

Gaining Perspective

There is a story I told in my first year here, about a true rarity, a Jewish football player. He was a quarterback no less. If you are at all familiar with the history of professional football, then you will recognize the name of Sid Luckman, the great quarterback for the Chicago Bears during the 1940's. Well, according to legend, Sid's Dad was not too pleased with his son's choice of careers. After all, Sid had gone to Columbia University, and most Jewish boys went on to become doctors or lawyers, not football players. After a lot of arguing, however, Sid convinced his Dad to come and see him in a football game.

You can imagine what this immigrant Jew saw: Sid crouching behind some large man sticking his hands underneath his behind, receiving an odd shaped ball, and then running around the field while other huge men chased after him. Soon you heard Mr. Luckman calling out from the stands, "Just give him the ball Sidney, I'll buy you another one."

This story is a great illustration of how the same event can be experienced by different people in vastly different ways. Each participant has a different perspective on what is happening and on the consequences.

Tomorrow morning, just like every Rosh Hashanah, we will read the story of the Akedah, the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac. That story begins with these words, "Vayahi achar ha'd'varim ha'eileh," "and so it was after all of these things." Exactly what are "those things?" Tonight, I would like to explore that.

What happened is a story that you might have read before. If not, then you may read it in the insert in your leaflet. It is a story that, to my mind, has as

profound of implications as the near sacrifice of Isaac. It is the story of a family that is torn asunder because of a hope, a faith placed in a series of promises by God.

Sarah sees two boys playing. From the context we know them to be Isaac, Sarah's longed for child through Abraham, and Ishmael, Abraham's first son through Hagar, Sarah's servant.

When Sarah had been unable to conceive a child, she gave Hagar to Abraham for the purpose of producing a child. As Hagar belonged to Sarah, her child, according to Biblical law, belonged to Sarah as well. The Torah tells of a tension between Sarah and Hagar, back when Hagar had conceived and Sarah was barren. So we know there is no love lost between Sarah and Hagar.

In any case, something about the two boys playing together disturbs Sarah enough to tell Abraham to cast Ishmael and Hagar from the family camp, thus sending them into exile. Abraham is not happy about this. In fact, the Hebrew text says that Abraham found this matter evil in his eyes. God, however, assures Abraham that he should listen to Sarah, and that all will turn out fine. Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with bread and water. As it runs out, Hagar weeps in despair as she believes her son will perish. God responds to the boy. He survives, grows up, and marries an Egyptian woman.

That is the outline of the story. Questions abound. What is it really that upsets Sarah so much? How the boys are playing or is there something more? What are Abraham's true feelings about being forced to follow Sarah's will? What are the perspectives of the two boys, Isaac and Ishmael? How does the

dynamic between Sarah and Hagar play into these events? Why does God side with Sarah in casting out Hagar and Ishmael? How will these events affect Sarah's and Abraham's relationship? How will they affect Isaac?

The Jewish tradition of midrash allows us to explore these questions and more. The Torah is written in very terse, unemotional language. It does not describe thoughts or emotions. We get no insight into the characters minds. It simply gives a description of the story. Midrash is the rabbinic way of exploring the gaps and questions in the text. It is a way to explore possible motives, thoughts, and outcomes. Through midrash, we try to discern deeper lessons that are contained within the story other than the plain sense meaning of the text. Tonight, I would like to create some midrash and use it to explore this text with you.

Before beginning, I need to remind you of a few things about the Hebrew of the Torah. This is important because reading Torah text in English is kind of like watching a TV show without the sound. All you get are images but no nuance. First, Hebrew is a language that in its original written form had no vowels, only consonants. The vocalizations of the consonants are an oral tradition. One has to really know the language, its structure and grammar in order to know how to vocalize the consonants. This means that an interpretation of a word, based on a certain vocalization, is open to change using a different vocalization. This is exactly how Hebrew is supposed to operate, as it is based on 3 letter consonant roots. Different but related meanings occur as you change the vowels used with those consonants. For example, we all know the word

“shalom.” Shalom consists of a 3 letter root, sh, l, m. The vowels are ‘ah’ and ‘oh.’ We know that word means “peace.” But if we change the vowels to ‘ah’ and ‘ei,’ we pronounce the word as “shaleim,” which means “to pay,” or “to compensate.” We can see a relationship between the two meanings coming from the same root, but the meanings ARE different. The rabbinic sages would often play with the vocalization of words to gain possible insights into alternate and deeper meanings of the Torah text.

