

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5779

Rosh Hashanah: Family Exile and a Moment for Reconciliation

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My Uncle, my father's brother, died two years ago. I did not really know him very well, he didn't live close and we had only met once or twice. He had been married 3 times, divorced 3 times and had two sons with his second wife. I remember the one time that his family came to visit us in Minneapolis when we were just kids (I was probably 9)--he was still married to his second wife and came with their two sons. We went out to Makeeskys deli - a sort of-kosher place and sat in one of those high-backed pleather booths and on the wall above our heads were graduation class pictures from the Talmud Torah, our local Jewish school- many of these photos from my Dad and Uncle's era. I looked up and saw a picture of Shirley standing in the front row of one of the graduation classes-1956. "What a coincidence," I said to my cousins, "there is Shirley, your Dad's first wife." They looked perplexed, as though I must be mistaken. Apparently, they did not know about their father's first marriage. I had inadvertently opened a real can of worms. That was only a glimpse into the life of my Uncle and that is about all I knew of my Uncle. He was the first of my father's siblings to die. But the greatest tragedy was not his death. You see, during the course of his life, he had become so estranged from everyone he was close to that there was no one to arrange for his funeral / his burial -- he had become estranged even from his only two sons who had not spoken to him in years. I didn't know any of the details but I had had a very small glimpse into his universe. There were only two people at the funeral other than military personnel laying an American flag, the two attendees were my

father and mother, who had taken responsibility for the arrangements. He had been married 3 times, had two children, but died alone.

Sadly, stories of estranged family members are not uncommon. There are Jewish families whose members are in exile, alienated from each other, who do not even speak to one another. There are parents who do not speak to their children and children who do not speak to their parents. There are siblings who do not speak to each other. There are lifelong friends who no longer speak to each other. There are individuals in the community who do not speak to other individuals in the community.

Who is right? Who is wrong? Sometimes the source of the initial conflict is forgotten or insignificant, but the pain, the anger, they live on. That anger and resentment pulse through us, body and soul - like poison. But what can we do? Can we reconcile with these estranged family, friends and community members?

As a rabbi, I have seen many cases of family estrangement. I have been asked to hold two or even three unveilings for the same deceased person because the family members don't speak to each other and refuse to come together to pay respects to a father or mother if the other is present. I have had Bnai Mitzvah situations where divorced parents have had to meet separately, sit in different sections of the Synagogue on the day of the event and come up to the Bimah separately to bless their children. I had a Shul President suddenly quit over a personal conflict with a staff member. These situations are always painful, especially for the kids who feel stuck "in the middle" of the conflict.

Today, I would like to speak about the exile of family members, both actual and extended, friends, co-workers and members of our community, our congregational family. These are not new problems. We can find examples of family estrangements/exiles of family members going all the way back to our forefather's family, the family of Abraham. During these two days of Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the ten days of repentance, *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, on both days we read, and not coincidentally, about the original Jewish family dealing with inner-family conflict, estrangement and the exile of family members. Today we read about the literal "exile" of Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, who were exiled from the family home of Abraham and Sarah in Beer-Sheva. Even though Abraham was very conflicted about sending his first son away, he did agree to do so and the two were cast into exile to the cruel desert with little food and only a small ration of water that ran out quickly. We read:

Bereishit 21:9

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בְּנוֹ־הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק:

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing.

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וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרִשׁ הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִרְשׁ בְּנוֹ־הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנֵי עַם־יִצְחָק:

She said to Abraham, "Cast out [exile] that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that handmaid shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

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וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹלַת בְּנוֹ:

The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned his son.

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וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-אַבְרָהָם אֶל-יֵרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל-הַנְּעִר וְעַל-אֲמָתְךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בִיצְחָק יִקְרָא לְךָ זָרַע:

But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed over the boy or your handmaid; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you.

