

Sermon | Parshat Chayyei Sarah
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B'nai Israel Congregation
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I am not sure if children still read them today, but I was big fan of R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series. I loved the books, and I think my parents still have a shelf full of them. At one point Stine published a few of these books in the style of choose-your-own-adventure novels. They were called *Give Yourself Goosebumps: Reader Beware...You Choose the Scare*. In this series, the reader would arrive at a particular moment in the narrative and be faced with multiple choices as to how one should proceed. The reader selected the next move, and then turned to the appropriate page. *Do you open the creepy, creaking door to see what awaits you behind it (turn to page 10), or do you continue down the hall and approach the dimly lit room (skip to page 15)*. In the end, of course, there were only a few options for how the story would conclude, but the power of this type of writing lies in the ability of the reader to go back and do it again, to choose a different way, their own way, and to try to arrive at a better ending.

The Sages of our tradition were also concerned with trying to write better endings. There are many narratives within the Torah that make the modern reader a bit uncomfortable. There is also evidence within our tradition that these narratives made our forebears uncomfortable as well. In looking at how our tradition understands one scene in Parshat Chayyei Sarah, I aim to uncover an important lesson in always trying to write a better ending.

You may recall that in last week's *parsha*, Ishmael and Hagar are expelled from the household of Abraham and Sarah, sent into the wilderness to live on their own. Sarah is displeased by something that Ishmael does to Isaac (what exactly he does is unclear from the biblical narrative), and as a result she instructs Abraham to banish them from their home. The

Torah tells us that Abraham is grieved and upset by the situation, but God reassures him that this is the right thing to do. So, with only a bottle of water and a bit of bread, Hagar and Ishmael set out on their own. Only by the grace of God are they ultimately rescued. But despite God's intervention in their greatest moment of need, the Torah's ending to the story of Hagar and Ishmael is deeply unsettling.

Fast forward to this week's *parsha*. Many years have passed, Sarah has died, Isaac is grown and married. Our attention is redirected to Abraham, וַיִּסֶף אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אִשָּׁה וְשִׁמָּה קְטוּרָה: "Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah."¹ Who is this new wife, Keturah? Citing a midrash,² Rashi says, הִיא הָגָר, "She is Hagar." In his old age, when the complex family dynamics of the past are decades behind him, Abraham returns to the mother of Ishmael and this time, he properly marries her as a wife and brings her back into his home. And why was her name changed to Keturah, because she was fragrant, בְּקִטְרוֹת, with kindness and good deeds. Whatever Sarah's opinion of Hagar had been, the Rabbis here depict Hagar as a *tzadeket*, a righteous woman.

To be clear, I am not sure that I agree with this *midrash* in identifying this new wife of Abraham's as Hagar, but that is not the point of this sermon. Rather, the point lies in the answer to this question: Why would the Sages of our tradition feel the need to identify this wife of Abraham's later years as Hagar, the righteous one? What compels them to go back to the Torah and write a better ending for Hagar? It seems to me that, like many of us, they too were uncomfortable with the Torah's ending to her story. After all, it was Sarah's plan that her

¹ Genesis 25:1.

² Bereshit Rabbah 61:4.

handmaid would bear Abraham's child. And it was Sarah who insisted that her handmaid and that child later be expelled. The Torah's end to their story is unsatisfying and troubling. How could Abraham, the one who argues with God in an attempt to save the corrupt cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, how can Abraham do that but allow Hagar and Ishmael to be left in the wilderness on their own? In writing their own *midrashim*, narratives that seek to fill the space between the lines of the Torah, the Sages demonstrate that sometimes we are compelled to write a better ending. Perhaps the story is not yet over, and we are able to redeem it.

This is one example where the story's end in the Torah is unsatisfying to the Sages, and as a result, a *midrash* attempts to offer a *tikkun*, a corrective action, to provide us with a better ending. There are other examples of this in our tradition. The Torah does not say much about what motivated Abraham to depart from his homeland, his birthplace, and his father's home to follow the One True God and move to a new land. The *midrash* which teaches that Abraham smashed his father's idols and then blames them for misbehaving demonstrates to us that the rabbis too saw the story as incomplete, and thus they filled in between the lines with this compelling explanation of Abraham's motivations to break with his past and move in a new direction. The same could be said of how the Sages understood Aaron's participation in the incident of the Molten Calf. He led the people in collecting the gold and forming the idol, and when it was complete he said to them, "Tomorrow shall be a festival of Adonai!"³ Most readers would take that as a sign that Aaron was complicit in the wrongdoing and perhaps even accountable for their collective sin. The Rabbis, however, reread his words and offer a different

³ Exodus 32:5.

understand: Aaron was just trying to delay the people from sinning. The festival will be tomorrow; it will not be today. Perhaps Moses will come back before it is too late...

I like to think of these examples not as the Sages' attempt to *rewrite* Torah, but to *continue writing* our living Torah. Judaism is a lived religion; not a document locked away and existing in isolation from the lived experiences of our world. The Torah is a sacred component of our lives; its teachings and traditions shape how we interact with each other, with ourselves, and with the world. But Torah is not limited to the scroll in the ark. It includes the numerous words of our Sages and the ever-growing body of interpretations that we continue to derive from its words. Judaism teaches us that when a story's end is unsatisfying, it is incumbent upon us to pick up the metaphorical pen and continue writing that story to arrive at a better ending. I am not suggesting that we alter the past or rewrite history. We must accept the facts of the past, but we need accept a foretold future. We are the architects of the future, and we are the authors of our own stories. The Sages were not changing the Torah when they wrote their commentaries. Rather, they were continuing in the interpretative tradition and offering new ways of understanding the past. So, too, it is our duty to accept the realities of the past, and work to improve the world for the future. When the world before us is not as we wish it to be, we must be the ones to work to change it.

This past Wednesday, October 27, marked three years since the horrific massacre of Jews praying on Shabbat morning at the Tree of Life – Or L'Simcha Congregation in Pittsburgh. I am sure that all of us remember clearly that morning and the harrowing days thereafter, forced to reckon as American Jews with a seemingly new reality: that we may be unsafe in our own houses of worship. That could have been the end of the story. But the next Shabbat was

different, and we made it that way. The Jewish community and our allies packed the pews of synagogues around the country and around the world for Solidarity Shabbat. The story could have ended with death, mourning, and fear, but the Jewish community would not let that be the end. Certainly it was part of the narrative, a critically important piece of how we remember that day and the weeks thereafter, but it would not be the end of the story. Instead, we showed up, we stood proudly within our synagogues, and we did what the eleven martyred souls would have wanted us to do.

Throughout our lives, we will be faced with moments when we can allow a story to sadly end, or we can be a part of how it continues on and brings reconciliation and redemption to the past. We learn from our tradition that the latter is the preferable approach. No, we cannot change the past, nor should we attempt to alter its retelling. But we can still write the future; we can still be the authors of a better ending. Shabbat shalom.