

The back section of the tent was hot and dusty, but Sarah could finally sit down for a few minutes of rest. As was Abraham's hospitable way, he had just invited 3 strangers into his tent and so, of course, Sarah had rushed about to prepare a calf from the herd and to knead the dough for cakes. As she leaned against a pile of sheepskins, her eyes suddenly opened wide and she straightened up. She could not believe what she had just heard:

I will return to you next year and your wife Sarah shall have a son.

And Sarah laughed. Of course she laughed! Come on, here she was barren and old. She had been praying for years for a child with Abraham.

And so starts our Torah reading today.

וַיְהוֹה פָקַד אֶת שָׂרָה

And God took note of Sarah, as he had promised. He remembered her. And she bore a son Isaac. And he was circumcised as God had commanded that Abraham do - the first circumcised baby of the covenant.

Next there is the story of Hagar, the Egyptian woman who bore Abraham's son Ishmael. Sarah observes Ishmael playing with Isaac and for reasons that are not entirely clear, Sarah demands that Ishmael should not share in the inheritance of her son Isaac and that Abraham should send Hagar and Ishmael away to the desert. Abraham becomes quite distressed over this. But God intervenes and tells Abraham to listen to his wife. (So you see, at times, there is really nothing wrong with a man listening to his wife.) And so they are expelled to the desert with some bread and a skin of water. They cry out to God when they are about to die of thirst. God hears them and reveals a well that saves their lives. God opened Hagar's eyes.

וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא

God opened her eyes. Could that well have been there all along and Hagar, trapped by her own despair, was not able to see it? Was she unable to recognize the possibilities for her own survival?

Do we become trapped by our own experiences? How willing and open are we to see the world afresh?

Lastly there is the story of Abraham and neighboring King Abimelech (who we heard of before in the story of Abraham trying to pass off his wife Sarah as his sister) Now Abraham and Abimelech fall into a dispute over a well that Abraham had originally dug. Abraham asserts himself and initiates a sworn agreement with Abimelech that publicly acknowledges Abraham's right to the well. In the business of shepherding (which was Abraham's business), access to water was just as essential as it was for everyday life. So what can we learn from this story other than seeing the character

development of Abraham as he reaches a new stage in his relationship with the promised land? That perhaps in business situations there are times to act generously to benefit others and there are other times when protecting resources and rights for the benefit of a group is the better negotiating stance. Neither business or life come with a handbook of rules and regulations that lead us to automatic and correct answers. We need a moral compass to help us. Which is why many of us show up here on Rosh Hashanah (or Shabbat for that matter.)

And so we are about to read these words of the Torah on Rosh Hashanah 5777. Can we extract ourselves from this ballroom and our everyday life thoughts to really listen to these words? Who is to say what meaning there will be in these words for each of us today?

As both Jonathan Safran Foer and Amos Oz have argued: Jews have a special relationship with words. Words are what we have! They are the most powerful way of telling our story. And our story is most powerfully told in the Torah.

ויהוה פקד את שרה

And God took note of Sarah and remembered her. Will God remember today all the infertile women who are praying for a child? Will God take note of us? Will God remember any of our prayers? Will God remember me?