

Rabbi Rebecca Richman

Rosh Hashanah Day 1

Introduction to Torah Reading (Vayera - Genesis 21:1-34)

Openness to the Unexpected

The Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah comes from the book of Bereshit (Genesis) from *parashat Vayera*. The *parasha* opens with G!d appearing to Abraham, who is sitting at the entrance of his tent after his circumcision.

The *parasha* is filled with situations when biblical characters come to see or encounter the unexpected -- an unexpected visitor, an unexpected child, an unexpected source of water.

Sarah is barren. When G!d first promises that Sarah will bear a child, Sarah laughs, unable to imagine being intimate with her husband and bearing a child in her elderly years.

In the section of the *parasha* that we read each year on Rosh Hashanah (Genesis 21:1-34, G!d recalls the promise of a child to Sarah and Abraham. Despite Sarah's laughter and doubt, she does, in fact, bear a child - Isaac is born.

The Torah reading also tells the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael. While Sarah was barren, Hagar bore Abraham a son - so his firstborn son was Ishmael, not Isaac.

Once Sarah has a child, she comes jealous and fearful of her son, Isaac, playing with Hagar's son, Ishmael. After watching them play together, one day, Sarah tells Abraham to cast out and send away Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's first born son. A midrash suggests that sending away his firstborn son was the hardest of Abraham's tasks.¹ Nonetheless, G!d tells Abraham to listen to Sarah.

Not long after beginning their journey, Hagar and Ishmael run out of water. Hagar cannot bear to watch her child die from thirst, withering away in the wilderness of Be'er Shava. Hagar and her son both cry out, wailing out of fear and desperation.

An angel of G!d comes to reassure Hagar that a great nation will come of her son, and then G!d opens Hagar's eyes. Before her, there is a well of water - a life saver. Was it there all along?

¹ Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 30

~

The Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah presents two stories of the unfathomable - Sarah's pregnancy and Hagar's sustenance.

Sarah's story reminds us that even our most distant seeming hopes and imaginations can in fact be actualized. Let us dream, Sarah teaches us.

Hagar's story encourages us to take the time we need to weep our grievances while also remaining open to noticing the resources and possibilities that are around us. Let us hold out hope for sustenance, Hagar teaches us.

Together, these women teach us to stay open to the seemingly impossible.

~

In this new year, may we be blessed with unexpected, life-sustaining gifts and opportunities.