

THE POWER OF LISTENING

the imperative of empathy for teshuvah and the high holy days

Congregation B'nai B'rith

August 26, 2020

Blessing for Studying Torah

(Torah, in its broadest sense, refers to all Jewish teachings/texts)

**Barukh atah Adonai
Eloheinu melekh ha'olam
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah.**

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,

אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו

וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe,
who has made us holy with commandments,
and commanded us to engage with* the words of Torah.*

*to engage with, to busy ourselves with, to soak ourselves in...



Congregation B'nai B'rith

WHAT'S THE FIRST PIECE OF JEWISH LITURGY YOU LEARNED?

Deuteronomy 6:4

(4) Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God,
the LORD alone.

דברים ו':ד'

(ד) שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

Sh'ma: LISTEN



What Torah portion do we read on Rosh Hashanah?

Traditionally:

RH day 1 - Sarah & Hagar (*Bereishit*/Genesis ch 21)

RH day 2 – Akeidat Yitzchak (*Bereishit*/Genesis ch 22)

Summary of Genesis 16-20, leading up to RH readings:

- Abraham and Sarah are childless, and therefore unable to fulfill the covenant
- Sarah suggests that her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, bear a child with Abraham.
- Hagar becomes pregnant, and looks down on the infertile Sarah.
- In her pain, Sarah becomes abusive to Hagar.
- The abuse becomes intolerable; Hagar runs away, and is visited by a messenger of G-d.
- The messenger sends Hagar back to Sarah, promising that she “will become the mother of a great nation.” Hagar calls G-d *El Ro'i* – “You are the God who saw me”.
- Hagar returns, and gives birth to Abraham’s son, Ishmael.
- Messengers visit Sarah and Abraham and tell them that Sarah will have a son.
- Abraham bargains with G-d to save Sodom and Gomorrah.
- Abraham and Sarah are in the land of Gerar. He tells King Abimelech that Sarah is his sister (to protect himself.) Abimelech takes Sarah – but before he can get her in his bed, God intervenes and tells the king that Abe & Sarah are, in fact, married. Abimelech is horrified, and returns Sarah to Abraham – along with lots of loot.

Traditional Torah reading for first day of Rosh Hashanah:


Genesis 21:1-20

(1) The LORD took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. (2) Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken. (3) Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac. (4) And when his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded him. (5) Now Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. (6) Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me." (7) And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham That Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age." (8) The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. (9) Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. (10) She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." (11) The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. (12) But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. (13) As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed." (14) Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. (15) When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, (16) and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears. (17) God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. (18) Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him." (19) Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink. (20) God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman.

דָּם אִזּוּ וְיִי דֶר מַלְאָךְ קֹנֵמֵט צוּ חָגֵר



"This is the angel coming to Hagar." Woodcut illustration from *Tsene-rene* (Lvov: Verlag v. B. L. N., 1872). (Gross Family Collection)


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- Gut response to Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in this story?
 - Who has been wronged? Who is “at fault”?


LET'S LOOK AT THE TEXT AGAIN...

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לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרְשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי
לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן־הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנֵי
עַם־יִצְחָק: (יא) וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינָיו
אֲבָרָהָם עַל אֹנֶת בָּנוֹ: (יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים
אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֶל־יִרְעֶה בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל־הַנְּעִר
וְעַל־אִמָּתְךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה
שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בִי־צִחָק יִקְרָא לָהּ זָרַע: (יג)
וְגַם אֶת־בֶּן־הָאִמָּה לְגֹוי אֲשִׁימְנוּ כִּי זָרַעָהּ
הִוא: (יד) וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אֲבָרָהָם | בְּבֶקֶר

Shema b'kolah – lit. LISTEN TO HER VOICE

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- What's the difference between **Do as she says** and **Listen to her voice** ?
 - What else might G-d have meant when telling Abraham, *"Sh'ma b'kolah"*?
 - Is this another test for Abraham? If so, did he pass?



So: how does this story speak to us at
Rosh Hashanah, and as preparation
for Yom Kippur?



LISTENING \Rightarrow **EMPATHY**

Empathy \Rightarrow Teshuvah

Where are the failures of listening and empathy in this story?

- ☐ Abe?
- ☐ Sarah?
- ☐ Hagar?
- ☐ God?