Second, all of the names in this story have meaning. They are not just syllables. I will give you their meanings and from here on, only use the Hebrew pronunciations. Abraham is Avraham – the father of many peoples. Sarah – the princess. Isaac is Yitzchak – the one who will laugh. If we change the vocalization of Yitzchak to Yitzacheik, then the meaning becomes “the one who will play.” This is significant because sometimes the word for play, “tzicheik,” can have a sexual connotation. An example of this is how the word is used to describe how the Israelites cavort in front of the Golden Calf during that famous episode in Exodus. Ishmael is Yishma’el – the one who will hear God. We can also re vocalize his name as Yishama’el – the one who will be heard by God. Yishma’el’s name is related to “sh’ma,” the “Hear O Israel” that is so central to our liturgy. Hagar means “to flee,” or “take flight.” If we change the vocalization to Hageir, the meaning changes to “the stranger.” You can already see that the names of the characters give us some insight into the underlying dynamics of the story.

Finally, there is one more piece. This incident takes place immediately after Yitzchak's weaning party, which would have occurred around age 3. That means he is between 3 and 4 which places Yishma'el between 11 and 12. With these facts in mind, listen as I retell this story from different perspectives.

It was shortly after Yitzchak's weaning feast. The guests had departed and Sarah, tired from all of the entertaining – she was, after all, over 90 years old – could not find Yitzchak. Nervously she searched the camp. After a bit, she heard the sound of children laughing, playing. She went around the corner of a tent and there was Yishma'el, holding Yitzchak in his arms, twirling him around. The motion caused the little one's robe to fly open, exposing his lower extremities. Sarah was livid. So much so that she did not hear the sound of Yitzchak's gleeful laugh. All she saw was that boy, born by that insufferable Egyptian maid, spinning her exposed son around. Angrily she called Avraham, "I cannot tolerate any more," she said. "I will not have my son threatened by that barbaric boy. You must send him and that woman who bore him away from my sight, away from this camp." But Sarah," Avraham said, "they are just boys playing. Remember, Yishma'el is MY son as well. Hagar had him with me at your behest." "Don't throw that up at me," Sarah cried. "That monster you fathered through that Egyptian is a threat to my son, our son. Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son, Yitzchak." "But Sarah, how can you ask me to do that to my own flesh and blood, and the women who birthed him? How can you ask me to be so cruel?" "If you truly believed in the power of that God you talk to all the time, then

you would believe that they will be all right. Now send them away.” Sarah knew she had won. Despite Hagar’s youth and beauty, she knew that Avraham was dedicated to HER, that he would always ultimately listen to her. While clutching Yitzchak protectively, Sarah watched Avraham give some bread and a water flask to Hagar and Yishma’el. Triumphant, she watched them trudge out of camp, feeling all was just as it should be. A problem was leaving.

Avraham was saying goodbye to the last of his guests. He was basking in the pride of a very successful feast. He was proud of the food and entertainment arranged by Sarah, he was proud of his son Yitzchak, he was proud to have his family firmly settled and established in Canaan. Then he heard the sound of Sarah’s voice, “Avraham, Avraham, come here, now!” He knew that tone. He knew his wife. He knew there was trouble. Avraham responded to Sarah, but not too quickly, for he did not like being ordered around. Next to a tent, he saw Sarah standing, red faced and trembling with anger. Yishma’el was standing still. Hurt and anger smoldering in his eyes. Little Yitzchak was clutching Yishma’el’s finger, looking confused and a little bit frightened. Avraham did not quite know why, but a black veil started to fall upon his heart. The sharp sound of Sarah’s voice focused his attention. “I cannot tolerate any more,” she said. “I will not have my son threatened by that barbaric boy. You must send him and that woman who bore him away from my sight, away from this camp.” The rest of the conversation was a blur to Avraham. He was deep in thought and in memory. He remembered his delight when Sarah gave him Hagar on her own behalf to couple with, to provide the child that Sarah seemed unable to provide. He

