

## **Self-Reflection and Solidarity**

### **Rosh Hashanah 2020 -- Rabbi Lily Solochek**

To say this year has been difficult would be at best comical, and at worst, insensitive to the countless crises going on in our country and the world at large. Many of us feel emotionally drained from shifting our attention from the pandemic, to systemic racial injustice, to natural disasters and concern about the future of our country in the upcoming election. I have been heartened to see so many people in our community and the greater world beginning to educate themselves about and grapple with questions of oppression and power.

These past few months have asked us to cultivate a new kind of compassion, a compassion born out of deep listening and bearing witness to the suffering of others. We have been asked to both protect our own health and safety while advocating for the rights of essential workers, teachers, healthcare workers, people of color, working class people, and everyone that this pandemic has impacted most harshly. For some of us, these past few months have simply amplified the work we've been doing in our communities; for others of us, this feels new and scary and asks us to step outside our comfort zones and confront a world more broken than we knew.

Jewish tradition teaches us unequivocally to advocate for the rights of the oppressed and vulnerable. Our Torah is filled with reminders to love the stranger because we were strangers, to care for the orphan and the widow, and to pursue justice. The constant reminder that we were slaves in Egypt is meant to teach us to have compassion for others based on our own experiences of suffering.

What happens when we don't identify with the oppression that someone else experiences? How can we cultivate compassion and love when we feel disconnected from those who need it most?

Before we dive deeper into these questions, I want to say a word the Torah. *Torah* means "teaching", and as our sacred text it's meant to teach us something about how to live in the world. The Torah tells stories of what it means to be human, and the characters are not always perfect. Sometimes our ancestors make mistakes, sometimes they behave admirably. Sometimes it's clear, such in the story of Abraham arguing with God to save the cities of Sodom and Amarah that we are meant to emulate their righteous behavior. Sometimes it's just as clear, such as the story of the Golden Calf, that we should learn *not* to do something. In other moments, it's less clear, and thus, more ripe for discussion and learning.

In this morning's reading Abraham and Sarah have finally had a child together, Isaac. His birth is cause for celebration, especially given their old age. Let us also remember Abraham has another child, Ishmael, whose mother is Sarah's servant Hagar. At Isaac's weaning, Sarah sees Ishmael "*metzachek*", which could be translated as "laughing" or "playing." She demands Abraham banish Ishmael and his Hagar. God tells Abraham to do what Sarah tells him, so he sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness where they almost die until an angel comes and saves them.

Reading this story the most puzzling question is, What did Ishmael do that was so terrible Sarah wanted him gone?

We should pay attention to our own reactions as readers. Do we agree with Abraham and Sarah? Are we confused by their actions? Who do we most identify

with in this story? Who do we feel automatic compassion and understanding for? Whose perspective do we validate and whose voices are lost?

These are questions we can ask ourselves anytime we read a troubling story. By opening with curiosity at our own reactions we might learn something about ourselves.

Our classical commentators seem to align themselves most with Abraham. Perhaps because like him they are men, perhaps because they are Jewish. When posed the question “what did Ishmael do that warranted banishing” they spill a lot of ink to justify Abraham’s actions.

Rashi, an 11th century French commentator writes that Ishmael was worshipping idols and/or that he was shooting arrows at Isaac and then pretending it was a joke. Ramban claims that Ishmael was scoffing at Isaac and claiming that he would inherit the double portion due to the first born. Sforino says he was making disparaging remarks about Isaac and Sarah that he learned from his mother Hagar.

This raises a key question: the Torah says Ishmael was “laughing”, why are our rabbis so keen on villainizing this behavior? What threat could they possibly think a playing child poses?

And yet, as readers of the text, we might also assume that Ishmael has done something wrong. We might come to this conclusion because as Jewish readers we also feel a loyalty to Abraham, and thus assume his actions must be justified. We might feel ourselves closely relating to Sarah, perhaps from personal experience of jealousy or even righteous maternal protective instincts. We might assume since *God* tells Abraham to do what Sarah says that our beloved patriarch has acted nobly. Perhaps we even feel compassion for Abraham as he sends away his son.

Those are all understandable readings of this story.

