

Rosh Hashanah Day 1: Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story: RBG Edition z''l

Women's stories and positions are not privileged in the Torah, yet the biblical readings for today, Rosh Hashanah, one of the most important days of the Jewish calendar, are centered on three women: Sarah, Hagar, and Hannah. (Hagar less so, being a woman who was not part of the dominant culture in the storyline.)

Much detail isn't given, but there is enough to want more, and to offer important lessons for today.

Let's go back to some of the text. When Sarah wants to banish Hagar and Ishmael (in the verses directly following the ones chanted this morning), Abraham is quite distressed. God tells Abraham "**shma b'kolah**" – listen to **her**. Listen to the woman. This is quite something, especially as we do not have any further record of Sarah speaking **at all** in the biblical narrative....

I see this as invitation and a recognition to seek beyond the normative text.

Rashi interprets shma b'kolah as Sarah being a stronger prophet than Abraham... שמע בקולה HEARKEN UNTO HER VOICE — we may infer that Abraham was inferior to Sarah in respect of prophecy ([Exodus Rabbah 1:1](#)).

What, though, was Sarah prophesying? Was she prophesying that all would work out for Hagar and Ishmael? Or was she prophesying that one day we would recognize the power of stories and who gets to be in or out of them in terms of framing our understanding of history and ourselves?

What are the (non-normative) voices that are missing from our stories?

Shma b'kolah – listen to her voice.

The story that we read in the haftarah of Hannah is one that has become the model for **how** to pray in our tradition.

Hannah is a pilgrim at the sanctuary in Shilo, overseen by the High priest Eli. There she prays silently and desperately for a child. The High Priest scolds her, mistaking her heartfelt prayer for drunken ravings. "No, my lord," she replies. "I am a

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tormented woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to God.”

Shma b’kolah – listen to her voice.

Eli realizes he was wrong and blesses her. God answers Hannah’s prayer and she becomes the mother of the prophet Samuel, Shmuel, which means “God listened.”

The brilliant Broadway musical, *Hamilton*, if you haven’t seen it, is Lin-Manuel Miranda’s telling of the story of American Founding Father, Alexander Hamilton. Cast with mostly non-white actors as the Founding Fathers and other historical figures, Miranda describes the musical as being about "America then, as told by America now."

The finale of the show is particularly moving. While about how to preserve and continue Hamilton’s legacy after his death in a duel, it is a poignant reflection more broadly on historical memory and the power of narrative in history: literally, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story.” How we understand our past, whose stories we get to hear or remember or recount, has quite an impact on our present.

*Let me tell you what I wish I’d known
When I was young and dreamed of glory
You have no control:
[WASHINGTON AND COMPANY]
Who lives
Who dies
Who tells your story?*

Shma b’kolah – listen to her voice. Even if others may not be there yet.

Yesterday we lost a giant, a real tzaddik, when US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, aka the notorious RBG, died at 87-years-old from complications stemming from pancreatic cancer. Zichrona livracha. May her memory be a blessing.

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Justice Ginsburg was born in depression-era Brooklyn to Jewish immigrant parents. She completed her degree in 1954 at Cornell University and then went on to Harvard Law School and Columbia Law School.

Despite graduating from law school at the top of her class, firms would not hire her as she was a woman.

After working as researcher, she became a professor at Rutgers Law School and then at Columbia Law School. “As the director of the Women’s Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union in the 1970s, she brought a series of cases before the court that helped establish constitutional protections against sex discrimination. Her litigation strategy invited comparison to that of Justice Thurgood Marshall, who was the architect of the civil rights movement’s incremental legal attack on racial discrimination before he joined the court.” (Accessed at the time from: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/justice-ruth-bader-ginsburg-dies-at-87/ar-BB19bKf4?ocid=spartan-ntp-feeds>)

She was appointed the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit by President Jimmy Carter, and in 1993, President Bill Clinton named her to be an associate justice on the United States Supreme Court.

