

SERMON FOR ROSH HASHANAH DAY 2 (September 26, 2014) by Aviva Goldberg

I have often wondered why it is that on Rosh Hashanah we read two narratives from the book of Genesis, both which are quite complex and both which are truly awful in all meanings of this word.

The narrative, read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is the story of Sara, Abraham, of Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael. Sara who was desperate for a child and then scoffed when informed she would have one at the age of 90 – and then called him YITZCHAK because God made Laughter for me – and Hagar, Abraham’s first wife who bore him a son, named Yishmael meaning God hears – Sara who perhaps because of insecurity, perhaps because of jealousy, demands that her husband take Hagar and Yishmael away from their home. Abraham who follows his wife’s directive and takes Hagar and their son Yishmael and abandons them in the wilderness of Beer Sheva with only a touch of bread and a skin of water –Hagar who desperate fearful that her son would die of thirst, calls out to God and as the narrative relates, ‘God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.’

And today’s narrative - Abraham who follows what he understands to be the voice of God and takes his son Isaac into the land of Moriah and offers him as a burnt offering to the Divine. Isaac who when he realizes that he is to be the sacrifice

silently acquiesces to the actions of his father allowing Abraham to place him on an altar, tie him on top of a pyre of wood, and then knife in hand prepare to sacrifice him. Abraham who only stops his action when a Messenger of God from heaven calls out to him and prevents him from slaughtering his son.

What's with these people? Are they insane? Some would say these are the stories of our forebears – stories of their faith and their hope and of a God who hears them and attends to their needs.

In contrast I look at these narratives purposely chosen by our sages to be read on these the most important days of our Jewish year and see not heroes but mortals – desperate, angry, flawed – human beings consumed with jealousy and fear, full of misunderstanding, of resentment, of pain – people very much like us today.

And this is why I think we read these stories every year, at a time where we are asked to be responsive to the needs of others, reflective of our failings, our own dis-ease.

Yesterday, Simone wove a wonderful speech about her experience of being a Jew and her relationship to the High Holy days. And one of the things she spoke of was her gift of synesthesia – in her case it is a particular form of synesthesia where she tastes words and names. For some it is the ability to hear colours and see sounds, or

to see music on a "screen" in front of their faces, or perceive words and numbers as having shapes and colours and on and on. When I was thinking about today's sermon I thought about synesthesia and a most wonderful little book I read this past summer, called *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* by Aimee Bender– it is the story of a nine year old girl Rose Edelstein who on the eve of her ninth birthday, bites into her favourite cake, her mother's homemade lemon-chocolate cake and discovers that she has an extraordinary gift: she can taste her mother's emotions in each slice and each bite. Soon with every taste of every kind of food, Rose becomes privy to the secret knowledge that most families, most of us keep hidden.

As you might expect this gift became a curse for her and eating anything became a burden for in doing so she knew everything about the maker of the food. But in thinking about this novel, I wondered how it would it be if we could truly understand and feel what others feel. Would Abraham have listened to Sara would he not have understood her pain and jealousy – would Abraham have abandoned Hagar, would he not have felt the fear and despair she felt. Would Sara have hated Hagar – would she not have tried to understand her own emotions and the emotional state of Hagar the concubine of Abraham, the woman pushed out of his life by a new son? Would Isaac not have felt the zealous faith of Abraham and understanding what was happening stop his father and reason with him?

And if we – all of us could truly hear the emotions hidden within our fellow human beings would we not behave differently. Would we not taste their fears and insecurities, hear their sorrow and despair, touch their essence and realize that we are all one?

A component of today's service, a theme we have integrated into the second day of Rosh Hashanah is that of healing. Is that not the healing we all crave? A healing wherein we can encounter and express our vulnerabilities, our shortcomings, our worries and failures to ourselves and to others. And have them recognized – be literally recognized - be known again.

Some believe that prayer effects a cure a healing – And though in our service today we have many modes of prayer I would submit that in fact for me, to pray for something is not really what it is all about – it is not to use an image of the late Reb Zalman a vending machine experience where you put in prayer and get out what you prayed for. Rather it is as he wrote a flight path experience – an experience of transportation wherein you are transported even if only for a second or two into another place. A place where you do find relief if only briefly.

Both of the Torah portions yesterdays and todays' talk of prayer. Each of the characters who play such important roles within these narratives call out to the Divine for help and healing and hear a Divine response.

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits writes that "Prayer is a cry – not a memo or a list of things that we want, but a cry of our most needful needs."

Similarly, our sages suggest that the sound of the shofar is actually a crying out – a sound of the desperation of Sara, and I would say of Hagar of Yishmael and of Isaac and yes of misguided Abraham who just couldn't hear and just couldn't understand.

And I would suggest that in this crying out for healing we acknowledge our anger and our frustration at that which we sometimes cannot change. There are many things in life which we are impotent to alter. Chronic illness, mental and emotional disorders, debilitating disease, accidents and death – many of us ask where is God in all of this? And why me? Why my mother, my father, my brother, my lover?

I would suggest that though we ask these questions – there is a time to let them go.

There is a lovely little anecdote I would like to share with you that comes from a book by Alice Hoffman – it is about a doctor who visits a young girl who had stopped talking after witnessing a horrible accident.

Ever hear of the Third Angel, the doctor asked her. People say, said the doctor, that there's the Angel of life and the Angel of Death, but there is another one too. The one who walks among us. She is nothing fierce or terrible or filled with light. She is like us, sometimes we can't even tell her apart. Sometimes she makes mistakes. Sometimes we are the ones who try to save her. She's there, here to show us who we are.

I am not sure really where to go now with this. A good friend of mine a Rabbi once said to me, "Aviva, don't worry about your sermons, every rabbi really only has one sermon in them, one story to tell, one lesson, that they repeat in one way or another each and every year."

So what is mine? Something, that is I think, for me at least, the most difficult part of life — how can we be healed – how do we stop our alienation, our fears, our disappointments, our dis-ease – by seeing the other, by holding each other, by opening our inner selves, by revealing what we fear most, by empathizing with one another and yes by truly living LOVE.