

MORE THAN MERE PRESENCE

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Bet Mishpachah Rosh ha-Shana Morning II 5780 2 October 2019

In some instances, just showing up can be meaningful. Take this service, for example. Unless enough people are present, certain Jewish rituals cannot be performed. Traditionally, at least ten adults — a minyan — are needed for a Torah service or Kaddish, Today's service contains both, so thank you for appearing!

A *minyan* is just one instance when physical presence alone may convey a message. Simply attending an event can be a powerful tool of reconciliation. Such was the case with Ishmael, the son of Hagar and Abraham who was exiled at Sarah's behest in today's reading. Ishmael's relocation to the wilderness of Paran at the conclusion of the reading is not his last mention in the Torah. Four chapters later, Ishmael reappears to help bury Abraham. Why does he come back? According to one *midrash*, sometime after Sarah's death, Abraham at his own initiative visited Ishmael's house without disclosing his identity and was greeted by Ishmael's wife, who provided Abraham with food and drink. As the story continues, "Abraham stood and prayed before the Holy One, and Ishmael's house became filled with all good things. When Ishmael

returned, his wife told him about it, and Ishmael knew that his father still loved him.” Showing up made a difference.

Nearly all of us have been in circumstances where we have been told that our attendance somewhere is mandatory. As children, and sometimes as adults, we are obliged to appear for events sponsored by or honoring cousins or great uncles or friends of the family whose pertinence to us (as opposed to the person who directed us to be there) is not always clear. We show up but aren't sure why we are there.

And it's not only family events. Recall mandatory school assemblies? Although this occurred over 45 years ago, the memory of school-wide pep rallies held in lieu of classes to glorify my high school football team still grates. It was never clear how our presence would help lineman block, receivers catch, or safeties tackle.

And then there are the events in which we are exhorted to appear for the good of the community. Time for another high school-era reminiscence: to the time everyone in my synagogue's confirmation class was urged to march down Peachtree St. in downtown Atlanta to protest the plight of Soviet Jewry. Unlike the pep rallies, I found this to be worthwhile. I certainly supported the cause: after all, my grandparents had emigrated from that part of the world around the time of the Russian

Revolution. But could I really explain what I was doing there? If I had been asked, I doubt I could have offered much beyond two sentences of detail about why I was marching; I certainly could not have advocated a solution to the underlying problem.

Do you know why you are here this morning? Perhaps you perceive this to be the equivalent of one of those family events I just mentioned. You can tell your parents, your siblings, or your friends that you were here. It's part of your heritage. Perhaps you regard spending a couple of hours here a favorable exchange for not having to spend a full day at work. Perhaps you feel vaguely guilty — or any least not 100 percent proud — about your actions during the course of the year, and feel that being here, and being part of the minyan, will help you feel better about yourself.

Or perhaps you feel it will help settle your account with God. Will Adonai take note of you? Will Adonai provide you, and all the other Jews around the world who are attending services during this year's Days of Awe, a reward in the form of a healthy, happy, and prosperous 5780? Elements of today's portion might encourage such a view. It is not merely Adonai rewarding Sarah for her faith and perseverance. There is also the predicament of Hagar, who bore Ishmael with Abraham, is described in the text as Sarah's handmaiden, and whom Sarah arranges to be exiled along

with Ishmael. Wandering in the wilderness, caring for a child without water or food, Hagar weeps in anguish at the thought of Ishmael's imminent death. Adonai helpfully sends an angel who leads Hagar to a well, saving her and Ishmael from perishing.

Be in the right place at the right time with a good intention: shouldn't a favorable result follow? It's not only aspects of the Torah portion today that could support such a view; so do some icons of popular culture. Remember the highest grossing movie of 1994, which also won the Oscar for Best Picture? It was *Forrest Gump*. For those of you who may have forgotten the movie — spoiler alert, it was not a favorite of mine — or are simply too young to have seen it originally, Tom Hanks starred as the title character, a well-meaning soul of limited intellect. In the movie, Forrest's appearance at events manages invariably to bring good tidings.

It would be gratifying to tell you that simply showing up while having the perseverance of Sarah, the sincerity of Hagar, or the good will of Forrest Gump will ensure your happiness in the forthcoming year. Perhaps in a perfect world that would be the case. But that is not the world in which we live. All of us have had enough life experience to know that the dutiful, the well-meaning, and the pious do not always prevail.

What else can we do? In addition to mere physical presence, why not try engagement? It is commendable that each of you has made the effort to go downtown to attend services here today and are participating in another presentation of our contemporary and thoughtful liturgy. But the liturgy is not self-actuating. It requires some work on your part to attain the ideals espoused. The work doesn't necessarily need to be something for the Jewish community, the LGBT community, or this congregation. Nor does the work necessarily need to be profound. All around us we see, for lack of a better word, jerks. These are the people who ignore messages they receive, don't shovel their sidewalks in the snow, cut in front in lines or traffic, speed on electric scooters down narrow city sidewalks, or loudly conduct video phone conversations while seated in a restaurant. One way we can engage ourselves and seek to bring about better outcomes is to be more considerate to neighbors, co-workers, or family members. Or, put more colloquially, don't be a jerk. That's admittedly not a spiritual or uplifting sentiment. Notwithstanding this, in a Facebook colloquy around Labor Day, three of this congregation's lay *darshanim* thought that was not an inappropriate message to convey during the High Holy Days. So I've decided to be the spokesman.

We could also consider the consequences of our actions upon others. Some conduct, such as the types of actions I just mentioned, is easy to condemn. Indeed, for the last few years nearly each day's newspaper print or online front pages and TV lead stories provide yet more revelations about major players in government, industry, and religion whose actions appear to be motivated by malevolent intentions. For all I know, news sites and social media are being updated with another outrage even as I speak. It's easy, and often cathartic, to get up on a soapbox and condemn such people. But what about the outwardly sincere people who seem either unaware or unconcerned that actions they perceive to be well-intentioned may unduly harm others?

Here again today's portion provides an example of conduct not to emulate. Sarah wants to help her only son by ensuring he receives the entire inheritance of Abraham, a prosperous man. But under the rules of the time, Ishmael, as a son of Abraham, was also entitled to a share. So Sarah acts like a soap opera character, scheming to banish Hagar and Ishmael. That certainly helped Isaac, and, in the larger scheme of things, promoted a larger, and certainly for purposes of the Torah, worthwhile cause: the continuation of what would become the Hebrew people. But the way in which Sarah did this caused great anguish to Hagar and

Ishmael. And while commentaries differ on Ishmael's culpability, none attributes any misconduct to Hagar.

Consequently, before any of us attempt to save the community or the world, we need to consider all the consequences of our actions — both the results we intend to bring about and the collateral consequences that will likely follow. Too often people take actions thinking that they are justified by good intentions, or their membership in a marginalized group. That's not always the case. Avoid actions that will serve to harm those who warrant no punishment. Also examine: will the proposed means actually accomplish the desired ends? The immediate benefits Sarah achieved through her actions might have been undone in the longer term but for the good grace of Abraham.

The need to assess the consequences of our actions does not mean that we should refrain from acting at all. To the contrary, as Jews we are instructed during the High Holy Days to seek *Tikkun Olam* — the repair of the world. In doing that, we shouldn't be like Sarah, and assume that desire for a commendable result justifies whatever means are expedient. Nor should we be like Forrest Gump and assume that our good-natured presence alone will yield good fortune. Life is not a box of chocolates. But it need not be an empty package either. Do show up when you are

needed. And once you've arrived, act judiciously, not impulsively. Shana
Tova.