

Grief for the Loved One and the Seed of Abraham
Keith Cohen – Erev Rosh ha-Shana II 5779

When the poet May Sarton separated in 1956 from her partner of 12 years, Judy Matlack, she wrote a series of “Autumn Sonnets,” of which this is number 2:

If I can let you go as trees let go
Their leaves, so casually, one by one;
If I can come to know what they do know,
That fall is the release, the consummation,
Then fear of time and the uncertain fruit
Would not distemper the great lucid skies
This strangest autumn, mellow and acute.
If I can take the dark with open eyes
And call it seasonal, not harsh or strange
(For love itself may need a time of sleep),
And, treelike, stand unmoved before the change,
Lose what I lose to keep what I can keep,
The strong root still alive under the snow,
Love will endure - if I can let you go.

This poem has always touched me deeply because of its statement about what remains steadfast even after loss. In recent months, I have experienced at least three losses, of people of varying degrees of closeness to me: my Aunt Barbara, who passed three weeks ago, the last member of my parents' generation; a member of our congregation who died, in my view, rather suddenly, early in the summer; and a young neighbor down the hall who took his own life about six weeks ago.

Of the three deaths, the one that upset me and stayed with me the longest was that of the fellow-congregant. He was not a close friend. However, I was chagrined not to have known what others seem to have known about his condition leading up to his death. The others were not taken off guard by his death because of their knowledge. This got me to start thinking about what we know, do not know, need to know and do not need to know about each other.

We live in a society in which information is spread quickly and easily about people; it can be ascertained quickly on the Internet. Despite the injunction against “lashon hara,” or evil tongue, in our tradition, we all, I believe—myself included—perk up our ears when sensational dirt circulates. I won't

bother to list examples of discreditable behavior by members of this country's administration; the point is that it is difficult not to lap it up.

[Remember that *lashon hara* is a transgression not simply by dint of the harm, material and psychological, that it inflicts upon the victim; what undergirds the transgression is the use of speech (or voice, discussed further below) for cruel or negative purposes.]

What interests me here is not the deprivation of information. After all, an individual has every right not to divulge his or her medical condition or the severity of their affliction. What interests me is the blurry border between a person's right to privacy and the need to know something about that person in the interest of the community. The HIPAA laws aim to protect the adult individual's privacy. Yet there are instances when such rules can be deleterious to the individual's well-being. (For example, I was once unable to intercede directly on behalf of a student I believed to be suicidal because of these rules.)

Today, moreover, in American society at least, there is an erosion of privacy due to the sophistication of digital tracking methods: malware, cookies,

downright hacking into your email server and even bank account. But this is another story.

So let me return to my late fellow-congregant. To maintain a community that functions in the interests of all—or at least in the interests of as many as possible, how much information do we need or want to know about a person? Whose responsibility is it, if anyone's, to disseminate information about an ill fellow-congregant? And if we begin to whisper behind his or her back, when do we cross that border into the severely proscribed territory of *lashon hara*?

Maintaining the cohesiveness of community brings me to the Torah reading for tomorrow's service: the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael by Abraham (Genesis, 21.1-21). Abraham is assailed by two conflicting emotions: one, to keep and to cherish his first son, Ishmael; the other, to consolidate his community and, in particular, his own lot in it. It is this latter issue that Sarah is reminding him of when she demands the banishment, "The son of this handmaiden is not going to share in the inheritance with my son Yitzhak!"

Put in other terms, Abraham has a pang of regret, of grief—indeed, in one translation, the suspicion of “evil”—at losing the first son, whom he loves (“This grieved Abraham greatly, on account of his son.”) Abraham is like Sartre’s grieving lover. If he can “take the dark with open eyes [. . .]/The strong root still alive under the snow,” Then “Love will endure,” if he can let Ishmael go. He may even, parenthetically and prophetically, think, as Sartre does, that “love itself may need a time of sleep.” Abraham’s filial love is also a communal love. Were it in his power to keep both sons in his household, he would do so. But, as we know, God has other plans. In fact, Adonai assures Abraham in the very next verse (here I am combining our text with Robert Alter’s translation):

Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for through Yitzhak shall your seed be acclaimed. But the handmaiden’s son, too, I shall make a great nation, for he is your seed.

Listen to her voice: shma! In its most familiar context, of course, this word is a call to all of Israel. But in the banishment story, hearing or listening to a voice also recurs several times, each time with a difference resonance.

- Upon giving birth, Sarah declares: “God has brought me laughter [tz’chok]; all who hear [shmeia] will laugh [yitzachak] with me

So, Sarah, while experiencing what Alter calls “triumphant joy [. . .], could well feel the absurdity [. . .] of a nonagenarian becoming a mother.”

Consequently the laughing from “all who hear” may be one of mockery, reinforced by the ambiguity of the pronoun “*li*”—translated in our text as “with” me, though it could also be “at” me. (Alter furthers the play on the root *tz’ch’k*, the foundation of Yitzchak’s name, by suggesting that what irked Sarah was that Ishmael was “Yitzchak-ing” the younger boy.)

- It is then the voice of Sarah that God tells Abraham to listen to (using the same verb and object as in the scene of Hagar in the desert that follows)
- When she leaves Ishmael under the bushes, Hagar raises her voice in lament; the text does not indicate if there is any listener
- God then hears not Hagar’s voice but the “boy’s cry:” it is the first we learn that the boy has been weeping. Though Ishmael’s actual name is

absent from this entire passage, beginning with Sarah's reference to "the handmaiden and her son," Alter points out that "the ghost of its etymology – ISHMA-EL "God will hear" – hovers at the center of the story."

- Finally, it is the voice of an angel of God who calls to Hagar, "[. . .] Have no fear, for God has heard the cry of the lad where he is. Get up, lift the boy, and hold him with your hand, for I am going to make of him a great nation."

Thus, two strands are intermingled here: voice and nation-building, speaking/hearing, on the one hand, and the progeny of Abraham's seed on the other. While Sarah, Hagar and "the lad" raise their mortal voices on high, and God and God's messenger vocalize from on high, Abraham is oddly silent. We look ahead to the future: Yitzchak will found a great nation; and later Ishmael will also found a great nation.

The troubling question that the passage leaves unanswered is whether a family, a clan, a tribe or any community must rid itself of half-castes or any other impure members in order to maintain its cohesiveness. In our age of

multiculturalism, such an idea could be politically volatile and would, at any rate, be unattractive to many.

As Sartre wishes, to hold onto love even as she lets it (or her lover) go, so we wish to hold onto all that is good and life-affirming in our community, even if we must, as Abraham had to do, let something or someone go.

At Rosh Hashanah we re-collect ourselves to begin anew. We hope to get one step closer to that “Gratitude” that we repeat in the Amidah “We are thankful that we understand that we are not alone.” From that point of inner hoped-for oneness with God we ask, as a community, to turn us back to God: “*Hashkiveinu Avinu l’Toratecha . . .*” “May we return to engaging with you through Torah . . .” We agree to embark on a new path, whether it is that of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav’s narrow, rickety bridge (*Kol ha-olam kulo gesher tzar me’od*) or the wide expanse of Walt Whitman’s open road (“Always the procreant urge of the world).” As our new mocha sings, I walked with Abraham when he left his homeland to read his future in the stars.

Now we will be walking that walk – the accumulated trek of thousands of generations – in the new year.

My wish to all of you is that your love endure, whether love of yourself, of one other, of others in general, or of God; that letting go and even accepting loss may be painless; and that you be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year. L'Shana Tova.