I want to offer one more: because we project ourselves onto the characters Abraham and Sarah, it is difficult for us to be critical of their actions because it reflects back as a critique of ourselves. It might be hard for us to consider that Abraham and Sarah are wrong because they are the people in the text we feel represent us. By seeing ourselves in the text as our ancestors, it becomes impossible or at least challenging for us to be critical of their actions.

One place we can go from here is to pivot to trying to identify with Hagar and Ishmael. Perhaps as readers we can find some part of ourselves in their story. And that's the way our Torah teaches us to have compassion, "love the stranger because you were strangers". We tap into our commonality in order to be empathetic to the other. I want to suggest another way to cultivate that compassion that actually keeps us aligned with Abraham and Sarah. We don't need to see ourselves as Hagar to have compassion for her.

The month of Elul and Rosh Hashanah are meant to be times of sacred reflection, a time when we weigh out our choices for the year, make repairs where we need to, and commit to better choices for the new year. And yet in this story we do not see any introspection. Sarah sees Ishmael laughing and she immediately demands his banishment. Abraham sends them away the next morning. There's no conversation, no chance for repair between Isaac and Ishmael or Sarah and Hagar. Everything happens very quickly.

What could have happened if Abraham or Sarah had paused to ask questions. What if Sarah had asked herself why Ishmael's laughter made her so angry? What if Abraham had asked what the future outcome of this rift in the family would be? We could say that Abraham was just following God's direction,

but then we must confront the dangers of simply listening to authority without any questions. Jews are a people of questions; Abraham himself just spent an entire chapter questioning and arguing with God about the destruction of Sodom and Ammorah. Where are his questions and arguments now?

To take it one step further, What if God had asked Abraham to have compassion for his own son Ishmael? If we are able to step back and be critical of Abraham and Sarah, let's also ask questions about God in this moment. If we disagree with Abarahm and Sarah, can we also disagree with God?

And to really push ourselves beyond our theological comfort zones: Can God make mistakes?

Actually, in the Torah, yes.

Shortly after the creation of the world, God sees that humanity has become wicked and regrets creating them. God sends a Flood to destroy the world. Immediately following this God regrets the destruction. Twice in one story we see God choose and then regret the choice, implying not only the potential for mistakes but also the self-awareness to admit it. Throughout the Israelites' 40 year journey in the wilderness God gets frustrated with them and tells Moses on multiple occasions that God is going to walk away from Israel. Moses continually convinces God not to do that.

Our God in the Torah has the capacity to change God's mind. God witnesses destruction and lets that impact the decision to not have another flood. God hears Moses' perspective and then chooses not to abandon or destroy the Israelites. God has the ability to receive new information and alter course accordingly.

How do we emulate God?

When we witness environmental destruction, does it change the way we behave?

When we hear perspectives beyond our own, does it inform our actions?

When we look at a tragedy from a new perspective, does it impact our understanding of the world and inspire us to change?

Looking back at our story, can we imagine a version of where Abraham and Sarah choose compassion instead.

One way the Torah teaches us empathy is to recall our own oppression and thus care for the vulnerable. This can be incredibly powerful. And there's another way to access this compassion for others through solidarity. When we do not resonate with or even perhaps understand their experience, yet we choose to support them and stand with them, that's solidarity. When we read the story and find ourselves most aligned with Abraham and Sarah yet choose to question their actions and feel compassion and protectiveness of Hagar and Ishmael, we choose a deeper compassion.

If we can do this with our story from the Torah, we can learn to incorporate this way of approaching the world into our own lives as well. When we hear a story of conflict, when we hear about a tragedy, and we feel ourselves most closely identified with the perpetrator, and we choose to support the victim, we are accessing that deep level of compassion that we wish Abraham had here.

We can only cultivate this compassion once we open our minds and hearts to the idea that others are experiencing the world differently than we are. And we can only understand that if we first stop and examine and interrogate our own perspectives and biases.

The only way that we move towards a better world is through radical compassion. We will never be able to fully understand the experiences of everyone around us, but our stories and our tradition teach us that changing our perspectives can save peoples' lives. There will likely be many of these choices in the coming year as we live through multiple global crises, and I challenge us all in the new year to always seek compassion for those experiencing the world differently than us. May we feel empathy and choose to stand in solidarity with all those who are oppressed. May we keep asking questions to better understand experiences beyond our own, and may we have the courage to stand up for what is right.