

## Intro to Aliyot / Torah Service

By Reb Ezra Weinberg

September 26, 2022 / 1 Tishri 5783

The Torah portion for Rosh Hashana day one is all about family. Before I say more, I want to share something personal. Last year, I was in a year-long fellowship for rabbinic innovators. There were six rabbis in the fellowship and we had projects from rethinking modern Jewish couples to new ideas around B'nai Mitzvah. The idea was to offer services to serve the growing unaffiliated population of Jews in America. My specific project is called “ReVoice” and it aimed to serve a very specific population: those of us who have gone through divorce. The goal of ReVoice is creating a network of resources for rabbis and clergy to support people through divorce. I’ll be happy to tell you more about that later. But the idea of divorce in Judaism is not new. It’s discussed heavily in the Talmud. But it goes back even further to biblical times. Some trace it back to this Torah reading, Genesis 21.

The first day of Rosh Hashana, we read about the birth of Isaac. But it’s really the story of Abraham and Sarah, and how they handle Hagar and her son Ishmael. Today, we’re going to focus on Hagar. What is Hagar’s relationship to Abraham? Rabbi Avi Killup from Yeshivat Hadar writes about this:

*In Jewish tradition, Hagar is usually not considered Abraham’s wife; however, the Bible refers to Hagar with the Hebrew word, “isha” which translates as wife, rather than as a “pilegish” or concubine. Defining her as a wife, the Bible later tells how Abraham “sent her*

*away,” using the same word “to send” (in Hebrew “shalach”) that the Talmud later uses to mean “to divorce.”*

Rabbi Killup goes on to say:

*It appears as though Abraham has divorced his wife Hagar. Ellen Frankel, in her book *The Five Books of Miriam*, introduces Hagar in the first person: “Hager The Stranger: I am the outsider, the alien, the rejected one. My name speaks my fate: hajira, the wanderer; ha-gera, the stranger; ha-gerusha, the one-who-has-been-driven-away.” Frankel uses the term gerusha to describe Hagar’s status and refers to the similarity in the sounds of the name Hagar and the word gerusha. While the Bible may not explicitly name Hagar as a gerusha, the language suggests that she is wife who has been kicked out and may hence be considered as a divorcée.*

So what do we make of this? According to this midrash, Hagar is the Torah’s first divorcee. In that light, it blows my mind that this story has been carried over by our sages to be our primary story on the first day of the new year. Our first encounter with our Torah, our story, is THIS story. Hagar’s story. Who, by the way, almost never speaks, except to G-d. So the Aliyot we call up today are going to be in honor of Hagar, giving voice to her story which is our story too.

One of the fellows in my program started her own community in Southern California a few years ago. I asked her how she referred to folks who had gone through divorce or lived in other non-traditional family structures. She said, “We call them Torah families.” Look at the stories in the Torah. Moses is intermarried. Jacob had two wives and more. Abraham, you’re about to read. As far as we know, only Isaac and Rebecca hold up

as the model of the modern monogamous straight Jewish couple who meet, marry and stay together.

**Aliyah #1:** So for the first Aliya, I want to invite up anyone who needs a blessing for their life inside a non-traditional family structure (self defined). Are you in a Torah family? Let's give you a blessing. Let us be blessed by the many forms of family living. We have so much to learn from each other, if we can just tell our story. This isn't 1950 anymore. Divorce, single, queer, or with children not born to you. Or maybe your parents are divorced. Whatever your circumstance, if you feel you dwell in or have come from a non-traditional family structure, this aliya is for you.

**Aliya #2:** There are so many ways to be in family. And families evolve too. Family systems today adapt and evolve. Hagar models that as well. Sometimes we're in one family and then there is a death, or divorce, or job loss, or a major move and our family changes. Kids go to college and everything changes. If your family life is in transition and you don't quite know how your life is reformatting itself, but you could use blessings for this moment of unknowing, come up for this Aliya.

**Aliya #3:** This is the Aliya where we give Hagar her voice back. Hagar weeps and then she speaks to G-d and G-d responds. This Aliya is for those whose voice for one reason or another has been silenced or suppressed. No matter how long we've been quiet, that can change in an instant. Hagar speaks and a new nation is born. What will happen when you finally open your mouth and speak your truth? Come up for this Aliya if you are seeking courage and blessing for that moment.