

Michael Goldman  
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A fitting reading for Rosh Hashanah. Isaac arrives on the scene miraculously to parents 100 and 90 years old. Finally the long awaited heir, full of hope.

Then, it turns dark again – Abraham’s other son – Ishmael – by Hagar Sarah’s Egyptian hand maiden, is expelled. Sarah believes Ishmael cannot be trusted with her Isaac. How can we understand this inhuman act? And why are we reading about it on Rosh Hashanah, right next to Abraham’s prayers being answered?

Many of the commentators (at least those who focus on it), try to find ways to justify the expulsion. Right after a feast made for Isaac, the Torah says, “And Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne unto Abraham, making sport.” In Hebrew, “Mitzahek.” What does that mean? The commentators dwell on that word and find the justification for Sarah’s wanting the boy gone. They say it means practicing idolatry, sexual acts, or threatening Isaac’s very life, or laughing at the party in Isaac’s honor since Ishmael as the first born would get most of Abraham’s legacy. The commentators, including Rashi and others concur that Sarah was entirely justified in her determination to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael in order to protect her Isaac from a BAD INFLUENCE. And if that wasn’t sufficient, God himself tells Abraham to “listen to Sarah’s voice” when she tells Abraham to send them away.

So, is this just a story of the challenges of a blended family – some just don’t blend? And is this important enough to explain why it is included as the Rosh Hashanah reading?

A couple of commentators, Ramban, for example, add that Sarah and Abraham were simply wrong for expelling Ishmael and Hagar. But then the question remains why did God tell Abraham to listen to Sarah’s voice? Was God wrong?

Let’s step back and look at the overall story, the back story, as it is. Back in Chapter 15, Abraham has one of his several divinely inspired dreams.

When the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a dread, even a great darkness fell upon him. And He said unto Abram Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they also that nation, whom they shall serve will I judge; and afterwards shall they come out with great substance. (15,12-14).

In chapter 16, the story with Hagar and Ishmael begins. Hagar was Sarah's handmaid, whom the text points out was Egyptian; out of desperation Sarah and Abraham decide to insure him an heir through Hagar since Sarah was barren and old. But as soon as Hagar conceives with Abraham, Hagar comes to despise Sarah. (16,4.) Greatly offended, Sarah deals harshly with Hagar (oppresses her), and Hagar flees. An angel finds her in the wilderness and directs her to return to Sarah, which she does and then births Ishmael.

Why is Hagar so central? Well for one, she is always referred to as the Egyptian. For another, she was treated harshly by Sarah (oppressed). Does this begin to sound vaguely familiar? Like a holiday roughly one half a year away? And the name Hagar –Hey, Gimel, Resh. Does that sound familiar? It could be pronounced Hageyr, the stranger. “As in we were strangers in the land of Egypt!.” And for that matter “oppress not the stranger.”

The similarities, the parallelism with our enslavement in Egypt go on and on. Pharaoh did decree the death of the first born. Ishmael was A's first born evidently doomed to die, but saved by God's intervention, like the Children of Israel in Egypt. When Hagar and Ishmael were expelled, they wandered in the desert – just like the Children of Israel -- until Hagar gave up and resigned herself to Ishmael's dying of thirst. Like the Children of Israel, after they were expelled, Hagar and Ishmael too seemed to get lost in the desert; the Children of Israel were saved first as the water parted and again as God provided them with water. All the similarities between Hagar & Ishmael and the children' of Israels' oppression and expulsion from Egypt are undeniable.

What does this parallelism mean? Well, first the entire slavery in Egypt is foreshadowed by the mistreatment of Hagar and Ishmael. Not just

foreshadowed; one might say it was justified. As much as we look up to our ancestors, Abraham & Sarah, they in fact did mistreat, indeed, oppress the stranger. This is an all-important value. So, to sear that message into the Jews, we as a people experienced the oppression, the harshness and bitterness that strangers in a strange land often endure – for generations in Egypt.

A question remains, if all this conduct was wrong and the very basis for our Egyptian bondage, why did God seemingly approve of Sarah's decision to expel Hagar & Ishmael? Why did He encourage Abraham to listen to Sarah's voice? Was God complicit? Remember that God had already informed Abraham that his descendants would be oppressed for 400 years – before the encounter with Hagar, before she was sent away. God already knew that the children of Israel needed to learn and experience why you do not oppress the stranger. After God already decreed their fate, the incident with Hagar revealed how much Children of Israel needed that lesson.