

**WHAT HAPPENED TO ABRAHAM, SARAH, HAGAR, ISHMAEL, AND ISAAC?  
A HIGH HOLIDAY RE-EXAMINATION OF GENESIS CHAPTER 21 AND THE  
QUESTIONS IT RAISES ABOUT THE ROLES WE PLAY IN OUR MODERN  
LIVES**

*For Kahal B'Raira • Yom Kippur 5772  
Inspired by Avivah Zornberg and Rabbi Or Rose*

*Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul.  
Return to who you are, return to what you are, return to where you are  
return and return again . . .*

Each year on Yom Kippur, we return again here to Kahal B'raira: confronting our skeletons in the closet, accounting for our behavior over the past year, promising to right our wrongs, and setting commitments for the year to come. From the metaphorical opening of the gates on Rosh Hashanah, to their impending closing at the end of this day, we participate in a macro-meditation of our behavior during the past year and what it means to be present amidst the certainties and uncertainties of our lives. Who are we NOW? Where are we NOW, and what are we doing NOW?

Yom Kippur is a time when we humble ourselves and make ourselves vulnerable. As Jews in Greater Boston, we generally lead privileged lives. Yet today, we abstain from our usual daily comforts. Perhaps, by doing so, we are better able to empathize with those less fortunate. The mitzvah of identifying with and taking care of others is a strong trope in the story of the Jewish people and is one of the grounding principles of Humanistic Judaism. Our liturgical calendar has many benchmarks, which remind us that our strength was forged from places of great weakness and vulnerability. On Passover, we remember that we were slaves in Egypt. On Hannukah, we recall the desecration of the Temple. On Purim, we celebrate the strength of our people in the midst of massacre and near destruction.

In the Torah, as well as in myths and folklore of many other cultures, the wilderness—or in Hebrew, the *midbar*—symbolizes a place of uncertainty, fear, and change. During the 10 days of Awe, many congregants are taken to this uncomfortable place when they listen to the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael, in Genesis, chapters 21 and 22.

The narrative opens, *v'Adonay pakad et Sarah, k'asher amar...* And YHWH remembered Sarah, as YHWH had promised, and Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age. The son was named *Yitzchak*,

Isaac, which means, “He will laugh.” Earlier in Genesis, when Sarah first heard the news of her impending pregnancy, she laughed. Abraham was around 100 years old at this time, and she as well was long past the age of childbearing. At Isaac’s birth, Sarah remarks, *tzchok asa li elohim...* “Elohim has given me a joke, and all who hear will laugh with me.” Or, a more interesting and perhaps more enlightening translation: “God has made sport of me, and everyone will laugh at me.”

Before Sarah knew that she would bear a child, she convinced her husband to conceive through his concubine, Hagar. Enter Ishmael, whose name means “God will listen”. The children, Isaac and Ishmael, grow up together. One morning, Sarah sees Ishmael playing: *Va-tere Sarah et ben-Hagar ha Mitzrit, asher yal’edah l’Avraham m’tzachek*. Notice that the verb for playing, *mitzachek* sounds just like the name *Yitzchak*. The words are, in fact, derived from the same three-letter root. Perhaps jealous or scared that Ishmael will take his rightful place as Abraham’s first-born heir, Sarah orders her husband to cast Ishmael and Hagar into the wilderness.

The request does not sit well with Abraham, but the voice of Elohim comes down and tells him to obey his wife. God assures Abraham that while Isaac is destined to become his heir, Ishmael will also become a great nation.

So, Hagar is given an animal skin full of water, and she and her son Ishmael are banished in the desert. They finish the water, and Hagar puts her son under a thicket, so that she will not have to bear with his cries. But, living out the destiny of his name, *Ishmael*, is heard by God, who comforts Hagar and shows her a well in the middle of the wilderness. YHWH stays with the two, and Ishmael becomes the father of a great nation—today we recognize him as the patriarch of the Arab nation.

Recalling this harsh episode forces us to confront some difficult parts of our foundational myths. Our Matriarch Sarah’s actions seem extremely cruel, and although Abraham has a history of bargaining with God—most famously in the tale of Sodom and Gommorah--this time he does what he is told.

There is a pattern in the Hebrew Bible of the younger child replacing the elder as heir and favorite of the father. Isaac has two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob tricks their father out of his older brother’s inheritance. We also find that Jacob favors his two youngest sons, Joseph and Benjamin, over their ten elder brothers.

