

D'var Rosh Hoshanah 2022

The Radak, Rabbi David Kimki, who lived in the 12th-13th centuries had this to say about Hagar, Sarai and Abram: **“This story was written to teach people to acquire good character traits and avoid negative ones.”** It might be reasonable to say that the entire book of Genesis was written with that in mind.

When I thought about what I wanted to speak about for this D'var, Hagar kept coming to mind. While the Rosh Hoshanah reading begins with Genesis 21 and the birth of Isaac, I will begin my talk reviewing Genesis 16 when we first meet Hagar.

As we enter this story, Hagar is Sarai's handmaiden and slave. Sarai is wealthy, privileged, married but barren and past the age of childbearing. Hagar, is single, poor, enslaved and fertile. There are a number of midrashim explaining different ways

Hagar became Sarai's handmaiden and slave but that is for another time.

Now for a summary of the story:

Since Sarai is past childbearing age, she gives Hagar to Abram as a second wife for Hagar serves as a surrogate. In Genesis 16:2a we read **“And Sarai said to Abram, Because God has prevented me from bearing children, go to my maid.**

Perhaps I will be built up from her.” Phyllis Tribble points out in her book Text of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives, the entire time Sarai is arranging for Hagar to be her surrogate, Sarai never sees her, she never mentions Hagar by name. When we do not acknowledge someone with a name it is a form of dehumanizing them.

Hagar also has no voice and Abram acquiesces to whatever Sarai wants. From the text, it does not sound like Sarai cares so much about the actual child as much as she cares about her own status. The child is for Abram.

In biblical times barrenness diminished one's social position and overall status; a woman is nothing without children. Some commentators say barrenness was a direct punishment by God for some bad behavior.

Hagar conceives and once she realizes she is pregnant, she loses respect for Sarai. As a pregnant woman, Hagar has changed the power dynamic which Sarai set up when she gave Hagar to Abram. Even though she is still a slave, some commentators suggest that Hagar thinks she will become wife #1. Sarai does not want this competition.

Because of Hagar's behavior, Sarai treats her harshly. Commentators suggest she was subjected to both physical and psychological abuse so much so that Hagar runs away. Midrash also states that after Hagar treated Sarai badly, she initially miscarried. In chapter 16:7b-7a we read:

And Sarai afflicted her. So she fled from her. But the messenger of the Lord found her.

We know from the text that Hagar fled to the wilderness toward Egypt. There was water. Hagar does not cry out to God; nonetheless we read that a messenger of God found her by the water in the wilderness. This the first person in the Bible visited by a messenger of God. Hagar is immediately addressed by her relationship to Sarai “Hagar, maid of Sarai” yet it is the first time Hagar is spoken to by her name. As Tribble points out- she is finally seen but still it is tempered by being called “maid of Sarai” She is seen in relation to the one who has power over her. At the same time Tribble suggests **“to be of Sarai is to be of the Lord”**.

This divine presence asks Hagar where she has come from and where she is going. This is the first time Hagar speaks and she only answers the first question **“From the face of Sarai my mistress I am fleeing.”**

The Divine Presence tells her “**Return to your mistress and suffer affliction under her hand**” At first what might look like Hagar running into freedom in the wilderness is quickly dispelled because the Lord finds her and sends her back to Sarai. She is sent back because Sarah owns her, Hagar is not really free.

Before she returns, she is told “**I will so greatly multiply your descendants numbered for multitude.**” All the patriarchs hear this, but Hagar is the only woman to be told this. She is then told she is pregnant. If the midrash is right, the angel’s announcement that Hagar will give birth is an announcement that she will get pregnant again when she returns to Sarai and Abram. That she will bear a son who is to be called Ishmael, and that he will be wild, a wanderer and a loner. Ishmael means whose voice God would hear.

After the messenger finishes speaking, Hagar speaks to this messenger. She gives God a name

El Roi, which can be interpreted as God sees and God of my seeing.

In the New York Times on Thurs, Sept 14, there was an obituary written about Gwendolyn Midlo Hall who died at the age of 93. Dr Hall was a professor at Rutgers University but it was only at the end of her career and after her retirement that she focused on her real passion project; documenting the names of enslaved Africans brought to Louisiana in the 18th century. While conducting research in a rural courthouse in southern Louisiana, she discovered a record book in which French colonial notaries had recorded in precise detail the identities of thousands of enslaved Africans brought to Louisiana in the 18th century.

Included in these record books were peoples' names, the ships they arrived on, their skills, and their personality traits. She found additional slave records in Madrid and Paris. In all she created a database with 107,000 names. In 1992 she published the book "Africans in Colonial Louisiana:

The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century.”

In a 2002 NY Times interview, Dr Hall said **“I’m hoping this database will help smooth the path for others to make Africans concrete as human beings,”** In other words, she wanted to humanize these slaves through naming them.

History has taught us that slavery dehumanizes the person and can scar them for life. There are many, many examples of this throughout history including the slaves brought to the US centuries before the Civil War.

This past spring I went to Alabama with a friend. In one city we stayed in a B & B built in 1850 by the current owner’s great-great grandfather. The house survived the Civil War and currently includes original furniture and layout. It is stunning. It was also a plantation with slaves. As the current owner told us, the slaves were treated very well, they had a new house every few years, clothes, school and could go

to church. She then went on to inform us that the Civil War was not only about slavery. The South was tired of sending tax money to the North-at which point my friend reminded our host that the reason the South had so much money was because they had free labor in the form of slaves. Needless to say, there was dead silence for a few moments. I can appreciate how complicated it is to have slave owning relatives and to live in a house with that legacy. Yet it did feel uncomfortable when she denied that the Civil War was only about slavery and never acknowledged that it was horrible her family owned slaves.