When taught this story as children, we were told to accept the decree as Abraham had and that, though seemingly harsh, this acceptance of casting out his own son was necessary for the future of the Jewish People.

Isn't this exactly what we do in our own lives, we tell ourselves not to be distressed over our own estranged relationships. “Oh, it's not a big deal that I don't speak to so and so, “it's better this way”. In our own cases, though, most of the time we suffer so much more, whether we are aware of it or not, from exiling these relationships than we would by reconciling them.

We read the story and are troubled by Ishmael and Hagar nearly dying in the desert. But perhaps the greater tragedy is the death of those family relationships. Father and Son.

We should note that it is God (not Abraham) who saves the boy Ishmael by sending an angel to show Hagar a well to bring water to the boy:

וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנְּגַד הַרְחֵק כַּמֵּטְחָוּי קֹשֶׁת פִּי אִמְרָהּ אֶל-אַרְאֶה בְּמוֹת הַיָּלֵד וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנְּגַד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת-קֶלֶה וַתִּבְדֹּק:

Hagar went and sat at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, “Let me not look on as the child dies.” And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears. (Now Hagar in desperation casts off her own son)

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וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּקְרָא מִלְּאֵךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶל-הַגֵּר מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה-לָּךְ הַגֵּר אֶל-תִּירְאִי כִּי-שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא-שָׁם:

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? Don’t fear, for God has heard the cry of the boy.

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קוּמִי שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנֶּעֱרָר וְהַחֲזִיקִי אֶת־יָדוֹ בּוֹ כִּי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׁימְנֶנּוּ:

Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.

19

וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר מַיִם וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתְּמַלֵּא אֶת־הַחֲמַת מַיִם וַתִּשְׁקֵן אֶת־הַנֶּעֱרָר:

God opened up her eyes and she saw a wellspring, she went, she filled the water container and gave the boy water to drink.

In some sense, our uncomfortable feeling while reading this story is supposed to be assuaged by the miraculous angelic redemption. But is this a truly happy ending? They live, but there is no reconciliation with family, where was the father as his son lay dying?

This brings up an important question. Should we expect God to intervene when family members are in exile? Isn't that our responsibility? It reminds me of one of our tendencies at this time of year. Instead of doing the real work, the hard work of reconciliation with those from whom we are estranged or alienated, we come to the Synagogue hoping to gain "atonement" from God! We say hours and hours of "Al Chets" - directed to God - but do little to ask forgiveness for specific wrongs or try to reconcile broken relationships or do the internal work of forgiving others who may have wronged us. We hope to be saved by God the way that Ishmael was saved. Ishmael lived, Hagar lived, but were they truly alive in exile? God saved their physical lives, but the disconnect from family was like a death in the family.

We pray to God to inscribe us in the Book of Life, but will that life be one of inner peace and harmony or one of exile, anger and resentment? The atonement/reconciliation according to Halakhah/Jewish law must take place between individuals, as we read in Mishnah Yoma (the tractate dedicated to Yom Kippur):

"עבירות שבין אדם למקום, יום הכיפורים מכפר; שבינו לבין חברו - אין יום הכיפורים מכפר, עד שירצה את חברו" (משנה, יומא, ח, ז).

Sins between a person and God--YK atones for those sins; between a person and another person-YK does not atone--[there is no atonement until the other person is appeased.] That means that we cannot simply pray to God for forgiveness or reconciliation, and Rosh Hashanah comes to remind us that we have 10 days to do just that! Reconcile with those from whom we have become estranged.

There is more family estrangement in store for us in tomorrow's Torah reading as well - spoiler alert.

We will read Akeidat Yitzhak, the Binding of Isaac -- a very dark tale and now-with Ishmael and Hagar out of the picture, there are only two relationships left intact for Abraham--his relationship with his now "only son" and with his wife, Sarah. Will these relationships survive the ordeal of bringing his **(now only)** son to be burnt on the proverbial altar of God? Does Abraham reconcile with Isaac? Let's take a look at the exact language of the text comparing the ways in which Abraham and Isaac went to the scene of the Akeida and how they returned from it.

