

I want to ask you to do something unusual. Take half a minute to recall a time when you were lonely. [pause]

Abandonment and estrangement; the existential sense that no matter how much others may be in my life, I walk my path alone; the need to be noticed and feel my life matters – these are the themes at the heart of the Days of Awe. We come together in such large numbers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that the essential “alone-ness” of these days is obscured. We do share yearnings and needs with those sitting around us, but in the end, this time is about you and me as individuals – making an honest assessment of our lives, taking responsibility for how we love, betray, embrace or ignore others; what we find in Jewish life and what we feel disaffected from. It is loneliness – and how faith responds to it – that is at the center.

The emotional and spiritual challenge of being alone (*really* alone) is at the very center of the story of Hagar and Ishmael. And it is no coincidence that our traditions suggest it, and not the “Binding of Isaac”, as *the* first story for this season. The story we will read from Torah a bit later is a powerful mythic tale – a paradigm for each of us trying to find our place in a world often cold, painful and rejecting. More than this, it is a narrative that transforms the religious response to others, altering not only Jewish, but human history. In place of religion as an instrument of denigration of outsiders and unbelievers, the tale of Hagar and Ishmael creates a wholly new understanding that puts empathy, openness and identity with those who are different from us as core values.

Let's begin with the very nature of Hagar. Her separateness is not only reflected through her situation, but in her very name, for vocalized differently she is *ha-ger*, which means “the stranger.” She is the paradigmatic “other” in the Bible. Like all outsiders, she is at the mercy of those who have power over her. In Hagar's case, she is a servant of Sarah, now old and – the Torah says – unable to bear children. Desperate for an heir, Sarah “gives” Hagar to Abraham to bear a child. As emotion-laden as it is in our time to find a surrogate mother, here the emotional eddies are even worse, for permission is

neither sought nor given. When Hagar does get pregnant (with the one she will call Ishmael – meaning “God hears”), Sarah is “belittled” in Hagar’s eyes.<sup>1</sup> The one without is now the one blessed; and so a previously debased Hagar now becomes impudent. Deflecting her anger at being dismissed in such a manner, Sarah blames her husband. And Abraham? He washes his hands of any responsibility. Hagar’s fate, he tells Sarah, “Is in your hand.” Given this power, Sarah becomes abusive to such a degree that Hagar runs away. And you thought *your* family is tough?!

All this occurs before we even “meet” Hagar in this morning’s reading. Now, years later, with Sarah’s son Isaac in the picture, the old tensions are only intensified. Sarah, now a mother, sounds a joyous laugh of delight and astonishment. Hagar laughs, too, but in the context it appears to be a derisive and mocking cackle. An emotional Sarah once again tries to rid herself of the one who shares her husband’s affection. This time, however, Abraham is reluctant to let them go. Ishmael is his son. Jealousy, rejection, hurt feelings, betrayal, exploitation, despair ... these are at the heart of the interplay of Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham. We are left to wonder - Who is the most beloved? Who will inherit? Who is loved? Who abandoned?

Hagar is also called *ha-Mitzrit* (“the Egyptian”). The Hebrew, however, could also be read as the one whose life is “constrained”, “limited”, without control over her destiny and is, thus, full of *tzara* “sorrow.” No kidding!

It is too easy, given all this, to simply describe Hagar as mother of the Ishmaelites – and to see this story only as a Biblical basis for the conflict of Arab and Jew. Hagar is not just the quintessential outsider. Her story – and the complex emotions of being inside, yet forever outside – is one that plays in each of our lives. Hagar and Ishmael, in essence, *are us*. Their story is ours - the times when we are estranged from our loved ones, the complex situations that tear apart our families, shatter friendships, lead nations into civil war, “ethnic cleansing” and create the possibility of genocide. Only when we confront

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 16:4

Hagar and Ishmael – not as the stranger who is “other”, but what pulls us from God and one another – can we get to what Rosh Hashanah is really all about.

In the end, as we will hear, Abraham does send Hagar and Ishmael away. Without food, their water gone, Hagar is so anguished that she cannot even bear to be next to her dying child. “I cannot watch the boy die.” Surely this is one of the most poignant moments of loneliness and despair in the entire Bible. Her sobs are wrenching. I cannot read this passage without feeling the pain of times when, as a parent, I was bereft because of the sufferings of my children I could not control.

In this moment is captured the human condition. Who amongst us does not know Hagar's tears? Who here has not felt the desperation of being abandoned like Ishmael? Do you not know what it is like to be betrayed by one you trusted? Can you not feel the bitter sting of a moment when you were left aside or ignored? As we grow older, losing the ones we love, our dreams dashed, even our bodies betraying us, it seems that even God has forgotten us. Hagar wanders in the desert – a place synonymous with being cut off from any meaningful contact with others.

