

Rosh Hashanah 5777

For me, this story articulates one of the moments of greatest personal suffering in the Torah. Hagar, the Egyptian slave, who has lived among a people not her own, a foreigner whose name could be translated like the Hebrew word *hager*, as “the stranger,” continues her journey of isolation and alienation in the desert where she must watch the seemingly imminent death of her only son. The pain is so great she cannot even bear to watch his final moments. She steps back from the bush under which she has laid him to die, in the hope of protecting herself from an ultimate pain beyond that which she already cannot bear.

Even though at this brink of utter loss, Gd hears Ishmael’s cries and the boy and his mother live, the heart-wrenching moment of near-death lingers. It is this pain, this suffering, that pulls me in. I read this story and I am sad. I am sad for the horror Hagar must endure, for the precariousness of life we must all constantly confront.

I read more closely. I follow the larger narrative of Sarah and Hagar and their challenging and painful relationship. After Sarah orchestrated the birth of Ishmael so that Abraham would have an heir, it is Sarah (with a little help from Gd) who forces Hagar and Ishmael into the desert, commanding Abraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”(Gen 21:10).

I am disappointed that Sarah could not imagine enough, could not conceive an inheritance large enough to support both sons. I am ashamed that she would be willing to let Hagar and Ishmael die because of her own insecurity. I telescope out and reflect on the hand that penned this narrative. If we assume, just for the moment that Gd did not personally write the Torah, then chances are it was a man, or group of men who authored this story. There is no doubt that biblical society and the sacred texts that sprung from it are patriarchal. I get angry thinking about this patriarchal system where the men in power write the narratives that tell the story of women - of these two women, Hagar and Sarah, one who is blamed for the injustice and one who is punished for it, while Abraham and Gd seem to bear no guilt.

Then I zoom out even further and I read the words of multiple (male) rabbis, who try to defend Sarah, our matriarch, and to defend Gd for the immense suffering and near death of an Egyptian slave-woman, and her son. The rabbis want to justify Sarah's actions, so they blame the victim, the foreigner. Rashi interprets Ishmael's playing as idol-worship and Hagar's wandering in the desert as a return to idolatry. Sforno posits that Sarah is upset by Ishmael because he questions whether Abraham is truly Isaac's father. In short, the commentators help us see, Hagar and Ishmael brought this suffering upon themselves.

And then I cry because I do not want this to be my story. I do not want this to be my tradition. I do not want the beloved roots of my religion to grow from the racism, bigotry and cruelty so painfully present in our world today.

But if over thousands of years, these dark tendencies are woven into the Judaism in which I now wrap myself, then I want to bring them out into the light. I want to get to know them, to let them have their voice, for a time anyways. I want to converse with them, to add my own voice to the conversation, to add each of our voices. I want to call upon my Jewish community to carry the same love we have for all of the beautiful parts of Torah to these hurt and broken pieces. What renewed Torah could spring forth from our loving embrace?

We are blessed because this is just what our tradition asks of us.

Yes, at times, our religion can feel fraught with oppression, but we don't have to let that consume all the beauty and mystery and meaning and connection that nestle beside it. And in turn, we don't have to let the joy and depth and wisdom blind us from the injustice, bigotry and sexism that also curl up inside the beautiful letters of our Hebrew alphabet.

While sometimes we have to squirm around a bit to make room for ourselves in this epic Jewish trajectory, it is there, waiting. Judaism is a process in which we are all participants. We don't have to abandon the process because we brush up against something unpleasant in it, and we don't have to try so hard to prove that it is all good, perfect, complete and in so doing, stop the churning and grappling, that is us, engaging.

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