

Cantor Jessica Epstein
Second Day Rosh Hashanah Sermon
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2 Tishrei 5781

Rabbi Ben Bag-Bag said of the Torah, “Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it.” Today, let us look with new eyes and see what turns up.

There’s a woman we read about every year, one with so many firsts in the Tanach your jaws will drop — and yet not once have I ever heard a rabbi preach on her. Her name is Hagar.

We all know of Avram and Sarai -- the call “Lech Lecha,” the journey to Canaan, famine, and then to Egypt. This is where Hagar enters the story — they bring her out of Egypt as a slave. But — there is always a but -- Avram and Sarai DO NOT really leave Egypt. In Hagar, they bring Egypt WITH THEM. It is not enough to leave Egypt — Egypt must leave YOU. One could argue that leaving Egypt behind us spiritually is the work of the entire Torah.

Let us compare — Sarai: rich, free, and married, but old and barren. Hagar: single, poor, and a slave, but young and fertile.

Sarai devised a plan. In Genesis 15, God reassures Avram that his servant will not be his heir, but his own issue. Sarai, driven by her need to have an heir for Avram, does something not unheard of then, she sends Hagar as a surrogate mother.

Avram heard directly from God that he will indeed have an heir, but either out of convenience or misplaced trust, he puts that faith aside and goes along with Sarai’s plan instead.

Sarai never even speaks Hagar’s name -- “my maid” -- and she never speaks directly to Hagar. Martin Buber would say she’s an IT not a THOU -- a possession to be passed around as Sarah was in Pharaoh’s house. She is repeating the cycle.

Hagar conceives, and the text shifts to her in Genesis 16:4, “her mistress became slight in her eyes.” The slave rises. The mistress falls. You’d think the two might draw closer, maybe bond over some mimosas? Did they have mimosas back then? They really should have.

But no. Sarai wants the old order. She shifts blame — first to Avram, screaming, “This is all your fault!” Avram shrugs. “Do what is right in your eyes,” he says. Note the repetition of eyes and seeing throughout this story.

So what does Sarah do, “ — ותענה שרי ותברח מפניה' — And Sarah abused her, and she (Hagar) fled from her.”

תענה is the same word used to describe the treatment that the Egyptians impose on the Israelites in Exodus 1:11. The next sentence makes it clear it was unbearable — Hagar flees, her own reverse Exodus.

Hagar is a woman of many “firsts.” The first person in the Bible to flee oppression. The first runaway slave. The first to run to the Wilderness — Bamidbar. Yet she is able to find a spring, an “Ayin” — the same word for Eye.

Suddenly a “Malach Adonai” finds her. She is the first person addressed by God’s messenger. Think of it. A runaway, pregnant, Egyptian slave. This is also the first time in the story that someone speaks directly TO Hagar.

“Where have you come from and where are you going?”

How does she answer? She uses the first person singular, and we hear her clearly for the first time.

“I am running away from my mistress, Sarah.” She can only say where she came from — her future is unknown. This, this is all of us. We may have an idea of where we’re going, but we cannot know where our lives will lead. Life can change in an instant, and it is all we can do to be ready.

And so, the plot twist. There is always a plot twist. “Go back to your mistress and submit to her harsh treatment.” I’m sorry, what? But there is also a promise, “I will greatly increase your offspring and they shall be too many to count.”

“Behold you are with child and will bear a son, You shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering.” She is the first -- and only -- woman in the Bible to receive this promise of numerous descendants. The first to receive an annunciation.

What does Hagar do with all this information? She takes a step no one else in the Bible dared — not a prophet, not a king, not even Moses — she names God.

Genesis 16:13 “And she called the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-Roi.’” Or “Have I gone on seeing after he saw me?” It can also mean, “God who sees” or “God who is seen.” She has been seen at last, her pain recognized. Her suffering has meaning and purpose. And she has seen God as well.

In 16:15 she becomes the first to bear a child in the line of the ancestors. Sarah gives birth to Isaac a year later.

Some years later, Sarah sees the son of Hagar playing. M'tzachek. Could also be laughing. It's the same root as Yitzchak — is there a deeper meaning of Ishmael “becoming” or “playing” at being Isaac? We don't know, but we learn that Sarah does not see clearly. The slave mistress roars to life.