But if you read carefully, in the web of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac, the answer of who comes out ahead is not quite so black and white.

A close reading of the narrative reveals that Sarah is plagued with an inferiority complex, which does not go away with the birth of her son, her son given to her by Elohim. Sarah's God does nothing to assuage her worries; Elohim instead stays in the wilderness and comforts the unfortunate handmaiden, Hagar. The next time we even encounter Sarah in the Bible, it is to learn of her death. Isaac, too, seems to pull the short end of the straw. After the banishment of his half-brother, he winds up bound to an altar, staring up at his father, who holds a knife to his throat. In two short chapters, Abraham shows willingness to sacrifice both of his sons: Ishmael, because his wife Sarah told him to, and Isaac, because his God instructed him to do so. This is shocking for the father of our nation. Had an angel of God not intervened in both cases, there would be no Jews and no Arabs, according to this foundational story.

Abraham and Isaac do not speak or interact after the infamous encounter on the altar. While the two walk up the mountain together, Abraham returns alone. Furthermore, the test of the Binding of Isaac is Abraham's final interaction with God. The father of our nation leaves his beleaguered son to deal with the blessing of a multitude of descendants, whatever that may entail. Thanks, pops, Happy New Year, folks!

Some read this story as an affirmation of the Hebrew God's sympathies with other peoples: Out in the wilderness, Elohim told Hagar, "Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation." But others see in the story Elohim's preference for Isaac and for the Jews above all nations. In the end, Isaac receives the blessing and covenantal promise. While this interpretation favors the traditional Jewish liturgy's devotion to Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah, it gives short shrift to the actual story.

A more sensitive and inclusive interpretation of the section rejects the proposal of an us-verses-them dichotomy (us being the Jewish descendants of Abraham and Sarah, and them, the Arab children of Ishmael, and demands that we relate to each character. On this Yom Kippur, when we are examining our deepest selves, we think back to these Torah readings, normally read on Rosh Hashanah. We are Sarah, whose jealousy arises from a place of not being able to accept herself. We are Hagar, who despairs, because she cannot save her son from dying of thirst. We are Isaac, bound to an altar. We are Ishmael, who cries out in the wilderness feeling helpless, abandoned, and alone. And, we are Abraham—coerced by his wife and possibly by his God too, who

winds up almost losing everything. We are the oppressors and we are the oppressed.

There is a notion of mythical truth, different from literal truth. You may agree with Historian Michael Berenbaum, who said, "Myth underscores the deepest truths we live." It doesn't matter whether or not something happened; what matters is that it is told for a purpose. This is our myth. Only after placing ourselves in the shoes of each character, are we able to begin to understand the steps that we must take to right each wrong. Therefore, on this and on every Yom Kippur, we must return again to a place of abandonment in the wilderness; to return to an understanding of what it means to be weak and vulnerable, so that we might help ourselves and others in the year to come.

There is a Hasidic Folk tale that supports this moral, about seven beggars, each with an imperfection. One beggar has a twisted neck. People think that he is ugly, but actually, his neck enables him to imitate the call and song of every creature that lives.

This beggar hears about two nations, whose countries lie a thousand miles apart, and when night comes over those lands, the people cannot sleep. For with night, there comes a strange moaning and wailing, so dreary, so heart-wrenching, that the very stones groan and weep. And when the people hear this sound, they too must begin to moan and weep; every night all the men and women, and even the children of these countries lie awake moaning and weeping with the sorrow that is over them.

The beggar learns that the reason for the moaning is this: there were once two beautiful birds that had mated together, and they were the only two of their kind. But once they were lost, one from the other, and they flew everywhere, each seeking its mate, until they became weary, and their hope was gone from them, for they knew they were far from each other.

Each settled alone where it was; one built his nest in his land, and the other built her nest where she was a thousand miles away; now when night comes the two birds begin to lament, each for the other, and it is their moaning lament that the people hear, and they too must keep with the birds, until there is no rest for them at night.

The Sages asked the beggar with the twisted neck to give the people some peace. Since he had the power to make his voice like any living being, he easily imitated the call of each bird, sending their songs to each other, so that they flew towards each voice and met together where he stood.

Today, WE should strive to be like this beggar in the wilderness. Let our imperfections be beautiful and create harmonious sounds. Notice the twisted neck of the shofar, and let its blast take us from a place of existential vertigo back on the path of righting our wrongs and repairing the world

*Return again . . .*