmael, son of Hagar, is seen "*mitzachek*" - playing - with Isaac. This word shares the same root as Yitzhak or Isaac; what Sarah fears is that Ishmael is becoming too much like her own child, and therefore too likely to be seen as Abraham's legitimate heir. Sarah is faced with the reality that others can equitably access what she has, which might mean less for her. Sarah feels threatened by the scarcity of resources, and out of greed and fear, she orders "*garash et ha'amah hazot.*" Banish this woman. In other words, permanently deport her.

Sarah's story is one of scarcity - scarcity of inheritance and status. She is protective of the child that was hard to come by, she is eager to make sure that her promised descendents and their amassed property is not lost. Her fear exacerbates the exile, as she banishes Hagar and Ishmael to the desert without enough water. Not unlike what we see today, as the hundreds of miles of Central American, Mexican and Southwestern American desert is an unintentional graveyard of those swallowed by their desert journey to safety.

Ishmael and his mother Hagar are starving and dying in the desert. Placing her child under a bush, Hagar covers her eyes and walks away, crying, "let me not look as the child dies." God opens her eyes, and the well she had not seen is right in front of her. They survive.

Hagar's story is one of scarcity - scarcity of security and water. The desert in which Hagar and Ishmael are wandering swallows their resources and there are no more. As they move away from the home they have known, where fleeing is the only option for their safety, they go further into the abyss of loneliness and dehydration. Until God sees them, and she sees a well. She recalls her previous exiles in which she calls after being abused, "*she called God who spoke to her, "You Are El-roi,"*" - you are the one who sees me. This is my favorite name for God.

Today, our story is also one of scarcity. It's not scarcity of property or water, or even about space where our immigrants and refugees will live and what resources they need. Our scarcity is a scarcity of humanity.

The scarcity of humanity.

We are very good avoiders. We are good at turning off and putting down and scrolling by and closing our eyes. Saturation with overwhelming destruction, with cringe-worthy suffering is everywhere. Dehumanization is a tactic of immigration policy, and we are falling for it hard. We know that the only thing for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing. Why is this evil growing? What are we not seeing?

As described in a September 16th article regarding the Supreme Court decision to change asylum regulations, ...the southern border has now been effectively shut to asylum seekers from anywhere other than Mexico.

"None of this, of course, will stop migration. Desperate people with no access to food, water and housing for their families in their home countries, as well as people fleeing gang violence, the ravages of climate change, narco-governments and collapsed economies, will still head north. They will do so next month for the exact same reasons they did so last month — because they have concluded that their families' survival depends upon it. Except, instead of trying to follow the legal process and file asylum claims, they will be driven in ever-greater numbers to hire smugglers, coyotes, to transit them through the most remote and deadly stretches of the desert and into the United States. Instead of seeking a legal status that would, if the system eventually granted them asylum, allow them to live, work and gain a pathway to eventual citizenship in the United States, they will be forced into the shadows, further swelling the ranks of the undocumented and the exploited."

The words "undocumented and exploited" actually reinforce our blindness. If someone does not have legal status in this country it has to be a secret, which stops us from seeing the fullness of what that means. If we do not talk about individual people and their individual stories, individual refugees and people who are right here in our neighborhoods, if they made it here twenty years ago or were lucky enough to make it here last week. Exploiting labor and continuing to push immigrants and refugees into shadows makes it easier for us to avoid. We have to open our eyes.

No one leaves their home and picks up their children and walks across three countries unless their lives are at risk. Had Europe and the United States not been separated by an ocean, many of our ancestors would have walked to our physical borders too.

Two stories: First from Reconstructionist congregation Kol Tzedek:

David Centeno and Milagro Delgado call her mother back in El Salvador, she begs the couple: Don't come home. It's too dangerous. Keep the children safe in America. Only recently, she told them, a street gang murdered a neighbor, then issued an order that no one attends the funeral. Nobody did. It's the same violence that claimed one of the Centeno-Delgado family's children, a son kidnapped and murdered at 15; that drove them 3,500 miles from their Central American homeland;

The number of people who came to the United States and then applied for asylum soared from 28,000 in 2010 to 143,000 in 2017, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

In El Salvador, gangs, or *maras*, are powerful and pervasive, their violence responsible for most of the 20,000 killings between 2014 and 2017, according to the International Crisis Group, a world peace organization. They operate in 94 percent of El Salvador's 262 municipalities and, in many areas, rule daily life, forcing residents headed to work or school to pay money at roadblocks, and extorting greater sums from shops and businesses.

The gangs' forcible recruitment of young men and women, the Washington-based Latin America Working Group wrote in a recent analysis, drives many Salvadorans to first flee their homes, then the region, and finally the country. After their son's death, the Centeno-Delgado family was told: Hand over a son to join the gang, or everyone will be killed.

Next, a story 2 blocks from here, a young woman and her family live at the Lake Street church after being forcibly separated from her family at 19 and deported to Mexico, then El Salvador, where she was stalked, attacked and forced to flee. Attempting to reunite with her family in Illinois, Yesica was apprehended and was held in Texas jails for 2 years. If she were to be deported she would be killed by the gang members who killed her father and targeted her. This past spring, after years of advocacy by Chicago Religious Leadership Network, various Immigration organizations in Chicago, the Peace and Justice and Asylum committee at Lake Street, and partnership and advocacy by JRC's Immigrant Justice Task Force and specifically Beth Lange, Yesica won her case for "withholding of removal" or safety from deportation. This doesn't mean she's a citizen or safe, but the threat of expulsion is abated for now.

