

Embracing the Stranger: a sermon for Rosh Hashanah morning

I recall sharing with you a year or two ago that the Torah portion that we read out here on Rosh Hashanah morning is not actually the portion traditionally assigned to this day. In much of the Jewish world, Rosh Hashanah is observed for two days. The unforgettable story of the binding of Isaac is reserved for the second day. The first day's reading is the previous chapter of Genesis. It is a happy story, because it tells of the miraculous birth of a son to Abraham and Sarah when they are already 100 and 90 years old. The whole event is so hilarious that they decide to name the baby Yitzhak, meaning laughter. This episode ties in nicely with the haftarah reading, in which Hannah gives birth to the son for whom she has longed. But the traditional Torah reading is a sad story as well. Abraham already has an older son Ishmael, borne to him by his servant Hagar. Sarah determines that her son should not have to divide his inheritance with the son of a servant, and she demands that Abraham expel the mother and son from his household. God assures the worried Abraham that no harm will befall his son, and so Abraham agrees to Sarah's request. For a while, it's touch and go; Hagar and Ishmael quickly drink through the water that Abraham has provided them, and it looks like they're going to die of thirst. But then an angel opens Hagar's eyes and she finds a well of water. Ishmael grows up to father his own people, and both he and Isaac bury their father Abraham when he dies.

Commentators are struck by the name "Hagar." It means "the stranger." Hagar is a stranger in the land of Canaan. She is a native of Egypt, and so Canaan is as foreign to her as it is to Abraham. In this story, she is cast in the role of a stranger within Abraham's family as well. She is by far the most vulnerable person in his household. This is not the only story in which she is mistreated. When she first learns that she is pregnant with Ishmael, her infertile mistress Sarah makes her life so miserable that she runs away. An angel appears to her and consoles her that everything will be okay, and that it will be worth her while to submit to her mistress' harsh treatment. She returns, only to be cast out again years later. When Sarah orders her to leave, she has no legal or familial recourse. She is, essentially, the original stranger in the Torah, and very few characters are treated worse.

Many of you will have learned that the command not to mistreat the stranger is the most repeated mitzvah in the whole Torah. The general consensus is that this *mitzvah* appears as many times as it does to emphasize its importance for the Jewish people. But I wonder if the authors of the Torah have a different motivation: perhaps they repeat this *mitzvah* many times because they appreciate how difficult it is to fulfill. Human beings have at our core a basic suspicion of those who are different from us. We seek out like-minded people in our lives: those who dress the same, who talk the same, who believe the same, who act the same. Think of someone like Hagar, employed as a servant, clothed in Egyptian garb, speaking a foreign language, holding on to the beliefs of her childhood. She is the consummate outsider in her adopted family, a status that cannot be erased even when she gives birth to Abraham's first-born son.

As I have already noted, Abraham and Sarah are themselves strangers in the land of Canaan. When Sarah dies years later, Abraham approaches the local Hittite population to purchase a burial plot for his wife and declares, "I am an alien among your people." He then agrees to pay an exorbitant price for a modest piece of land, clearing disclosing the vulnerable position in which he finds himself despite the

honour accorded to him by the Hittites. We would hope that he himself might appreciate what it must be like for Hagar, whose indentured status makes her even more defenceless.

It is not difficult to imagine what impact this treatment has on Hagar. After raising Ishmael to adulthood, she vanishes from the story. She never again interacts with Abraham or Sarah, two people who were so significant in her life. Hopefully, life is kind to her; after all, her son becomes the head of a mighty tribe, so he should have the means to look after his mother.

What is harder to know is how these events affect Abraham and Sarah. We do not hear from Sarah again. The next mention of her is two chapters later, when the text speaks of her death at the age of 127. Is she haunted by guilt? Does she sleep with a clear conscience? The Torah does not tell us. Abraham, of course, is quite active in the following chapters. In Genesis chapter 21, he banishes his elder son Ishmael from his household. In chapter 22, God calls upon him to sacrifice his younger son Isaac. Commentators note that when God gives Abraham his instructions, God says, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love--Isaac." But doesn't Abraham have two sons? Well, not anymore, not really. Although Ishmael still lives, Abraham will never see him again. Abraham does not argue with God's draconian request to kill his only remaining son, but rather hurries to carry out God's will. What is going through his mind? Is this a moment when he perhaps feels that the crime he committed against his older son has come back to haunt him? Having sent Ishmael and Hagar into the wilderness to almost certain death, should he argue when God now demands that he relinquish his younger son as well?

