

This week's parasha, Vayera, has much to consider about life, death, and death averted. It is one of the most action packed of our narratives. It includes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham's banishment of Hagar and Ishmael and the *akeidah* – the binding of Isaac.

Raia will discuss the very beginning of the Torah portion tomorrow, and there is much that could be said about the destruction of Sodom in the middle, but tonight, I want to look at the end, at the fate of two children and their parents. In Genesis 21, after Abraham decides to send Ishmael and Hagar away, the text relates in verses:

Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.

God heard the cry of the boy, and a messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.

Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.

The thing that gets me every time is Hagar tucking Ishmael under the bush, and backing away to cry as she fears that Ishmael is dying of thirst.

Why does Hagar move away from Ishmael at what she fear might be his last moment? Several commentators describe how long she had been carrying him, until she was sure he was near death, implying that only the combination of acute exhaustion and despair drove her to cast him under the bush and run away.

Ha'emek davar suggests that she feared her tears might worsen his condition, and that she moved away to cry to spare him that danger.

But what all of the commentators have in common is the acknowledgement that Hagar was in despair, was out of options, out of solutions. She cast her son under a bush only when she was so overcome by despair that she could not imagine an alternative to his death.

There is a parallel between Hagar in Genesis 21, despairing of Ishmael's life, and Abraham in the next Chapter, Genesis 22, preparing to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, in response to the call he has heard from Hashem. In one chapter after the other, both parents believe their son must die. Both parents are unable to imagine that the story will end differently. And happily for them, both children survive via angelic intervention.

But let's consider the nature of that intervention. In neither case is there a miracle. As I already related in the story of Hagar, the angels opens here yes to a well that is already there. And in Genesis 22, as Avraham raises his knife over Isaac, verses 11-13 tell us:

“Then a messenger of Hashem called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” And he answered, “Here I am.” And he said, “Do not raise your

hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.”

When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.

The late medieval commentator Gersonides teaches that Avraham’s greatness as a prophet was revealed in this moment – not in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac per se, but in his calm receptivity, such that even as he prepared to sacrifice Isaac, he was still able to hear the call of the angel telling him a different plan.

The miracle, for both Hagar and Avraham is that even when they had accepted the fact of the deaths of their children, they could hear a different message; they could be opened suddenly to another possibility, and could seize it; Hagar overcoming her despair when she saw the well of water, and Avraham overcoming the fervor of his obedience to God in order to offer the ram instead of Isaac.

On this End Gun Violence Shabbat, I admit that I, like Hagar, have been stuck in a certain despair for years. I have slowly become resigned to the apparent reality that children have to worry about being killed by a mass shooter in schools; that terrorists who want to target synagogues legally have access to high capacity magazines.

I have been angry about it. I have signed petitions for legislation. But I have had a certain crisis of imagination when it comes to believing that our society might have the political will to actually stay the knife, or in this case, to actually prevent people who shouldn’t have guns from getting their hands on them.

So I am particularly grateful to my colleagues of **Lift Every Voice Oregon**, a coalition of faith-based communities promoting policies prohibiting the sale of assault weapons and large-capacity magazines. The people running this coalition, who named this weekend as End Gun violence Shabbat, have a prophetic vision and a moral imagination that enables them, like Avraham and Hagar, to rise above despair and resignation and to be receptive to a difference possible future.

As Leonard Cohen wrote in his song, "The Story of Isaac,"

*You who build these altars now
To sacrifice these children,
You must not do it anymore.
A scheme is not a vision
And you never have been tempted
By a demon or a god.
You who stand above them now,
Your hatchets blunt and bloody,
You were not there before,
When I lay upon a mountain
And my father's hand was trembling
With the beauty of the word.*

If you would like to learn more about what you can do, you are invited to sign up for information from the Lift Every Voice Oregon campaign, by talking with Roz Slovic about the campaigns during our oneg. The campaign is supporting an initiative petition to enact assault weapon regulation.

We read this parashah every year. There will likely always be dangers threatening our community, threatening our children. But we do not have to entrench ourselves in those dangers through our own resignation. We must always be willing to let the messengers open our eyes and our minds to other possible futures.