Rabbi Deborah Waxman, president of Reconstructing Judaism witnessed: "if someone comes seeking asylum and is not turned away, they are charged with misdemeanors for crossing the border. Large groups are adjudicated at once, raising serious questions about due process, brought before a judge in shackles. If they plead guilty (whether or not they understand what is going on), they are immediately deported. If they plead not-guilty, they are jailed. Parole is discretionary, granted only occasionally and only to those who can prove their identity, demonstrate they pose no public danger, and have a sponsor to provide housing and financial support. Which is why our support for organizations that provide these services is crucial."

How do we open our eyes? How do we mitigate this scarcity of humanity?

"Creating Activism and Hope around Immigrant Justice: A Day of Learning, Connecting and Doing."
Sunday, November 17th. MArk your calendars now, and I don't care if you take out your phones.
Immigrant Justice is our congregational learning theme this year, and This will be an immigrant justice fair designed to educate, motivate and activate our JRC community and provide us with specific opportunities to **do more**. It will include an exciting panel of activist leaders, tables with representatives from 6-10 diverse immigrant justice organizations, and an immigration-themed book fair. Email

immigrantjustice@jrc-evanston.org to get involved. I am grateful to Beth Lange, Tamar Frolichstein-Appel, Bruce Koff, Edie Canter, Vivian Eisenberg, Chibur and Religious School, Racial Equity and Library Committees.

When we open our eyes and see, what is our natural human response?

We are conditioned to respond to sirens by pulling over, to a baby's cry by picking them up, to turn our heads when someone calls "help." We are becoming too numb. Immigrants and refugees are calling out with blasts as loud as the shofar and as stifled as the echo of silence after its blast. Are we listening? We listen and respond to active shooter drills. When the safety we fear is not our own, will we still listen?

When the angel showed the well to Hagar, it is said "then God opened her eyes," to which the Rabbis comment that everyone is presumed to be blind until God opens their eyes. What does it mean to open our eyes and see? *Esa einai el heharim meayin yavo ezri* - I lift up my eyes to the mountains? Where will my help come?

If our Torah text this morning teaches about God reaching out to humanity - telling the story of Hagar and Ishmael's rescue, then the voice of the Psalmist we sang is the emotional voice of humanity reaching back out to God. They are a companion, a pair of longing and need reaching across the atmosphere like Michaelangelo's Adam and God on the Sistine chapel ceiling. We know where we've come from - now what does this story tell us about where we go next? How do we start? Practically, come on November 17th. But spiritually? Emotionally? As human beings?

Bamakom sh'ayn anashim, hishtadel lihiyot ish. In a world without humanity, strive to be human. (Pirkei Avot 2:5). Humanity is the thing that is scarce – but it doesn't have to be. We don't lose our humanity when we give it to others – just like the light of the shamash isn't diminished when we light the Chanukah candles. The thing about humanity, about *menschlichkeit*, is that when we open our eyes and see, **we don't lose sight**. We don't give it away. We open our eyes and we see more deeply, and we expand. We see more. When we see immigrants, refugees and asylees and the very real needs they have we increase the humanity in the world. Where is the abundance? It can be right here. In this room. Will we recognize it?

The lives of these two Biblical women this morning diverge here. Hagar and her son will establish their lineage, and a people - the ancestors to Islam - will thrive. She will see her child grow up and her line flourish. He will ultimately reunite with his brother when their father dies.

Sarah, on the other hand, does not end up living to see her child thrive. Tomorrow we will read about the near sacrifice of Isaac and HIS blindness. In fact, the last thing that Sarah ever says in all of Torah is that Hagar and Ishmael be deported. She will not be heard from again.

The one who opens her eyes, the one who will not see. This is our Biblical choice. Will we open and see and respond?

HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society says, once we supported refugees because they were Jewish. Now we help refugees because we are Jewish. It should go without saying that we care about immigration and the refugee crisis not just because of how the American Jewish community was formed, beginning in 1623, and not even because of the experience of the Exodus from Egypt, which we mythologize around our tables at Pesach. But it is not enough to say we should care because of a myth we believe may or may not have happened 3,000 years ago. It is not even enough to care about

immigration because trace our roots to the story we read this morning - Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, and their descendents Isaac and Ishmael were all refugees. And it is still not enough to learn the Assyrian exile, the Babylonian exile, the exile from the Iberian peninsula, Arabian peninsula, Crusades, pogroms, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Russia, Ethiopia, and so many other places. Because it is not enough to care because it happened to us. And it didn't happen to all of us, and certainly not in the same way. Some of us came to this country in chains as slaves, beginning 400 years ago in 1619. The racism that brought them here continues today. In our Biblical story, had Abraham and Sarah been trying to purchase their first home in the post-WWII era, they would have had the help of the GI bill. Hagar would likely have been fighting the same degraded status as she did under Sarah's rule. We don't care about immigration because it's personal. We care because we are human.

We have to open our eyes to the Immigration crisis because Judaism is the foundation upon which we base our morality and our values as human beings, and it teaches us to love and help and support the immigrant. This line repeats 36 times after the Sarah and Hagar story, for even the Torah evolves and learns within its stories. We have to open our eyes because this time feels devoid of humanity, and we are humans. Never again means never again for everyone - and our humanity can overflow this room if we let ourselves see it.

*Bamakom sh'ayn anashim, hishtadel lihiyot ish.
In a place where there is no humanity, be a human. Keyn yehi ratzon.*