When the people of Israel was settled in its land they were instructed to bring their first fruits to the priests and recite the words, “My father was a wandering Aramean.”<sup>2</sup> At the very moment when we feel most comfortable, settled, at peace and fulfilled, Torah assails that ease by having us recall what it was like to be the outsider, the wanderer, the one with no home. We live (thank God!) in a time of comfort and plenty. Anti-Semitism is, for most of us, a thing of memory or somewhere else. Most of us are removed from what it is like to be an immigrant – speaking a strange language, living out of sync with the larger society. We have made it. And yet ... and yet ... we know what it is like to be Hagar. Is there not, even with all we have in our lives, moments when the Psalmist's plaint, echoing the cry of Hagar, is ours: “There is no one at my right hand. No one is concerned for me. I have no refuge. No one cares about my

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 26:5

life."<sup>3</sup> And for those shielded from and inured to life's pain, Torah offers a challenge – heed the tears of Hagar, do not turn aside those cast off and forgotten, remember the wanderer you have been, the stranger you were – and, in truth, still are.

The nineteenth century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote that this intense "alone-ness" is at the heart of a great anguish that grips our souls. "Deep within every human being," he wrote in his journal, "There still lives the anxiety over the possibility of being alone in the world, forgotten by God, overlooked among the millions and millions in this enormous household."<sup>4</sup>

It is at this darkest moment that the way through the loneliness appears. **ישמע אלהים את קול הנער ... באשר הוא שם** "God hears the voice of the boy where he is." In the face of desperation, when it seems that there are none who take note, the beginning of hope is to "hear" the pain of the other "where they are."

A story is told of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, who once was studying Torah in his room. Hearing his infant grandson crying, he rabbi closed his book, went into the baby's room and soothed him back to sleep. He went into the adjoining room, where he found his son, the baby's father engrossed in study. The rabbi turned to his son and asked in astonishment, "Why didn't you get up to pacify your crying son?"

The bewildered son looked up and answered: "I was so immersed in my Torah study that I didn't even hear him cry."

The rabbi then declared: "If someone is studying Torah, and fails to hear the crying of a baby, there is something very wrong with his learning."

2600 years ago the prophet Jeremiah cautioned that a turning away from God is to have "eyes that do not see ... ears that do not hear."<sup>5</sup> Everything we do here, everything we are about grows from this. **שמע ישראל** "Hear, O Israel" is the essential, profound and fundamental truth with which we begin. If you want to know God, then, it is learning to "listen" as God did for the voice of the one forlorn, forgotten and forsaken.

To truly "hear" others "where they are" has tremendous implications for what we are as a synagogue – at least, what we should be. It also reminds us

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 142:4

<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 5:21

that the Jewish quest is not for our own benefit alone. Beginning with Hagar and Ishmael on Rosh Hashanah, ending with Jonah preaching repentance to the inhabitants of Nineveh (the arch-enemy of our ancestors) – the theme of these holy days is to hear those who are not “us” – to embrace and ennoble every human soul.

Ron Wolfson, in his book *Relational Judaism*, argues that people come to synagogues for many reasons, but they stay because of the relationships they establish. When someone leaves our congregation we ask, “What could we have done better? What was missing that you did not find here?” At times the answer is framed in financial terms. “I don’t really ‘use’ the synagogue.” “It wasn’t worth it to us anymore.” But more often than not it really isn’t about money. People “leave” because they are disengaged already. They feel that when they were here they were not really “heard”, needed or loved, and when they left it did not matter.

Is this the fault of the clergy? Yes, sometimes. But no rabbi or cantor alone makes a “sacred community.” A synagogue, at its best, is a place where each person takes responsibility to reach out to others. When I talk to people who like it here they say that is one of the things they love about The Community Synagogue is that we really are a community – warm, welcoming, inviting, inclusive. But it’s not true for everyone; and it’s not what I always see standing up on the *bimah* or I hear in the disappointment of people who leave without having really found a friend.

To be who we can be at our best means to embrace a philosophy of “radical welcome” – an approach I learned, of all places, at an Apple store. A few years ago I went there looking for a new computer. At the entrance I was greeted warmly by a young man who introduced himself as “Seven.”

I paused. “Like the number?”

“Exactly.”

“OK,” I thought, “Each to their own.” It turns out that Seven was an engaging guy. We got to talking and he told me his uncle was a cantor (at which point I figured Seven was not the name given at his *bris!*). Seven then

asked me why I was there. I explained how my first computer was a Mac, but when – in the 1990s – the office where I worked used PCs. Though I became adept in the PC world, it never felt comfortable. “So”, I ended, “I really want to own an Apple computer again.”

Seven smiled, opened his arms, gave me a great big bear hug and exclaimed, “Welcome Home!”