Bereishit 22:7

וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל־אֲבִרְהֵם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיִה הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה:

Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he answered, “Yes, my son.” And he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?”

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וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרְהֵם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה־לוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

And Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.

So, they walked on together towards the mountain, but did they return together?

Bereishit 22:19

וַיָּשָׁב אֲבִרְהֵם אֶל־נַעֲרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל־בְּעֵר שָׁבַע וַיֵּשֶׁב אֲבִרְהֵם בְּבְעֵר שָׁבַע: (פ)

Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.

The Torah tells us that Abraham returns to Beer Sheva, but what about his son Isaac? The text states specifically that Abraham returned, but does not mention Yitzhak. What does the fact that they go off, together, as one, to the Akeidah, but that Abraham returns alone, say about the state of their relationship?

Isaac survived the Akeida, just as Ishmael survived his-- but did Isaac's relationship with his father survive?

And what about Sarah? The next thing we read after Abraham leaves the scene without Isaac is that Sarah dies:

Bereishit 23:2

וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֵא אַבְרָהָם לְסֹפֵד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ:

Sarah died in Kiriath-Arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her.

Notice that Sarah is not in Beer-Sheva (their home at the time from where Abraham had just come with Isaac), but rather in Kiryat Arba, their other home in Hebron, far away. What is she doing there? Did Abraham and Sarah have a separation? Not clear.

The midrash tells us that she died of shock, though I prefer to think of it more as a broken heart. The greater tragedy is not her “physical death,” but the death of family relationships that killed Sarah.

Chizkuni-Hezekiah ben Manoah or Hezekiah bar Manoah, known as the Chizkuni was a French rabbi 1250 France

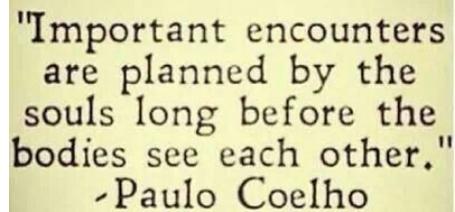
בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע, in Kiryat Arba; there is an opinion that the reason why the location where she died is mentioned is that Abraham had sent her there before taking Yitzchak with him to be offered as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. He did not want her to have any knowledge of this. Avraham and Sarah at that time had been residents of Be'er Sheva. When she heard why Avraham had taken Yitzchak to Mount Moriah, she died of shock. This is why Avraham had to come all the way from Be'er Sheva to mourn and bury her.

The motif of family estrangement and exile would appear to be a theme of these RH readings and the reconciliation within the family either does not happen or is not so evident. The question is what can we learn from reading about the family estrangements of our earliest ancestors on this day? After reading and thinking about the results of members exiled from the original family of Sarah and Abraham what must we do?

Do you have an exiled family member that you need to reconcile with? What are you going to do with these next 10 days? Will you seize this opportunity?

But what do you do, where do you start?

What are the practical steps that we can take towards reconciling a broken relationship?



"Important encounters
are planned by the
souls long before the
bodies see each other."
-Paulo Coelho

Let's take the first steps right now.

1) Though I have been clear that our prayers here will not atone for broken relationships, it is the first step towards reconciliation. There is a reason that we have not been able to do this until now, it is extremely difficult and requires God's help, it requires our prayer to enable us to take these steps.

2) Reconciliation demands humility and vulnerability. Humility means acknowledging that we are not 100% in the right. Vulnerability means we are opening ourselves up to the possibility of something very unpleasant happening, but also the possibility to do an ultimate tikkun-repair and hachlama--healing. We are also here in Shul on these days to work on this step.

