

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5769
Sermon Given by Rabbi Paula

I was very close to my maternal grandparents. We lived across the street from them until I was five and I spent many hours in their Bronx apartment. They worked hard in their bakery and my grandfather took the subway to collect the money from several Laundromats he owned in various parts of NY. Leaving them back in NY when I moved to CA was difficult for me but I would call my grandmother every Friday afternoon while preparing the matzah ball soup for shabbos

My grandmother came to visit us a number of times but I can recall clearly the first time they came to Santa Cruz together. It was back in the 80's and they were staying at the Dream Inn on Westcliff Drive. Richard and I helped them schlep their bags to their ocean front room. It was a beautiful summer day. When we entered the room my grandfather, already in his early nineties opened the drapes and stood there looking out the window. Amazed at the sight he exclaimed, "Look Marian, we're like millionaires." He could not believe that he was able to afford to stay in such an incredible hotel. The truth was, he had enough money to stay in this hotel for a month if he chose to, but being an immigrant, who grew up in poverty, he could not believe that he had achieved such financial success. He had not readjusted to the fact that he actually owned property in New York valued at over a millions dollars. He was not in synch with his new reality.

As I got older, my grandparents and I argued a lot about politics. My grandmother said, "Why do you care about the world's problems. Don't you understand that Jews have to take care of Jews because

nobody else will? Why waste your time worrying about other people? She didn't understand why I cared about the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, how I thought Reaganomics was negatively impacting the poor, or for that matter, feminism and why I felt so strongly about it. I was a young woman growing up in a middle class Westchester family, trying to make sense of my privileged position. While my grandmother was still living with the horrors of anti-Semitism she and her parents had experienced back in Hungary.

My grandmother carried within her the experience of being a victim. And this projected an attitude, which, while understandable given her experience, was a limitation in her life as I see it. This perception of victim hood is very common to oppressed peoples. And it can appear on both an individual and a communal level. I have been thinking about this and wondering:

"Could it be that identifying as a victim may lead us to the inability to see situations clearly?" I want to tell you that this has been my personal experience. All of us have survived times when we have been victimized. Maybe when we were young and our parents divorced and we were caught in the middle. Or maybe in a job when our boss took his or her frustrations out on us. Or surviving sexual abuse. How have these circumstances held us back from discovering and acting from a place of power and truth?

The story we read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is about Hagar and Sarah. Hagar was the Egyptian maidservant of Abraham's barren wife, whose name was Sarah.

Sarah said to Abraham, “You see that God has prevented me from bearing children; go into my maid so that I might have children through her.” Abraham listened to Sarah’s voice and Hagar conceived. When Hagar got pregnant with Abraham’s child her mistress (Sarah) became unimportant in her eyes.

When Sarah saw this she became angry and said to Abraham, “May God see justice done between me and you!” Abraham succumbed to Sarah and told her; she’s your maid, deal with her however you see fit. Sarah then made Hagar’s life so miserable that Hagar ran away from her and Abraham.

Already this story breaks my heart but there’s more.

An angel of God found Hagar by a spring and said to her “Hagar, return to your mistress and submit to her hand”. You will have a son and he will be a special child, a child with a great future.

So Hagar returned to Abraham and Sarah and gave Abraham his first born son, Ishmael.

Many years later, Sarah became pregnant and Isaac was born.

One day Sarah saw Ishmael playing with her son Isaac. Sarah did not like this and told Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away because she did not want the son of her maid servant, Hagar to share the inheritance with her own son, Isaac. Abraham then sent Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with a small amount of bread and water.

Alone in the desert, Hagar and Ishmael soon used up their tiny supply of water and bread. Hagar searched desperately for more but found none, and saw her son begin to die of thirst. There was nothing she could do to save him except place him in the shade of an overhanging bush and wait. In what she believed were the last moments of her life, she called to God for help. God heard her, and the weak voice of her dying son. Then her eyes opened and she saw something she had missed before: a well of fresh water. She refilled the skin that Abraham had given her with water and took it to her son, gently coaxing the water through his lips. Then she drank the water herself.

Here we have two women who are caught in their own worlds of powerlessness. Being unable to conceive causes Sarah excruciating pain, which is not expressed in the text. But if we are to truly understand her actions, we must acknowledge her experience. This is not to excuse her treatment of Hagar. Sarah turns her suffering outward, creating worse suffering for Hagar, her Egyptian servant, the woman whose womb she thinks she can control.

