

Inauspicious Beginnings

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Rosh ha-Shana, by tradition, is the birthday of the world. It is a time we start a fresh spiritual ledger, engage in serious self-assessment, change course if necessary, and give ourselves a new start. New starts, new opportunities. They sound so attractive in theory. But how do they work in practice?

Not always as intended. Take Jeremy Guthrie. He thought he was off to a new start in the spring of 2017 as the fifth member of the Washington Nationals starting pitching rotation. He started his first game, got two men out, allowed 10 runs, and did not complete the first inning. For those of you who don't know or care about sports, trust me, that is not a good performance. Jeremy Guthrie never pitched another game in the major leagues. But don't feel too sorry for him: his aggregate major league earnings were just shy of \$44 million.

Or take me. In October 1998 I went out for dinner prior to Friday night services with someone I met at a Bet Mishpachah event. I thought: this could be the start of something promising. Too bad that each of us found his dinner companion underwhelming. Seven months later, we gave it another try, found more success, and, in time moved in together and got married. So not all inauspicious beginnings spell doom.

The portion today relates the stories of several individuals who find themselves contemplating new situations that they did not choose. We are in va-Yera, in the book of Genesis. The portion we read depicts two starkly different sets of beginnings. The first is an auspicious one: Sarah, despite her old age, has given birth to a child, Isaac. We learn of his circumcision and the feasting afterwards.

The second beginning is much less grand. It involves Hagar, previously described in the text as a slave of Sarah's, and Ishmael, Hagar's son with Abraham. At Sarah's initiative, they get tossed out of Abraham's comfortable household and are forced to experience a new life in the wilderness.

And what did they do to deserve this? It was contrary to tradition (or at least the tradition that subsequently developed when the Jewish population exceeded three) for a Jewish parent, such as Abraham, to banish a child from home. The text and commentaries suggest divergent rationales for the banishment. Here's what the text attributes to Sarah: "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." This suggests that Sarah simply wanted a possible rival for Abraham's affection and lands out of the way, because Ishmael, as a legitimate son, had an expectation of an inheritance. Numerous *midrashim* or commentaries, presumably seeking to justify Adonai's action in telling Abraham to give Sarah what she wants, suggest that Ishmael may have been up to no

good. There are various suggestions that he was spiritually corrupt, because he brought idols into the household; that he was physically menacing, because he attacked Isaac with arrows (recall in this text Isaac is a newborn); or even morally degenerate because, in the words of one commentator, "Sarah saw Ishmael doing something sexual which apparently was not consistent with acceptable moral behavior in Abraham's house." Precisely what this was is left to the reader's imagination. Still, whatever the reason, Hagar and Ishmael must confront a new life in the wilderness.

This part of the story, which is in the portion traditionally read on the first day of Rosh ha-Shana, may seem to be curious choice for the High Holy Days. (We began reading it here only last year.) It doesn't establish laws. And it doesn't provide particularly good examples of human behavior.

Yet it depicts a situation familiar to many of us — being cast into a metaphorical, if not an actual, wilderness, because we have fallen into disfavor. There are all too many instances where this can happen. The first is the circumstance described in today's portion: family members who take a dislike to someone and either badmouth him or her to other members in order to discredit the person or take steps to freeze the person out. Similarly, friends may discard someone to gain credit with others whom they perceive to be more valuable or important. Then there are bosses who play favorites, and relegate those who are disfavored with inferior assignments, promotion opportunities, or pay — or by discarding them altogether.

The preceding examples, while regrettable and all too frequently traumatic for those involved, generally involve only a few individuals. But some types of banishment are much broader. Consider those in charge of organizations or governments who cast aside entire groups of people. This phenomenon has become all too prominent in recent years: so-called leaders who divide by creating favored and disfavored groups and seek to enhance their powers by vilifying the disfavored. Currently high among the list of disfavored: racial minorities, immigrants, and particularly the transgender members of the LGBT community. Too many of us and those we value have been stigmatized as outliers underserving of having the same rights and privileges that the majority receives.