3) Forgiveness--we may not be able to forget, but we must forgive, for our own sakes and for the sake of important relationships. We first have to work on ourselves and then express this forgiveness to the other party. Rabbi Shulweiss expresses the concept of forgiveness beautifully: "Forgiveness does not reverse the past but it promises a new and different outcome. When you forgive,

when you seek reconciliation, things may never be as they were before the injury. But you can establish a new relationship, a speaking civil relationship. Through forgiveness you don't eliminate the holes [in the relationship], but you can remove the nails that tear at the soul of your being and tear your families apart." [Metaphorically speaking] These words refer to a Talmudic passage: "A rabbinic sage explained that sin is like pounding nails into a wooden chest. And repentance and forgiveness is like removing the nails from the wooden chest. The nail may be removed but the hole remains. The nail can be removed but the scar does not disappear." Here in this space we work on our ability to forgive, but when we leave these doors we must take the next step. Ask forgiveness for our part in the conflict, the broken relationship, and express forgiveness to those by whom we have felt hurt.

4) Once we are ready, there is someone you need to talk to, to ask forgiveness for your part in the conflict. Need to be ready to have the difficult conversation and hear difficult things. But what if we are angered or disagree? You don't have to agree but you can acknowledge the other person's feelings and truth. Repeat what they have said, "you feel like I have pushed you away"--you can even nod your head because you are not agreeing you are simply acknowledging the feelings and story of the other with compassion.

4) Restitution: Sometimes, when really bad things have happened and many bad things have been said, we need to think about concrete steps to make things right beyond our words. Sometimes this includes, monetary compensation, returning possessions, for example related to an inheritance conflict.

There are great books on how to hold the most difficult conversations. My favorite is *Difficult Conversations* written by Bruce Patton, Douglas Stone, and Sheila Heen of Harvard University. Link:

<https://www.amazon.com/Difficult-Conversations-Discuss-What-Matters/dp/0143118447>

Back to the family of our forefather and foremother, the question is: was there any reconciliation for them? After a family history fraught with conflict and various estrangements, there is at least an allusion to family reconciliation at the time of Abraham's death, when his two beloved sons Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury their father.

We read: Bereishit 25:9

וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנָיו אֶל-מְעַרַת הַמְּכַפְלָה אֶל-שְׂדֵה עֶפְרָן בֶּן-צֹחַר הַחִתִּי אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי מַמְרֵא:

His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre

Does this come to tell us that they have reconciled, or that they have both reconciled with each other and with their father?

Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi), 12th century Torah commentator states:

וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנָיו, seeing they were more honoured than his other sons and had been more beloved by him. This is why they took upon themselves the procedures connected with their father's burial.

יקברו יצחק וישמעאל בנוי, כי היו גדולים ונכבדים מהשאר והיו אהובים לו לפיכך התעסקו בו

According to Radak, both sons were beloved by their father. Does this tell us that coming together to bury their father was an act of reconciliation? Even if there was reconciliation at the end of Abraham's life, what of all the lost years lost? Can they be brought back? In the case of my Uncle, he did not even merit this; his two sons did not show up to his funeral. With God's help, let us not fall into either of these situations.

We hold the possibility of reconciling our broken or damaged relationships now-- Don't Wait! I am purposely speaking about this today and not on Yom Kippur so that we can all make full use of these 10 days of repentance and reconciliation. This time of year comes to remind us that we are not immortal and will not be here forever. We are not perfect nor is any conflict black and white. What is the cost of ignoring this call? For Ishmael or Isaac or even Sarah it was exile -- how will it be for each one of us? if our relationship(s) remain in exile the future will contain its share of personal pain and resentment, anger and frustration.

But there is another path that the Days of Repentance offer us...reconciliation. Remember and I quote "Emphasize reconciliation, not resolution. It is unrealistic to expect everyone to agree about everything. Reconciliation focuses on the relationship, while resolution focuses on the problem. When we focus on reconciliation, the problem loses significance and often becomes irrelevant." ~ Rick Warren----After all, this is your book of life and you will write the next chapter.

Shanah Tova!