A feminist icon, Justice Ginsburg was a role model for millions, fighting for gender equality under the law both as an advocate and as judge. She was the first tenured woman professor at Columbia Law and ultimately the second woman on the United States Supreme Court. **Also a super-bubby, and AKA Notorious RBG.**

Listen to her voice - shma b’kolah – here is some of Justice Ginsburg in her own words:

- **1973 oral arguments in *Frontiero v. Richardson* (re: striking a law that treated military spouses differently in terms of benefits):**
- *Sex, like race, is a visible, immutable characteristic bearing no necessary relationship to ability.*
- *Sex, like race, has been made the basis for unjustified or at least unproved assumptions, concerning an individual’s potential to perform or to contribute to society...*

These distinctions have a common effect: They help keep woman in her place, a place inferior to that occupied by men in our society.

To conclude her powerful argument, RBG quoted Sarah Grimké: *"I ask no favor for my sex. All I ask of our brethren is that they take their feet off our necks."*

- **On Equal Marriage:** "All of the incentives, all of the benefits that marriage affords would still be available. So you're not taking away anything from heterosexual couples. They would have the very same incentive to marry, all the benefits that come with marriage that they do now."
— *From oral arguments on Obergefell v. Hodges, in which SCOTUS eventually recognized same-sex couples' right to marry*
- **On Holocaust and US and civil rights:** "I was fortunate to be a child, a Jewish child, safely in America during the Holocaust. Our nation learned from Hitler's racism and, in time, embarked on a mission to end law-sanctioned discrimination in our own country. In the aftermath of World War II, in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, in the burgeoning Women's Rights movement of the 1970s, "We the People" expanded to include all of humankind, to embrace all the people of this great nation. Our motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, of many one, signals our appreciation that we are the richer for the religious, ethnic, and racial diversity of our citizens." - 2004 Holocaust Day of Remembrance speech at The Holocaust Memorial Museum
- **On the work that must be done, particularly since the 2016 US federal election:** "Yet what greater defeat could we suffer than to come to resemble the forces we oppose in their disrespect for human dignity?" - *My Own Words, 2016*
- **On Staying Optimistic (<https://news.uchicago.edu/podcasts/big-brains/supreme-court-justice-ruth-bader-ginsburg-polarization-discrimination>) :** *RUTH BADER GINSBURG: What keeps me optimistic, as I said, is the changes that I have seen. I mean, even think of race discrimination. World War II we were fighting a war against the most odious race discrimination. And yet, our own troops until the very end of the war were rigidly separated by race. I think World War II is what hastened*

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the decision in Brown v. Board of Education. So I have seen enormous changes and that's what makes me optimistic for the future.

The past few years especially have shown us how much more work we must do.

Listen to her voice - shma b'kolah – powerful lesson of Torah – Justice Ginsburg modeled the import of listening particularly to those most marginalized to transform society for the better.

When we think about Canada, and about the work that must be done regarding Indigenous reconciliation, dismantling anti-Black and Indigenous racism, we too must heed the call – **shma b'kolah** – listen to her voice. Listen to the stories, the history, the everything.

We must listen. And we must act.

This, I believe, is the **tikkun klali**, the communal repair/ healing that is needed and that I pray is happening right now. We have to do a whole lot of listening.

Communal healing comes from being able to shine light on our diverse narratives and learn from them and grow from them... Only with stories, and with active and empathic listening, can we then really undo “isms” and “obias” of our institutions (racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, etc.), and build a more inclusive and just community and society, welcoming and free of discrimination, systemic or otherwise.

Shma b'kolah – Hagar, Sarah and Hannah's stories are all difficult and multifaceted, as well as rich and meaningful. The fact that elements of their stories have been canonized and highlighted on Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, the time of rebirth and renewal, of reconciliation and healing, teaches what we must do, now.

Who lives, who dies, who tells your story? Hagar, Sarah, Hannah, Notorious RBG, have all left us with important and meaningful legacies. We cannot lose them.

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We must make sure the stories get told, and we must be sure to listen to the voices. And we must transform our communities and our society for the better. May Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's memory forever be for a blessing.

Shanah Tovah.