

## D'var Torah Rosh Hashanah 5781

Rosh Hashanah is a time for self-reflection. The Talmud states that there are 3 books that open on Rosh Hashanah and closed on Yom Kippur. These are the Book of the Righteous, the Book of the Indeterminate, and the Book of the Dead. The Righteous will surely live, the Indeterminate who knows, and there are those who will metaphorically die, due to their way of life.

Then, there is the Torah portion we read during this time of year, which includes the following:

1. Abraham and Sarah are childless, which makes Sarah very sad.
2. Hagar gets pregnant by Abraham (with Sarah's consent).
3. Hagar taunts Sarah treats her poorly. Hagar runs away.
4. Hagar is told by angels to return to the abusive house.
5. Hagar has a son, named Ishmael.
6. Approximately 13 years later, Abraham and Sara have a son, named Isaac.
7. There is much rejoicing.
8. Ishmael does something to Isaac, while Isaac is still a baby. We're not sure what it is but it strongly disturbs Sarah who wants Hagar and Ishmael out of the house.
9. Abraham sends them away, knowing he will never see his son, Ishmael, again.
10. They almost die of thirst when an angel tells Hagar *to open her eyes* and see a well.
11. Hagar and Ishmael are saved, but do not return to the household.
12. Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his second son, Isaac.
  
13. Right before Abraham lowers the knife he is stopped by an angel who *calls twice* to him and points out that the ram in the bushes would be just fine for a substitute sacrifice.
  
14. And during all this, Abraham is making land deals and living among the Philistines.

This Torah portion is full of drama, bad behavior, multiple interactions with angels, the inability to speak up, the inability to control one's behavior, heavy handedness, and so forth.

Basically a therapist's nightmare.

Are we to judge Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar?

That was my first inclination. I want to talk about Sarah's ruthlessness, about Hagar's lack of faith, about Abraham's complacency.

Or, should I look at this differently?

I studied many years with Rav Zimand, a blessed memory, and he said never sit in the same seat when you study Torah. Always try to get a different perspective.

I would like to offer a slightly different question:

Can we see ourselves in Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar?

Can we open our eyes and ears to the trials we face today:

- Covid
- Wildfires
- Hurricanes
- Afghanistan

Think of the promise that if we behave correctly, we can tackle the pandemic.

If we practice environmental strictures, we can have water.

If we evacuate, we can save ourselves from wild fires and hurricanes.

If we pull together, we can help 350 Afghan families, soon arriving in Buffalo as their new home.

Just like our ancestral stories, we too are faced with life and death situations.

The angel had to tell Hagar two different times to open her eyes to see the well. Abraham had to be called *twice* by the angel before he paid attention to the ram.

We must open our eyes and ears. We must tip the scales, so we are written in the Book of Life.

May you have a healthy, happy, and sweet New Year.

Shanah Tova!