Hagar, who was oppressed due to her nationality and certainly came from a lower class since she worked as a servant, probably saw this new turn of events as an opportunity to improve her lot in life. From the time Hagar conceives she develops a new self-esteem. Having carried a child myself I understand that a woman can discover a new part of herself when she is pregnant. There is an amazing shift in consciousness that accompanies pregnancy. The power to conceive and bring new life into the world is an awesome experience.

The Torah reflects this internal change in Hagar as we get an external glimpse of Hagar's behavior towards Sarah. She no longer sees herself in servile terms. As the text is written, Sarah, her mistress "becomes lower in her eyes". Hagar's loss of respect for her devastates Sarah.

What were Sarah's expectations? Maybe she hoped that Hagar would feel for her as a barren woman. That Hagar, even though used by Sarah would express compassion and give her the gift of her child with grace. If we can see this from Sarah's perspective we might understand that Hagar could have acted differently in this situation. Maybe we could see Hagar not only as being at the mercy of Sarah, but someone who had a choice, someone who could have shifted the dynamic between the two women. Maybe Hagar could have changed the whole story.

When Hagar becomes pregnant, she doesn't see the pain her behavior causes Sarah, and Sarah, who first tried to survive as a barren woman is now afraid that she could lose her status and financial position if Ishmael, inherits the rights of the first born. Who could blame either of these women for trying to elevate their personal circumstances? Both of them are trying to transcend their roles in a patriarchal, society. I have compassion for both of them. But the point is they lack compassion for each other. And the sum result is a deep divide between the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael that has been carried through the generations until this very day.

At the deepest level, this is a story of survival but it is also a story of missed opportunity.

If we rewrite the story of Sarah and Hagar, what might we change? How could we help them see that their projection of suffering upon each other only increases their pain and perpetuates a system where they carry their victim identification into future generations? If they could understand their own suffering, might they then be able to understand the suffering of the other?

After asking myself these questions I began to wonder why we read this story on Rosh HaShanah, just as we celebrate the potential for hope and transformation embedded in the New Year? Could it be that the purpose of the story of Sarah and Hagar is to awaken in us the humility and the courage to stand before the mirror of self-scrutiny, which is an act essential to the spirit of the Days of Awe?

I want to share a story that helped me see that we can be unaware of how other people may make assumptions about us due to their own insecurities and experiences. In June I had dinner with Rina, a young Israeli woman, and Mohammed, a young Palestinian man from the Arava Institute. The Arava Institute supports ecological projects in Israel that incorporate cross-cultural work between young Jewish Israelis, Palestinians and Jews from outside Israel. In an effort to break down the traditional barriers between these young people the organizers house participants from each of these groups in the same room. Mohammed explained to me how he felt sharing a room with two Jews. He said that the first two nights he was unable to sleep

because he was so afraid. I almost laughed out loud. How could this young man be afraid of two nice Jewish boys? I mean, come on. As I listened to Mohammed's story I slowly began to understand that it was all a matter of perspective. Through whose eyes was I seeing the situation? My own eyes, or his eyes? Until participating in this program his experience with Jews was limited to contact with Israeli soldiers carrying guns at checkpoints. In fact, one of the reasons he chose to participate in this program was to learn more about "the other". Instead of continuing the pattern of powerlessness he was accustomed to, Mohammed was building his capacity to understand the other.

I wonder about our ability as a people to acknowledge the pain of the other. When I hear about the lives of the Palestinians in Gaza, can I open my heart and hear their pain? Or am I too afraid to criticize the retributive actions Israel has taken in response to rockets falling in Sderot? Just as in the conflict between Sarah & Hagar, there has to be room for both sides of this story. If I feel compassion for the suffering of my own people surely that compassion should extend to other people as well.

So here we are, about to read the story of Hagar & Sarah tomorrow morning. We're gathered together as we begin Rosh Hashanah this evening, filled with hope for a new year, trying to rebuild our trust with people who may have hurt us, looking for forgiveness from those whom we have hurt, or maybe even in the middle of a difficult conflict with a friend or family member. And as Jews, as Americans keenly aware that our actions may have caused others

harm, we are asked to have compassion for ourselves and see that Sarah & Hagar's failures are our failures as well. We can use this story as inspiration to become more caring and aware of the horrible things that happen to others and the dedication to get involved, to take risks for the sake of social justice and to work to heal the conflict between Israel & Palestine. We can begin to understand that we have cast out others whom we did not know how to include and that we have failed to hear their pain out of our own insecurities.

Can we transcend this orientation and imagine ourselves moving into a new future with possibilities for healing and peace that we haven't considered? As we move through these next ten days together I invite you to explore a different ending to this story. I invite you to consider how we can rewrite the story of Sarah & Hagar together so that we can become the ones who act from a place of power, understanding and hope.