remembered intimacy with Hagar, different than with Sarah, not better, but somehow more exotic. He was intoxicated by Hagar's youth. He thought of his pride in Yishma'el, how adept the boy was with tools and weapons. While God had indicated that Avraham's line through Yitzchak was to be particularly blessed, Yishma'el was his first born. There was something special about the boy that drew Avraham to him. The idea of sending this son away distressed him greatly. To his eyes it seemed evil. Yet, his first loyalty was to Sarah. Something in the corner of his mind, a voice – the voice of God? – was telling him to listen to Sarah. Was it the voice of God or was Avraham merely too cowardly to argue with her? Did he really believe she was right or was this simply the easiest way to regain a measure of peace within his household? Whatever the reason, Avraham soon found himself handing some bread and a water flask to Hagar. The words coming out of his mouth seemed completely unrelated to the thoughts in his brain, as he sent his first born child along with his mother into the wilderness to fend for themselves. Whether it was the will of God or his own lack of will, Avraham, now, was truly brokenhearted.

Little Yitzchak was bored with all of the people. On one level he knew that he had been the center of attention. On another, he did not like the attention. He just wanted to play, not to be on display for a bunch of grownups. But his mother, Sarah, had insisted that he be with her for most of the time all of the strangers had been celebrating in his family's camp. Clearly the adults were having fun, drinking, eating, celebrating something, he was not really sure what. But Yitzchak was bored. So when he finally got away from his mother for a bit,

as she was saying goodbye to the visitors, he was thrilled when his older brother Yishma'el found him wandering and bored and began to play with him. He loved his older brother. His mom called him wild, but Yitzchak just thought he was fun. As they would play fight, rolling in the dirt, Yitzchak would scream in delightful laughter. Today, Yishma'el picked him up and started to spin him around. Laughter came easily to Yitzchak, and today he was laughing uncontrollably. Suddenly Yishma'el stopped, and Yitzchak soon saw why. His mother, Sarah, was standing, pointing, and screaming. The boys' father came running and soon they could see Sarah and Avraham gesturing and shouting. It was clear that their father was unhappy. Avraham came over to them and told Yishma'el to get Hagar. Yitzchak was not sure how it happened or what happened next, but all of a sudden Yishma'el was crying, clutching Hagar as she was crying, "please no." He felt his mother grab him, but she was not really paying attention to him, just holding onto him very tightly. Yitzchak began to cry, as he saw his father walk with Hagar and Yishma'el to the edge of the camp, give them something, and gesture for them to go. "Yishma'el," he cried, "where are you going, where are you going?" It would be many years before Yitzchak would learn the answer to that question.

Hagar knew before being told. She did not know what happened between Yitzchak and Yishma'el. She did not think her son would purposely hurt his younger half brother. She only knew that life with Sarah had grown progressively more intolerable. She had sensed that the only reason Sarah had kept her around was on the chance of her producing more children for Avraham.

Technically, those children belonged to Sarah, as Hagar belonged to her. Yet, Hagar knew that despite Avraham's love for Yishma'el, Sarah resented the boy and did not really see him as her own son. The fact that Avraham had real affection for Hagar only made matters worse. Hagar knew her place. She knew that her status was not even that of concubine. It was servant. So after she heard Sarah screaming and saw Avraham coming to her, telling her to get Yishma'el's things, she knew. With only some bread and a flask of water, Avraham sent Hagar and Yishma'el into the wilderness. She gave the water to her son. She gave him most of the bread. After a few days, not knowing where they were, and not meeting a soul, the bread was eaten and the last of the water was gone. Yishma'el was sitting under a bush, praying to God just as he had seen his father Avraham doing so many times. Hagar did not think that prayers were worth very much. She was never impressed with Avraham's dedication to this unseen God. She did not understand how praying to a God without body or form had any effect at all. Yet, there was Yishma'el, under a bush, uttering prayers just like his father, seemingly unaware of what was around him. Hagar crept away from Yishma'el. She closed her eyes as she could not bear to look upon him in what she thought was a hopeless gesture, suffering from hunger and thirst. But suddenly, something, she was not sure what, made her open her eyes. It was then she saw the well, hidden previously by some rocks and bushes. She went and filled the water flask, brought it to Yishma'el and gave it to him to drink. "I knew that God would hear me," Yishma'el said.