The Equal Justice Institute in Montgomery is one of those locations which I think should be mandatory to visit. This multimedia immersive experience begins as soon as you enter the building, where you encounter the history of slavery. The museum ends in a room dedicated to understanding mass incarceration. The EJI is situated on a site where enslaved Black people were forced to labor in bondage. In the room about mass incarceration, you

sit at these tables like you do in prison when visiting. On the other side is a hologram of an actual current or former prisoner and when you lift the phone, their face shows up on a screen and you hear their voice and they tell you their story. There is no way to not see them. It is heartbreaking and necessary. Growth never comes when we stay comfortable.

You might be familiar with the Great Migration when more than 6 million Black and Brown people moved out of the South between 1910-1970 or as some say- were run out of the South due to lynchings, lack of jobs, etc. This was not something I ever learned about in history class. But I did learn quite a lot as it was so brilliantly documented by Isabel Wilkerson in The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration. While Black and Brown people moved out of the South, poverty and racism followed them. Black and Brown people could only live in certain areas due to red lining, no one would sell them homes in white neighborhoods or if they did buy one, the white people moved out of the neighborhood overnight. Jobs were hard to come by,

promotions rare, high crime, drugs. I am likely not telling you anything you do not already know.

We see remnants of slavery everywhere- it is a matter of opening our eyes and seeing. As Jews we have our own internalized trauma from generations of pogroms, enslavement, antisemitism, which we know is only getting worse. In this country we were not brought here as slaves, nor were we lynched like the 4084 documented racial terror lynchings in twelve Southern states between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and 1950.

As noted earlier, when Hagar flees into the wilderness, she was not going to get far because God's messenger found her and told her to return. She was never really free She went back to Sarai. During slavery in this country, unless a slave followed the underground railroad, there was nowhere to go and if you did run away the punishment upon getting caught was horrible. As a papercut artist, I found it extraordinarily interesting that it was not unusual for slave owners to have

silhouettes cut of their slaves so if they did run away, the slave owners would post copies of the silhouette in the hopes of a capture.

In his book Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know, Adam Grant explores what it means to review our beliefs in a process he calls re-thinking. There may have been decisions we made in the past that seemed right for the time but are not currently right.

For example, Rabbi Hayim Angel, in his article Sarah's Treatment Of Hagar (GENESIS 16): Morals, Messages, and Mesopotamia, points to Near Eastern documents discovered in the 19-20th century that have helped scholars understand some of the behaviors found in the Bible. One of the findings was a Mesopotamian Marriage Contract, c. 19th century BCE that explains the behavior of Abraham and Sarah. It stated that if a woman does not give birth within two years of getting married, she can buy a slave for her husband and after the slave gives birth, the slave can be disposed of. It also

underscores the legal rights of the time. Sarah was the owner of Hagar. When Hagar tried to run away, an angel of God appeared and told her to return. She did not have real freedom to run away.

Later Torah legislation was developed to help a runaway slave escape: In Deut. 23:16-17 we read: **“You shall not turn over to one’s master a slave who seeks refuge with you from the master. The Slave shall live with you in any place they may choose among the settlements in your midst, wherever they please; you must not ill- treat them”**.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Israelite enslavement in Egypt which eventually resulted in the complete prohibition against slavery.

In the past 600 years Jews were involved in the slave trades throughout the world, although slavery is unacceptable in Judaism today, the Torah explicitly talks about how to treat slaves. At the time the Torah was written or given, slavery was not

abolished. Today it is and this is an example of how Judaism has morally evolved for the better.

Slavery was normalized and still is in part of the world. and while it still exists, laws have changed to deem it unacceptable in many countries. While we no longer have slavery in this country, we still have a huge problem with the way Black and Brown people are treated. As discussed by author Michelle Alexander in her book “The New Jim Crow”, to quote the book’s description: **“The majority of black men in major urban areas are under correctional control or saddled with criminal records for life. Jim Crow laws were wiped off the books decades ago, but today an extraordinary percentage of the African American community is warehoused in prisons or trapped in a parallel social universe, denied basic civil and human rights—including the right to vote; the right to serve on juries; and the right to be free of legal discrimination in employment, housing, access to education and public benefits. Today, it is no longer socially**

permissible to use race explicitly as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. Yet as civil-rights-lawyer-turned-legal-scholar Michelle Alexander demonstrates, it is perfectly legal to discriminate against convicted criminals in nearly all the ways in which it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once labeled a felon, even for a minor drug crime, the old forms of discrimination are suddenly legal again. In her words, “we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.”

In studying this parsha, obviously my focus has been on Hagar as a slave and slavery in this country. It has also opened my eyes to how we normalize behaviors- racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, etc. and what it takes for us to get out of our box, which we may not even realize that we are in.

It is really important to see things from different perspectives. Adam Grant encourages us to Think again, to look around. Be aware of our surroundings. This increased awareness will help drive the possibility of a greater intentionality. We all play a role in the future of our society, of our lives and of our families on the macro and micro level. What we do and how we do it can make a real difference. The world is a big place and we are small but our actions really matter. If Radak is correct and the book of Genesis is about acquiring good character traits then today, right now, this Rosh Roshanah is the time Think again, be kinder, go out of your comfort zone to make friends or just talk with people who are different than you. Help eradicate injustice in this world. See others. And act with intention.

Chag Sameach.