ABRAHAM'S EMPATHY FAILURES

- Doesn't recognize Sarah's distress at her childlessness; doesn't offer reassurance, unlike Elkanah, Hannah's husband (who told her their relationship was worthwhile even without children); doesn't pray on her behalf, unlike his son Isaac (who asks God to help Rebecca's conceive)
- Doesn't consider Sarah's feelings, and lets her nearly get raped by a pharaoh and a king in order to protect himself
- Doesn't notice Sarah's anguish when she "gives" him her servant Hagar, and when Hagar becomes pregnant and Sarah feels despised
- Doesn't "listen to her voice", and instead just sends Hagar & Ishmael away
- Doesn't consider Hagar's feelings
- Doesn't listen carefully when G-d says, "Take your son, your only one, Isaac" (—earlier G-d had confirmed that Ishmael was fully Abraham's son)
- Doesn't consider Isaac's feelings during the akeidah episode!



ABRAHAM'S LISTENING & EMPATHY SUCCESSES

- Bargains with G-d to save the people of Sodom & Gomorrah
- Listens and heeds the voice of the angel who says, "Don't kill the boy!"
 - this is Abraham's teshuvah moment!

SARAH'S EMPATHY FAILURES

- Doesn't consider Hagar's feelings about
 - Being offered up as a surrogate womb to Abraham
 - Having a son who might be taken from her and considered Sarah's son
- Takes out her grief and anxiety on Hagar
- Doesn't consider Hagar & Ishmael's welfare

Does Sarah have an empathy/ teshuvah moment?

HAGAR'S EMPATHY FAILURE:

- Doesn't [appear to] consider Sarah's feelings about her being pregnant with Abraham's child
- In the desert, in her anguish sits away from Ishmael and cries about his impending death, rather than hold and comfort him

HAGAR'S LISTENING/EMPATHY/ TESHUVAH MOMENT:

- Listens to G-d & reaches out to her son; fills her water bottle and gives it to Ishmael first.



WHAT ABOUT GOD?

Does God listen? Does God show empathy?

Where else does LISTENING play a part during Rosh Hashanah?

Hint:



Numbers 29:1

(1) In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded.

במדבר כ"ט:א'

(א) וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ
מִקְרָא-קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל-מְלָאכָת עֲבֹדָה
לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ יוֹם תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם:

ROSH HASHANAH = YOM TERUAH

...but what's "Teruah"?

From Talmud Bavli Rosh HaShanah 33b:

As it is written: “It is a day of sounding [terua] the shofar to you” (Numbers 29:1), **and we translate** this verse in Aramaic as: **It is a day of yevava to you. And** to define a *yevava*, the Gemara quotes a verse that **is written about the mother of Sisera: “Through the window she looked forth and wailed [vateyabev], the mother of Sisera”** (Judges 5:28). One **Sage**, the *tanna* of the *baraita*, **holds** that this means **moanings**, broken sighs, as in the blasts called *shevarim*. **And** one **Sage**, the *tanna* of the *mishna*, **holds** that it means **whimpers**, as in the short blasts called *teruot*.

Rosh Hashanah is a day of *yevava*.

--In the *tanach*: *yevava* occurs in the story of Yael killing Sisera and saving the Jews.

Thus: *Yevava* is the cry of the mother of our enemy when she realizes her son might be dead.

SO: We are commanded to hear the *terua*, to listen to the *yevava*, to listen to the cry of our enemy and let it break through to us.

The shofar blast, then, is meant to induce empathy, to stir us to listen, as a stepping stone to *teshuva*.

from "Hearken to Her Voice: Empathy as Teshuva",
by Marsha Pravder Mirken in
Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days

“We see that the primary obstacle to *teshuva* is the failure to pay attention to our own experience and to the experience of others. During Hagar's pregnancy, Sarah could not resonate with Hagar's experience of wanting a child and yet fearing his loss. When Sarah told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael, he could not hear the pain, loneliness, and fear behind her words. Similarly, had Abraham paid attention and truly listened for the voice of God, he could not have bound his son.

...

Empathy is, in some ways, a halt to the action. It is valuing another person enough to listen and hear her voice, not her voice as a mirror of our own. Empathy is the active ingredient of *teshuva*, propelling us to turn in a direction that is closer to ourselves, our loved ones, and God.

On Rosh Hashana we ask God to be empathic toward us, even though empathy was often so lacking in ourselves and in our foreparents ...*teshuva* is possible, if only we can commit ourselves to being more fully empathic human beings.”



So how do we incorporate this into our teshuvah?

Listening beneath the words of...

others (those close to us, AND our adversaries)

ourselves (what are the unexpressed feelings beneath our words?)

God?

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RESOURCES FOR TAKING YOUR LISTENING TO THE NEXT LEVEL:

- Depolarizing Within (Braver Angels workshop)
 - <https://braverangels.org/online/online-depolarizing-within-workshop/>
- Non-violent communication
 - <https://www.cnvc.org/learn-nvc/what-is-nvc>
 - <https://thehappywanderersclub.com/feelingsandneeds/>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sjA90hvnQ0>

Shanah Tovah!

Happy Listening!