What is the purpose of this story? Is it a story about how God provides in our hour of need? I think not, because the evidence shows God does not always provide. Is it an etiological tale, giving insights into the origins of Judaism and Islam? Some have certainly made it that, but Islam does not come into being until the 7th century CE. The author, or authors of this story, I think, had something different in mind – an insight into our humanness.

It is a story about family and friends, clans and communities. It is a story about how, through our own fears, our own prejudices, our own narrowness of vision, our own narrowness of heart; we fail to see the other as a person of God the same as we are. It is a story about how we humans lean on God to compensate for actions we either fail to take, or are unable to take. It is a story about how through weakness of spirit, complicity with prejudice, and the failure to assert for goodness, we expel the stranger and trample upon the joy of the innocent. It is a story about anger unabated, prolonged grudges, hopes that are dashed, opportunities lost, and all of their consequences. For the consequences of this story are felt through the generations.

Yitchak will never laugh again. He will undergo the horror of being almost sacrificed on Moriah. Midrash tells us his soul left him briefly that day. We can only imagine that it returned to him damaged, missing some important element. He will marry a magnificent woman, Rivkah, who will be the dominant, guiding force of that generation. Yitzchak will slip away into blindness, both physical and spiritual. He will form a narcissistic symbiotic relationship with his son Esav, bestowing upon him favorite son status in return for the tasty game Esav will

provide. He will be fooled by his son Ya'akov into giving him the blessing due the first born Esav. Ya'akov's own life will be one of trickery and tragedy, clearly the result of Yitzchak's failure to provide a strong father figure.

Sarah dies in a cry of despair. Midrash teaches that a divine messenger comes to tell her what Avraham's attempted sacrifice of Yitzchak on Moriah. That grief causes her heart to fail. She dies knowing that all of her over protectiveness of Yitzchak has been futile.

Yishma'el will become a great bowman, a hunter living in the wild. He will marry an Egyptian woman in a match arranged by Hagar.

Avraham becomes a shadow of his former self. He is no longer the bold warrior who rescues the kidnapped children of local kings. He is no longer the champion of righteousness who argues with God for the fate of Sodom and Gemorah. No, Avraham is done arguing. When God calls upon him to take his son to Moriah for a sacrifice, Avraham does so as a beaten man, uttering nary a protest. He maintains a relationship with Yishma'el, riding off to visit him periodically, but not staying long enough even to dismount from his camel so as not to displease Sarah. Avraham dies having lived a life that he believes was dedicated to his God. Yet for all of his dedication, for all he sired, his children live apart, scattered. Practically speaking they are strangers to each other.

It is only upon Avraham's death that Yitzchak and Yishma'el come together once again for the task of burying their father. We do not know what words they exchanged. We do not know if in the shadow of death, they were able to speak the unspoken words from earlier in life. We do not know if the

affection they shared as youth was forever lost. We can only pray; that for them, it was not too late.

We live lives filled with plans and dreams, conflicts and compromises, moments of gladness and moments of despair. Our lives are filled with actions we would like to undo, words we would like to recall. Much of the time, we are never sure what to leave in God's hands, and what to seize with our own. We try to do what is right. If we are lucky, sometimes, right will even be righteousness. Most of the time, however, we simply exist with the hope that we have chosen our actions wisely. We exist with the hope that we will navigate life with our heads held erect.

As we pray in Psalm 119:

May I keep the commandments of my God,

Uphold me according to your promise

That I may live,

And let me not be put to shame,

In my hope.

Amen