

D'var Torah— Rosh Hashanah—The Birth of Isaac Genesis 21:1-34

Shanah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom:

I've learned to be responsible for what I speak and write. Torah has another deeper responsibility. It was created to teach and inspire. Written for another time and a different people, it is many layered— and as difficult as we *choose* to make it. Today's portion, and a great deal of Genesis, can raise more questions than it answers. That is both its challenge and its strength. As we study, its subtext offers us much to consider. Today we are asked to swallow our distaste at the selfish cruelty (or not) of our ancestor Sarah and our scorn at the weakness (or not) of her husband Abraham. In addition, if it's the portion for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we look for a significant teaching, so we can dig beneath the harsh surface to find the message within. We meet the dark side of Sarah, whose barrenness led her to behavior we cannot understand. We see the pride of the slave woman, Hagar, who had given Abraham an heir, their son, Ishmael. And we see Abraham, foreshadowing the horrific binding of Isaac, which lies ahead.

Hagar and Ishmael are a constant reminder that Isaac is not the heir but the second child of Abraham. Isaac serves as the silent center of our dark story. We ache when Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be banished. Isaac must be the firstborn for the line to continue. Abraham, to his credit, is torn but God steps in to make the decision for him. Abraham *must* listen to Sarah.

Abraham abandons Ishmael and Hagar in the wilderness, in essence, leaving them to die. But as Hagar watches her son slowly weaken, she hears from an angel of God, the voice reassuring her that they will survive and Ishmael's descendants will become a great nation.

We are asked to accept this mythic history presented by Torah. This is not a textbook. This is not written by God. This is our *story*—not our history. There is a difference.

If we accept current Torah scholarship, we realize that Torah was not dictated by God to Moses, but actually is a human product containing ancient stories as well as new ideas and teachings. Slowly these pieces of inspiration were put together, rewritten, and revised. The anonymous compilers were charged (by whom we will never know) with creating God's words. Who were these people and how were they inspired? Where and how did they discover the core truths that were the spiritual food for a people who longed for sustenance?

Godly intervention is often used to excuse the behavior or explain the behavior or forgive the behavior of our ancestors in our early stories. The writers of Torah had to twist things to legitimize Isaac's status. In a few lines, they turn the inheritance tradition on its head. In a few lines our affection for Sarah is challenged, and our aching need for Abraham to say no to the banishment of Ishmael will be echoed again in the Akedah, the binding of Isaac.

Genesis stories are teachings that are pre-Torah—pre-Sinai—they existed before the lengthy instructions of Leviticus create a people seeking to be closer to the holy. The world around Abraham and Sarah is not guided in a way we can understand. Their behavior reflects the world they live in. We've read the whole book. There's a lot to still learn.

Isaac must be protected. Ishmael is a risk to Isaac's future. They must be separated. Banishment was the humane solution. The story is acceptable to us because God does save Ishmael and Hagar. The paths of these brothers just move in different directions. One path leads to Judaism and the other to Islam. We pray to the same God.

But in our study we also can't ignore the phenomenal pain inflicted on all the major players. Only Isaac is left untouched in this story, but he's soon to be altered forever.

Turning us towards a path that leads to the holy is the ultimate gift of Torah. It is the gift of the New Year and the gift of self-assessment and self-repair. These lines also give us one more time to struggle with God. That has always been the task of the Days of Awe.

But for today, I'm looking for inner character— primarily with Abraham and Sarah, but I also revisited all seven of our imperfect patriarchs and matriarchs. They are named in our most important prayer, the Amidah, and we bow as we recite the Avot-V'Imot. Other than God and the Torah, we bow for nothing else.

Torah, at its best, presents humans struggling with their humanity. Torah is a foundational book, a mix of middle eastern stories, bits of history and "how-tos" that have guided Jews and Christians for centuries. The Book was written for a different time and a different audience. When the "sources" (the collective names for the authors) decided to write today's portion as well as the traditional second day reading of the "Binding of Isaac," they forever created questions of character. I'm grateful.

What is the reason for all this imperfection? Why are we not given better role models? I would have preferred a lineage with more of a conscience. The ancient values these stories espouse are not my values. Within the Book of Genesis we confront incest, murder, slavery, torture, war, rape, theft, abandonment and a God who punishes.

Torah is not literal truth to me. I know there's a lot missing. Midrash tries to fill in some blanks, but Midrash isn't Torah. It's backstory. If we count Sinai as the beginning of Judaism, which it was, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob, Rachel and Leah were merely, or amazingly, setting the stage.

When asked to talk Torah, to bring an "aha" to the start of what we call the Days of Awe I have a simple goal— to make these words a source of wonder and find comfort in the light that is shed on our own flaws. We are not alone in our search. Even the final compiler knew a search was required.

I believe it was sheer brilliance to allow us to see humans behaving as humans. I believe that my desire for our ancestors to forgo jealousy and embrace compassion is not a fantasy, but a lesson learned. I want to believe that this is all a cautionary tale. It's impossible to read without wishing for better responses. We want a do-over, as we do with the Binding of Isaac, but it isn't offered. What is offered to us is the opportunity to recognize what we are aiming for—what we wish to heal in ourselves and in others. If I was writing a midrash on this complicated family drama, I would add another chapter. That story would conclude with forgiveness, reconciliation and love.

That may be our task. Forgive, Reconcile and Love... "aha"

—Barbara Carr