How can those cast into the wilderness respond? There are basically four choices. The first is to seek reconsideration from the banisher. Perhaps popular culture provides a better — or at least snappier — example for this than do eminent Jewish scholars. So I refer to lyrics from a song that this year celebrates its 30th anniversary — "Second Chance," by the band 38 Special:

*I look to the sky
And everything is turnin' grey
All I made was one mistake
How much more will I have to pay
Why can't you think it over
Why can't you forget about the past?*

*When love makes a sound babe
A heart needs a second chance*

While the song lyrics are unclear as to whether the protagonist achieved his objective, sometimes we do get a second chance from the one who casts us aside. This is most likely to occur when there is a personal connection, as with relatives or friends. Recall my own experience when I received — and provided — a second chance after a lackluster first date. But an appeal to Sarah by Hagar or Ishmael clearly would not have worked here. Nor is such a technique likely to be effective when the banisher is malicious, as is the case with someone who attempts to cast aside larger groups. Indeed, more likely than a second chance is that the banisher will concoct grounds for the banishment. Recall blood libels against Jews or the charge that gays and lesbians recruit the young because no one is born that way. People in power often are quite skilled at creating “alternative facts” to justify their actions that will then be amplified by their supporters. Although not entirely analogous, recall the *midrashim* for this portion attempting to justify Sarah’s actions by charging Ishmael with misconduct nowhere referenced in the text.

A second choice is to hope that the banisher goes away or is toppled. This certainly can happen: recall the story of Purim, celebrating the demise of Haman at a service that is a lot more fun than the ones this week or next. But the Purim story of the very prompt, and very total, annihilation of an enemy is more the exception than the rule.

We then proceed to the third choice: plead to a higher authority. This is essentially what happens in the portion we read today. After the banishment, Ishmael is dying of thirst and cries. Hagar then bursts into tears. Adonai witnesses this, sends down an angel to communicate with Hagar, and then provides a well of water. Hagar and Ishmael survive their banishment. Indeed, the angel states, on Adonai’s authority, that Ishmael will become part of a great nation. Two portions later, Ishmael reappears to help Isaac bury Abraham. Ishmael is considered significant enough that there is a paragraph listing his descendants, and under both Jewish and Muslim traditions, he is considered a forefather of Islam.

The concept of a compassionate, merciful God who forgives sin and helps promote the welfare of a righteous community of Israel is central to the High Holy Day liturgy. It promotes the concept that repentance will be effective and all our hours sitting here will do us some good. But it also focuses on our relationship with God. That God will forgive and not seek vengeance on us does not necessarily assure that we will be protected from malicious human actors.

That leads to the fourth and final course, which is to stay resolute. God’s compassion is an important message of the High Holy Day liturgy, but not an exclusive one. Another important theme is that there are standards of proper and improper conduct. There is a right way to act, even if this is not the way others with whom we

interact conduct themselves, and even if this is not the conduct displayed or values espoused by the authorities who may happen to be in charge at a particular moment.

We have limited ability to control the actions of others. Yes, to the extent we are parents, mates, friends, or mentors, we can have some influence on others' conduct, some hope we can steer them to the good. We can also implore the divine, as did Hagar.

What else can we do? Whether we call it persistence, resistance, or simply doing the right thing, we can follow the conduct of the positive examples we see in the liturgy, in scriptures, and in the world around us. That those in charge may be insulting, vain, dishonest, cruel, bigoted, or unyielding does not give us license to do the same. No one forces us to send nasty tweets, post inflammatory material on Facebook, or refer to those with whom we disagree in scatological terms. We all have the capacity for goodness and decency.

This was reinforced to me the past summer by the most spiritual experience I had this year. It had nothing to do with Jewish ritual or writing; it was a movie I saw by myself on a Saturday afternoon. This was "Won't You Be My Neighbor," the documentary about Fred Rogers, whose children's show I never saw when I or my younger siblings were growing up. At one point in the movie, Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, references an expressly Jewish concept: *Tikkun Olam*, the repair of the world. And he tried to bring this about by emphasizing each child's potential to be someone good.

Let us all realize our potential to act in an upright, if not Godly, manner. There are many possible tools for this, ranging from Mr. Rogers' simple songs and hand puppets to meditation to religious services with eloquent liturgy and magnificent choirs. We can then hold firm even if we are banished to the wilderness. We are entitled to cry out as Hagar did. Perhaps our cries will be answered. Perhaps they won't. Even if they are not, we must not disappear, but need to remain righteous and not to stoop to the level of our tormentors. If so, we can hope to survive, and perhaps prosper. *Shana Tova*.