

Hagar's Tears and Ours

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Genesis offers us narratives of our biblical ancestors struggling with many of the deepest challenges that we may face in our lives, whether in our familial or interpersonal relationships or as we face the uncertainty, fear, and loss of living in a broken world. Throughout the Genesis cycle we encounter families who accept the fallacy that there is not enough blessing to go around, and thus make terrible mistakes. Parents choose favorite children, siblings are pitted against each other as rivals. This year we return to these stories shattered by the horrific violence of the October 7th massacres, as we see a new and terrifying chapter unfold in the primal conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. We know that there is enough suffering and trauma and outrage to go around. We wonder if there is enough compassion or enough hope to carry us through this time.

In Parashat Vayera we encounter Sarah and Hagar, two mothers who are more accustomed to scarcity than abundance and become trapped in their own fears for their beloved sons. After years of longing, Sarah receives the blessing of a son, of Isaac. She experiences a moment of pure joy.

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צְחֹק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כָּל־הַשְּׂמֵעַ יִצְחָק־לִי:

Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:6).

But when we are accustomed to feeling empty, lonely, less than, it can be hard to stay in that place of joy. And so when Sarah becomes concerned about the behavior of Ishmael, the son of Hagar, towards her own son, Isaac, she reacts with seemingly unrelenting fury.

וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גָּרַשׁ הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירַשׁ בְּנִי הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנֵי עַם־יִצְחָק:

She said to 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).

Her words are dehumanizing. Painful. I would rather imagine that Sarah and Hagar had built a relationship through their years of being in the same family, parenting side by side. But so often our fear of inadequacy turns us inward. If we doubt whether we are worthy of love, we may close ourselves off from others. Our fear that we and those we love will not have enough can make us regard others as competitors for the same scarce resources. We forget that generosity and connection are available to us. Instead of turning towards connection and generosity, which can lead to abundance, we turn away from them.

Abraham, while distressed about doing so, sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with only some bread and a skin of water. Rejected by Sarah, betrayed by Abraham, when the water is gone Hagar quickly descends into despair.

וַיְכַלּוּ הַמַּיִם מִן־הַחֶמֶת וַתְּשַׁלַּךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים: וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לֵה מִנְגֵד הַרְחֵק כַּמֶּטְחָי קִשְׁתָּ כִּי אָמְרָה אֶל־אֲרָאָה בְּמֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנְגֵד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת־קִלְהָ וַתַּבְרָךְ:

When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she wept. (Gen. 21:16)

Hagar cannot bear to see her son suffer, and so she moves away from him. The rabbis do not want to believe that Hagar is abandoning her child in this moment. Radak, Rabbi

David Kimchi, explains the unusual measure of a bowshot to explain that while Hagar went some distance away, she remained close enough that she could still see Ishmael. She is so consumed by her fear and grief that she moves away from him. Yet, she is motivated by love and so she stays close enough to still see him. We don't know if Ishmael can see his mother. We don't know if he knows she is still there. In her own grief and isolation, Hagar moves away from her one connection, and inadvertently deprives him of her presence. So now they are both alone, thirsty, and afraid.

Hagar weeps. Ishmael must have wept too, and perhaps while she could still see him, she was too far to hear his cries, because the text continues:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּקְרָא מֵלֶאֱלֹקִים אֶל־הַגֵּר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מִה־לָּךְ הִגֵּר אֶל־תִּירָאִי כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׁם:

God heard the cry of the boy, and a messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is." (Gen. 21:17)

Midrash Rabbah teaches that from this we learn:

יִפָּה תְּפִלַּת הַחוֹלָה לְעַצְמוֹ יוֹתֵר מִכָּל

The prayer of a suffering person on their own behalf is more beautiful, more desired, than the prayers of others.

Rashi explains that if a person is in a position to pray on her own behalf those prayers will reach the One of Blessing first. Yet the midrash is saying even more than this. According to this reading, God responds to Ishmael's cry for help first, and only then to Hagar's tears of despair. God wants us to hope. We must reach towards the Divine to express our desire to survive and our hope that a different future is possible. Seeking that connection can open us to receive blessing.

Hagar must confront her despair and break through her isolation to reconnect with her child in order to reclaim her will to survive. Abraham Joshua Heschel understood deeply the delicate line between fear and despair. In a 1963 speech

titled "Religion and Race," he acknowledged that despair is seductive, because the evils of the world are tremendous. In the face of the greatest acts of human depravity, of brutal racism and injustice we may feel "that the most practical thing we can do is 'to weep' and to despair." But, he argues, succumbing to despair is an abdication of our most fundamental human responsibilities, and a betrayal of God. "The greatest heresy is despair, despair of humanity's power for goodness, humanity's power for love."

קוֹמִי שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר וְהִחֲזִיקִי אֶת־יָדוֹ בּוֹ כִּי־לִגְוִי גְדוֹל אֲשִׁימְנוּ: וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹקִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר מַיִם וַתִּלְךָ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת־הַחֲמָת מַיִם וַתִּשְׁק אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר:

Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him. Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and let the boy drink. (Gen. 21: 18-19)

First Hagar must rise out of her isolation and despair and go back to Ishmael to hold him. Then God opens her eyes, and she is able to see the well of water. Perhaps it had been there the whole time, but she was so focused on looking away from Ishmael that she couldn't see it. When she remembers the power of love and connection, the possibility of good, her eyes are unclouded and she can find the water.

May each of us seek out connection to defeat the isolation and despair that clouds our vision, so that we may remember our potential to choose hope, and with that, our potential to help build a different future.

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