

Hurt people hurt people,
But self-actualization, feeling seen,
and seeing the other stymies the cycle of harm.
Our Torah reading this afternoon demonstrates this.
When Sarai has difficulty conceiving,
She insists that Abram use her maidservant, Hagar,
To bear his children instead.
Eventually Hagar does conceive but,
When she realizes she has become pregnant,
Her esteem for Sarai declines.
After being treated as,
“little more than a womb with legs”
Hagar begins to associate –
Sarai’s reproductive failings with moral failings.
If Sarah was truly righteous, she reasons,

Then she would have gotten pregnant long ago.
Deprived of her own bodily agency and autonomy,
Hagar equates fertility with value.
She internalizes the obvious message,
That a woman's worth is –
defined by her generative capacity.
Though Sarai was –
a perpetrator of this harmful construction,
She is also a victim.
She is doubly wounded,
First by her inability to –
bring her primary function to fruition,
Then by Hagar's confirmation of her gender failure.
The weight of Sarai's unrealized expectations causes
her to lash out at Hagar.

When Sarai confronts Abram, he gives her the opportunity to bring justice to the situation.

“Her fate is in your hands,” he said,
 “deal with her as you think right.”

Sarai might have taken this moment to –
 recognize Hagar’s full personhood.

Instead, her pain overcomes her,
 and she revisits it upon Hagar cruelly.

The cruelty is the point.

Hagar becomes a surrogate for Sarai’s suffering,
 The root used of Sarai’s actions against Hagar,
 עֲבָדָה, connotes slavery and oppression –
 as well as sexual violence.

Sarai deals harshly with Hagar –

So Hagar flees into the wilderness.

A divine messenger finds her in her distress and –

asks her,

“Where did you come from –
and where are you going?”

For perhaps the first time,
Hagar meets someone who –
recognizes her full humanity.

By considering her life’s trajectory,
Hagar can step outside of the cycle of abuse.
She recognizes that she is fleeing Sarai’s cruelty,
but also that the future offers hope.

The angel tells Hagar to return to Sarai,
in full recognition of the cruelty she has endured.
She is promised that she will bear a son.

She will name him Ishmael, because God has heard
her suffering.

The first woman God communicates with in the Bible is a slave who has suffered abuse at the hands of our ancestors.

The God of the vulnerable and downtrodden, lifts up this poor woman and tells her that her story will be heard.

Hagar, calls God “El-Roi” the seeing God.

A commentary explains the power of this name thusly, “To be seen in one’s suffering is to receive a most basic form of compassion.

For another to see you as you are, to recognize your pain, shame, and dehumanization...

is to have your humanity restored.”

God sees this suffering immigrant, even when she feels invisible.

Her relationship with God is –

unique in that in God’s seeing her, she sees God too.

Feeling seen gives Hagar the courage to return to the source of her trauma with a message of hope:

God will hear my suffering.

Perpetuating the pattern upholds the harmful paradigm of abuse. Whereas Hagar attempts to escape the cycle, Sarai never learns to.

When Sarai eventually learns she herself will become pregnant, she finally has the opportunity to move through her trauma and break the cycle.

But she scoffs and remains self-centeredly focused on defining her worth by what she lacks.

Rather than appreciating the potential the future holds, she can only think about her age and previous disappointment. She remains shackled to societal pressures many of us still experience today.

Even after Sarai has undergone an identity change and becomes Sarah, she remains stuck in an ill-formed conception of family systems.

She remains unable to take advantage of the agency being offered to her, denying that agency to others.

Even after God has seen Hagar, Sarah cannot, so she fixates on herself.

On the day Isaac, the son she birthed, was weaned, Sarah turns her attention to Ishmael the one she did not.

She sees him playing.

But the Torah does not tell us with what or whom he is playing.

The Septuagent's translation offers,

“he was playing with her son Isaac.”

She is furious seeing them play together because it might suggest they were equals.

All the more so because the verb for playing, *mitzachek*, shares a root with Isaac's name: Yitzhak.

Sarah sees her own son reflected in Ishmael and rather than appreciating their similarities, she worries about how the older boy and his mother might affect her status.

Sarah demands that Abraham cast the two out so that Ishmael will not share Isaac's inheritance.

She calls them by the role's they hold in her esteem, "That slave woman and her son."

She fails to recognize that this act harms Abraham and Isaac as well as Hagar and Ishmael.

The next morning, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with only some bread and a skin of water.

They wandered and wandered until eventually they ran out of water.

Hagar could not bear to see her child suffer, but El-Roi, the seeing God, again took notice of them.

God heard Ishmael and sent another messenger to Hagar saying,

“Fear not, God has heard the cry of the boy where he is.”

Again, the divine vision surpasses human capacities.

God saw Ishmael, just as God had seen Hagar, in the totality of his humanity.

God heard Ishmael where he was, not within the confines of expectation.

This is the well of self-actualization God opened Hagar’s eyes to.

When she too was able to see Ishmael where he was, he was enabled to forge his own path.

He made a home in a wilderness which had seemed so frightening to his mother.

He became a skilled archer, setting his own marks and trusting that his arrows would fly true.

When Ishmael is seen and heard, he can break the cycle, he can brave the wilderness and blaze his own trail.

Abraham and Sarah never really see Isaac in this way.

He remains a means to an end for them.

Isaac is bound and offered as a sacrifice.

Sarah's identity was so wrapped up in his that, and his in hers that, when she dies, he remains in a stage of arrested development.

He never leaves the land of Israel and eventually replaces his mother with his wife.

Having never escaped the cycle himself, Isaac will revisit his trauma upon his own children.

Though there are many lessons from our Torah reading this afternoon,

The most salient to me at the outset of 5783 are these:

We must be willing to brave the wilderness in search of our true selves in order to break cycles of harm.

If not, we might ourselves become bound as a sacrifice to an unjust system;

God is El Roi.

God sees us in our cruelty and in our suffering.

If we wish to see God,

we must see the other in their full humanity –
as well as with our full humanity.

In the face of the immigrant and the orphan is the face of Divine.

In ancient times, during the festival of the first fruits, it was imperative that all of Israel presented themselves at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Mishnah teaches: *HaKol Chayaviim b'reiyah*,
all are obligated in seeing and being seen.

In this new year, may each of us find the courage to show up in our totality.

Let us all see one another fully, and let each of us feel seen.

This is the recipe for a good year, for a sweet year.

Shanah Tovah U'Metukah.