Now, as a mom, I can tell you, when you think that someone or something is threatening your child, you are going to do everything and anything in your power to stop that threat. That she does, for weal or woe.

Gen 21:9 — “Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance of my son Isaac.” These are the last words we ever hear from Sarah.

She cannot refer to either of them by name. She depersonalizes them. When you ignore someone's identity, when you see them as “Other,” it is so easy to eliminate them, to refuse to see them.

Sarah uses “Garesh” — the verb Pharaoh uses to “cast out” the Israelites in Exodus. She still has Egypt inside her. And Abraham, what does he give his second wife and eldest son to make their way in the wilderness? Out of all his wealth...a little bread and water.

Hagar is the first slave freed. The first divorced woman.

In this wilderness, she cannot see a spring. Ayin. Eye. She cannot see a way forward.

She puts the boy under a bush -- the Hebrew is used elsewhere to mean the preparation of a grave -- and she sits a distance away. The last words we hear from Hagar... “Let me not look on as the child dies.”

“Let me not look on...” Compare those words of compassion to Sarah’s invective. The last words people utter in the Bible are often their memorials.

What does she do? What would you do? She raises her voice and weeps. When words fail, tears are all she has left.

Hagar is the first character in the Bible to weep.

She is what scholar Phyllis Tribble calls, “The Mother of Weepers.” Hagar is the voice of the desolate. That place where everything is gone -- you sit in the dark without friends, family. Maybe you see...well, we all see something different, scary, insurmountable. And you see...despair.

This too is all of us. We have been in that desert. We have lived Hagar’s pain. Some of us still live it. If you haven’t and aren’t, then bless you, I hope you never do. Samuel Beckett wrote, “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” That’s what life is, going on.

We cannot know where our lives will lead. But Hagar is our guide.

Suddenly, God hears. It is the voice of the na’ar — the lad. Ishmael’s cry pierces the very heart of God. Hagar’s eyes are opened for her — eyes, opened, seeing — and there is now a well, ayin, eye -- Be’ersheva. They are not destined to die in the desert. This is not their end.

It is all we can do to be ready to adapt.

Genesis 21:17. An Angel appears — “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the lad’s voice where he is. Rise, lift up the lad and hold him by the hand, for a great nation I will make him.’

“And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water, and she went and she filled the skin with water and gave to the lad to drink. And God was with the lad, and he grew up and dwelled in the wilderness, and he became a seasoned Bowman. And he dwelled in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took him a wife from Egypt.”

Hagar must get past her fear and anxiety. She must go on. These are the hardest parts of coming out of despair. We are so afraid. She’s been wounded. Abused. Abandoned. At the last, she finds it in herself to rise up and take her son’s hand.

We cannot get up alone from the wilderness. We all need an angel — someone to ask, “What is wrong?” A hand to hold, to love. Hagar knows that she must journey from accepting death to restoring life. She brings water and gives it to Ishmael.

Note, it never says that she takes a drink.

“And God was with the lad.” Ishmael thrives. The last thing Hagar does is secure his future — unlike Abraham, she doesn’t send a servant, she procures a wife for him from her homeland. She is mother and father and guardian of his promise.

So many firsts, now a last for Hagar. The last time she is referred to in the Bible is as “mother.” Is there any higher praise or more beautiful word?

A few lasts before we go. After the Akeidah, Abraham and Isaac never speak again. Abraham returns to Beersheva without his son. And Sarah...she dies alone in Kiriath/Arba Hebron. Isaac does not attend her funeral. Abraham and God never speak directly again. There is a brokenness to them that never heals.

They could not know where their lives would lead. They could not have seen this.

As I said at the beginning, I have never in my life heard a rabbi preach on Hagar on the holy days. Which is a shame. Because we are the children of both Sarah and Hagar. With Sarah, we see our wounds, our pain, our fear. With Hagar, we catch a glimpse of grace and promise. We see a way out, a way to break the cycle.

We rise. We adapt. We go on.

I want to end this morning with the words of Maya Angelou’s poem, “Still I Rise.”

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

May we all rise on this Rosh Hashanah and be renewed into life. Kein Y'hi Ratzon. May this be God's will.