Many faith traditions, as well as schools of psychology, understand that our actions have consequences both predictable and unforeseen. Hindus speak of *karma*, the idea that our sinful actions follow us, not only in this lifetime but in lives to come. Freudian analysis understands that our past misdeeds hide themselves deep in our unconscious mind, seeping out in ways that may lead to even more pain for ourselves and others. As a child, I was transfixed by a story my father read me of the miraculous deeds of the founding rabbi of Hassidic Judaism the Baal Shem Tov. A man named Reb Schmerl found a method by which he could dump all of his sins into the lake near his home. Year after year, he carried his sins to the water and dropped them in. Until the lake itself came to life, rose up, and attempted to steal away the soul of Reb Schmerl's beloved son as repayment. It was only the intervention of the Baal Shem Tov that saved him. Despite his best efforts, Reb Schmerl learned that he could not escape from his sins.

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Four thousand years after Abraham, the whole of Australia is deciding day by day how to treat the strangers reaching our shores. Like Hagar, these refugees have very little in common with us. Most come from countries that have been torn apart by war, and thankfully war for most of us is an unknown experience. For the most part, they practice Islam, a faith which is treated with great suspicion by many who fear its most fanatical adherents. While they may not have grown up in poor families, they have been rendered poor by the circumstances of recent years and arrive with little more than the shirts on their backs. Their skin is a different colour than ours, and they speak different languages. Our very human inclination is to classify them as "other" than us.

Unfortunately, leaders of our major political parties have contributed to this process of othering by using the language of border security and threat when speaking of asylum seekers. Australia's increasingly hard line policies in dealing with refugees have been condemned both within and without the country. It was striking to me that within days of the announcement of the PNG solution, the Orthodox rabbinic organisations of both Victoria and New South Wales, not known for their political activism, had strongly denounced the policy change. As did the Catholic Bishops, the Council of Churches, and just about every non-governmental organisation within Australia.

By now, many of us are accustomed to ignoring stories of what happens to asylum seekers once they are placed in indefinite detention. They are out of sight, and therefore out of mind. But they are suffering. Those who work on Christmas Island, Manus Island and Nauru repeatedly speak of both children and adults deteriorating into depression and even psychosis, cutting themselves to relieve their emotional suffering, and attempting suicide. Few of us are prepared to allow our minds to wander into their world and wonder: how would we live each day knowing that we might spend years locked in a prison with little or no hope for the future? And what of those who have now been sent to Papua New Guinea, presumably for the rest of their lives? What are their thoughts? What do they tell their children?

And what do we tell our children? What language, what arguments can we muster to justify these policies to the next generation? What lessons will they draw from this chapter in our history? How will our treatment of asylum seekers shape policy and attitude in the decades to come?

For some reason, for months now, whenever the asylum seeker issue surfaces, I am reminded of the words of Israel's prime minister Golda Meir, spoken years ago in a land far away about a wholly different issue. She said, "We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children, but we can't forgive them for forcing us to kill their children." Embodied in her wise words is the idea that causing suffering to other human beings leaves a trace on our souls. I believe that includes those of us who stand passively by and allow it to happen. I worry not only for the thousands of asylum seekers currently trapped in a nightmare of Australian detention, but for the millions of us who are gradually acclimating to this reality as normal and acceptable.

Hagar, the original stranger, is mistreated by her masters, then is thrown out along with her young son when their presence becomes inconvenient. It is only after the Jewish people as a whole experience several hundred years of slavery that they are finally able to internalise how difficult it is for others who are strangers in their midst. But even then, we see the text of the Torah reminding them again and again not to mistreat the stranger. How easy it must be to forget! Most poignantly, the Torah states, "You shall not mistreat a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." We know the heart of a stranger, for we have been strangers ourselves. We know what it is like to be made to feel unwelcome for no other reason than because of who we are. We know what it is like to be refused entry into a country because we have the wrong papers, or no papers, or because the quota has been filled, or for no reason at all. We even know what it is like to have our boats turned back, to be sent back to certain death. We know the heart of a stranger.

“On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: who shall live and who shall die.” As this new year begins, I pray that this year we will choose to embrace life, not only for ourselves and for those we love, but for those we do not know. So many in our world have known little more than death. Their experiences have broken them; they are in need of healing. Will we open our hearts to them, or will we turn our backs, insist the problem isn’t ours? Will we choose life in the year to come? Shana tova.