There, at the threshold of that Apple store, I found what I want most from a synagogue - the “radical welcome” God showed Hagar and Ishmael – a loving acceptance that if I want in, I *am* in.

“Radical welcome” is actually not so difficult. It means opening your heart enough to let your eyes see those sitting or standing alone. It involves paying attention to the person crying quietly during services and going up to them with a simple, “You seem to be pain. I don’t want to intrude, but ... can I help?” “Radical welcome” means not having to be asked to turn to the people around you, look in their eyes and say simply, “Hi, my name’s Irwin or Sarah or ... Hagar. Would you like to sit with me?” It means speaking lovingly of anyone who wants to be here, and accepting people as they are – questioning or faithful, those in inter-faith relationships, people of every ethnicity seeking something from a Jewish connection, our young families and older members, those gay or straight, people who are divorced, single, married or yearning for a partner, members, seekers or just those passing through. “Radical welcome” means having the courage to open the conversation to find ways to lower the financial cost of being connected to Jewish life, so we stop putting people in the situation of feeling ashamed because they can’t pay enough or angry that they are continually asked to spend more than they can handle.

In the coming year our focus will be on building closer connections between us as clergy and you, but even more to help you deepen your friendships with others. Rabbi Danny, Cantor Franco and I invite you to come with us for a “Shabbat in the City”, as we worship elsewhere to learn “best practices” we can bring back home. And (you might be surprised to hear) we

will ask you – at least once this year – *not* to come to services. Instead, join Rabbi Danny or me in “Shabbat at Home”, an informal potluck *Shabbes* dinner in congregant homes. We will be exploring new ways of funding, perhaps even getting rid of the model of “dues” and “membership” as the way to belong. I have no idea where all this will lead, but it comes from a passionate desire to make each person who comes here feel worthy and needed. Hagar reminds us that there is much to lose if we don't listen.

As we consider what it means to truly “hear” and be open to others, however, let us not get caught up overly much in navel gazing. This morning's Torah portion is far more profound and far-reaching in its implications than just making our synagogue bigger. It is about seeing the world not as “us” and “them”, the good against the evil. It is battling the natural inclination to only be concerned with our own kind that we close ourselves off from others.

Too often in human history we have seen the awful result of societies who do just this, denigrating those who are different, expelling or exterminating those regarded as strangers, dismissing minorities as outsiders who are dangerous or undesirable. Fear of the other creates the religious atmosphere that argues that there are true believers to be rewarded and blasphemers who are damned. It leads to the attacks against Copts in Egypt, the callous poisoning of fellow citizens in Syria and the anti-Jewish hatred that is a cancer in the Arab world. Fear of the other denies the possibility of Palestinian and Israeli living in peace, for it assumes that greater than a common humanity is the pull of difference. Being deaf to the fate of others leads to seeing the homeless or the immigrant or the welfare recipient, as somehow unworthy or robbing me of what is mine. Rejection of those who are different is the soil out of which grows homophobia. It is what closes the Wall to the sound of women in prayer. Fear of the other is the religious stance of exclusion and denial that has hounded our people through the ages. It is fear of the other that led to the ovens of Auschwitz, and excuses the most heinous of human behavior in every age.

In the face of a world riven by all that separates us from one another, here – at the very gateway into a new year – we are offered a clarion call of “radical welcome”. The foundation of Judaism is a God who teaches us to hear the cries of those who are *not* us, to see the pain who are cast off, and to realize that those we see as so different are really a reflection of ourselves. Thus, Torah commands, “Know the heart (or, literally, “soul”) of the stranger, for you were strangers the land of Egypt.”<sup>6</sup>

This is not some utopian “Kumbaya” assertion that we are all the same, that love will lead us to become one. The Jewish religious response is not the erasure of “otherness”, but it is the dignity given to it. Our Jewish journey is unique and separate, but it is that very experience of being the “other” that defines the way we must teach the world how to be accepting and loving of others – not where we want them to be, but “where they are.” In this world, so filled with conflict, it may be the most important lesson humanity needs to hear.

In the end, a Jewish sensibility does not just arc towards justice. It inclines the ear, opens the eye and whispers to the heart, במקום שאין אנשים “In a world where there are no human being, השתדל להיות איש strive to be a human(e) being.”<sup>7</sup> The stranger is not the “other.” The stranger is *me*. שמע ישראל “Hear, O Israel”. Let your eyes see. Open your heart. There is more than enough loneliness in our world. There is so much pain, so much anguish - in you, in those near to you, in the countless souls who wander, the millions oppressed in so many ways. All we have to do ... is listen ...<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:24 even says we must love the stranger.

<sup>7</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:6

<sup>8</sup> For further reflection on themes raised in these remarks see Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith” (Tradition, 7:2)