

D'var Torah Lech Lecha

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The Torah portion for this week is *Lech Lecha*, which is usually translated as “go forth,” and can also be translated as “go into yourself.” I had a head start on working on this *D'var Torah*, as this was my daughter's portion for her Bat Mitzvah 4 years ago...now I get to say all the things I couldn't talk her into saying for me!

In *Lech Lecha*, we are most familiar with G!d's command to Abraham to “go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house to the land that I will show you.” So Abram, as he is still called at that time, took Sarai, his wife, and his brother's son Lot, along with all of their possessions and a community of people that they dwelt with, and headed out into the land of Ur, toward the land of Canaan. They left the comforts and conveniences of the city to live in a harsh land without comfort, security, or stability. A big risk for them – but one they undertook because of Abram's faith in G!d.

This week's *parasha* contains a parallel story about risky journeys and the theme of faith – the story of Hagar. We will look at this story from an unfamiliar angle tonight. Hagar is often the overlooked character in this portion – overlooked just as communities tend to turn a blind eye to the abused people in their midst.

The name Hagar means “the stranger.” The word “ger” in Hebrew means stranger, and it is used later in Torah to refer to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Names in the Torah are rich with meaning, so the Torah means for us to pay attention to Hagar's name and the various ways the position of the stranger will play a part in the flow of the story.

So who was Hagar? She was a young Egyptian girl and the attendant to Sarai. G!d promises Abram in chapter 12 of Genesis to make his family a great nation. He promises land and offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky. Specifically God promises him a son. As they approach their mid-eighties and are still childless, Sarai decides to take matters into her own hands, perhaps out of a sense that G!d's covenant requires some sacrifice on her part in order to be fulfilled.

She offers Hagar to Abram, as a concubine, a kind of surrogate mother. Abram follows his wife's advice and Hagar becomes pregnant. Once Hagar is visibly pregnant, some animosity arises between the two women. Hagar acts haughtily, and Sarai becomes jealous. She complains to her husband about the way that Hagar fails to obey her, and Abram says, “She's your attendant, do with her what you want.” Sarai begins to abuse Hagar and she runs away into the desert.

Alone and pregnant in the desert, an angel of G!d comes to Hagar at a well and says this: “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She responds only to the question of where she is running from, but she has no destination in mind. Her journey is aimless. She doesn't know where she is headed. The angel tells her to return home to Sarai. Hagar names the well where she encounters this angel the “Well of the living One who sees me.” The text concludes by saying that “Hagar bore a son and Abram named him Ishmael. Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore a son.”

Fourteen years pass and Sarai has still borne no children. Finally she bears a son she names Isaac as she grows close to 100 years old.

Jumping ahead to the next week's *parasha*, *Vayera*, there is a family gathering and Ishmael, now 14 years old, is playing with and teasing the toddler Isaac. Sarai looks at the two boys together and feels very uneasy. Various *midrashic* traditions offer different accounts of misbehavior on the part of Ishmael. Or maybe Sarai realizes that the older boy is due $\frac{2}{3}$ of the family inheritance over her son Isaac. In any event, Sarai demands that Abram get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Worse, Abram has a vision from God who says, "Do what your wife says, for your great nation will pass through your son, Isaac." God later says he will make another great nation through the older son, Ishmael. So Abram, greatly grieved for Ishmael, takes them out in the desert and releases them, providing only bread and water. Later, as they walk out in the desert, running out of bread and water, and desperate, Hagar set Ishmael away from her, not wanting to see her child die.

The Torah then states "God heard the child crying"...and then an angel tells Hagar "Do not be afraid, for God has heard the child's cry. Get up, lift up the child and hold him; for I will make of him a great nation." Miraculously, she opens her eyes and finds a fresh well of water. We are told that they make it out of that desert safely, for Ishmael becomes a great archer and his mother finds him a wife in Egypt. Of course, both Muslim and Jewish tradition teach that it is through Ishmael that the Islamic nations are born and through the other son, Isaac, that Isra-el emerges.

I found myself wondering, back when Hagar runs into the desert while pregnant with Ishmael, why the angel tells her to return. Why would G!d send an abused person back into the home of the abuser? This is a question many of us in this era feel compelled to ask.

I think of the dilemma abused women reading this passage might face. After all, Hagar was not called to the wilderness by G!d, like Abram, and she wasn't supported by her community. She had no plan of action, no faith that G!d would be there for her. She had *no choice* but to return, for the safety of her unborn child and for herself. It is common for an abuse victim to have to return to the home of the abuser several times before finding the way to safety.

The second time she went out into the desert, when Abram, who should have been her protector, cast her out, again, she sat down, without faith in G!d or in her community, and waited to die. This is where the Torah text may finally be directing us to see Hagar fully in her plight. G!d opened her eyes so that she could see, again, the "Well of the Living One who sees me" and drank and was revived. It took G!d's reaching out to Hagar, *and* Hagar's being in a place where she could hear and be strengthened by G!d, for change to begin for Hagar and her son. Hagar had to "**go into herself**", in order to be strengthened and travel, find for herself and her son a community that embraced them, where they became healed and strong. The two arms of recovery from abuse, community support *and* personal faith and healing, join together here to create change.

Imagine that you are Hagar, the Stranger, and that you live in a community that really knows nothing about what goes on within your walls. In fact, I would say that because we, the Hebrews, are repeatedly called "ger/stranger" later on in the Torah, one could argue that the Torah *insists* that we take the time to imagine that we are Hagar.

It's hard to visualize the revered father and mother of the Jewish people, Abraham and Sarah, as abusive. When you hear me say that they abused Hagar, I imagine that you react in disbelief. Perhaps anger. But no less an authority than Nachmanides said, "The matriarch sinned by such maltreatment, and Abraham too by permitting it." Perhaps one of the great ironies about Abram and Sarai is that, while they excelled at kindness and hospitality to the stranger in general, in the case of Hagar, the Torah shows us some of their less worthy moments.

In any case, by giving us in Hagar a character with a name we share as a people, the Torah pushes us to see ourselves in the Other, and reminds us that their story matters too. The lesson we can draw from this today, as people living in a society still rife with domestic violence, is that it is up to us, as a community, to believe and support people who tell us their story.

We live in a community with many resources for survivors of violence. But before our Hagers can get to these resources, they need to be strengthened and grow through the support of their spiritual communities, their friendships, and their families. G!d WAS there for Hagar, all the time, and the proof of this is that she was able to raise her son safely to an age where they could escape, and that G!d opened her eyes so that she could see their way into a supportive community. She and her son created happiness and great success for themselves once she knew she was supported by G!d.

The Hagers in our community are everywhere. One in three to four women, over the course of their lifetime, will be abused by an intimate partner or family member. Will you listen when someone tells you something that is happening in their life? Will you have patience as they gain the confidence to trust in themselves and G!d, and to leave a harsh situation? Will you support them in opening their eyes to the safe and healing path in front of them? G!d has provided us with a roadmap in this Torah portion – to understand that G!d doesn't support abuse, and that..., with emotional, spiritual, and physical healing comes release and safety. How will we comport ourselves, as Jews, as human beings, as community members, the next time someone reaches out to us?

May we all be blessed with having our eyes opened, today and every day.

Shabbat shalom.