

Rosh Hashanah 5782

No more water

Imagine yourself as a servant girl to a wealthy family a couple of millenia ago. You originally came from Egypt, but you are in the land of Canaan now. Your mistress is barren. She demands that you act as her surrogate. So there you are, pregnant and uncertain, and she is mean and getting meaner, so you run away. So you wander in the desert, frightened and alone; and then you see a light in the sky, and a Being you've never seen before tells you that you should go back home and that you will be okay. And you go back home, and you are okay, and your baby is born, and he is a beautiful son. And you raise him to be a successor to his father.

And then, thirteen years later, it happens again. This time it's because your mistress has - astonishingly - given birth to a son of her own. You have been thinking for a while that she might have enough of the two of you. Out you both go into the desert, you and your child, and you wander with him in the expectation that sooner or later that Being who was so reassuring will once again reappear.

But the Being does not.

And then you run out of water, and you are lost, completely lost, and your boy looks at you with his eyes sunken deep, deep in their sockets and his tongue black from thirst. And you lay him under a thornbush a bowshot away from you, because you cannot stand to look at him, you cannot stand the waiting, you cannot stand the shattering of all your expectations. There is nothing to do but weep.

Your name is Hagar.

And as we read Hagar's story this morning, there's no need to imagine how she felt. Because we are there.

In her blog post *The Second Marathon*, pastor Jennie Smith describes this feeling:

We crossed the finish line! We made it! We did a hard thing!

Then...

Instead of collapsing at the finish line in a heap.

Instead of drinking water.

Instead of resting our aching bodies.

Something else happened.

An official-looking race organizer slapped another runner on our back and pushed us toward another starting line that mysteriously appeared.

Wait. What?

A second marathon? Right now?¹

Yes. A second marathon. And just like Hagar, the landscape is familiar from the first time around. Just like Hagar, we had expectations, but those expectations are being crushed. And just like Hagar, we are also encountering some feeling, some set of circumstances, that wasn't there before. The weather has turned against us. Our children are more vulnerable. We just feel even more lost than ever.

And hit that moment where we just have to sit down and cry.

What can we learn from Hagar's experience that can help and support us in this moment?

¹ https://www.jennysmithwrites.com/post/the-second-marathon-a-word-for-pastors-on-walking-the-new-normal?fbclid=IwAR1U0MTP48ejN_fg4-Y-nUJ2ExvQu3_iXlu6FH25J9xQ8GGigdVUYHsSBjg

The first thing to note is that there *are* two different stories. While Hagar's experience in both of them is similar, it's not the same. The Torah moves us forward. In the first story, there's a prophecy of what Ishmael will be like when he grows up - a "wild ass" of a man, set against everyone with everyone set against him. But in the second story, as we read this morning, his mother finds him a wife from her own country and he learns a skill - and the Torah takes care to say that the Holy One accompanies him as he grows up.

After trauma, it's natural to wish that we could go back to exactly the same way things were before. But human lives aren't like that. In just the same way as the Torah gives us a different ending to Ishmael's story, defying the expectations that were initially set about him, we have all been engaged in the process of discovering that going "back to normal" isn't how we thought it would be. There have been small changes - for those of you watching us at home, that's one example. And there have been larger changes as well.

Psychologists have a terminology for this shift. It's called 'post-traumatic growth.' Rather than ratcheting back after a trauma, opportunities arise to improve - to make our situations better than they were before. Richard G Tedeschi, chair of the Boulder Crest Institute, writes:

We've learned that negative experiences can spur positive change, including a recognition of personal strength, the exploration of new possibilities, improved relationships, a greater appreciation for life, and spiritual growth.²

He explains that if we can figure out how what we have been through has changed our beliefs (because it has) and how some of its effects might be positive, if we focus on past successes and feelings of resilience, if we are able to talk honestly about what has happened and build new narratives to encompass the changes we have been through, and if we can direct our energies towards serving others, we stand a real chance of coming out of a trauma in better shape than we were when we went into it. This is true for individuals, for organizations and for communities.

² <https://hbr.org/2020/07/growth-after-trauma>

Let's consider just three aspects of the Torah story that we read this morning that bear this out:

The well. I've been studying this passage with Livi Samuels in preparation for her Bat Mitzvah on October 23, and we've talked a lot about it. Livi was channeling some of our earliest commentators when she noticed that the well which saved Hagar and Ishmael's life wasn't created out of nothing. Rather, God opened Hagar's eyes, and then she saw the well. It was there all the time - she just hadn't noticed it.

And the same has been true for us over this past year. The restrictions we have been working under have helped seeds that were already planted to blossom. I'm thinking of the way that leaders who were there before but not in the habit of leading have emerged to guide us, or the way that talents we did not have time to nurture - baking, plumbing, masonry, crafting - have come to the fore. It was all there - just untapped.

If we look downwards, into our immediate environment, we can see what those seeds have grown into. And when we see what we see, we feel gratitude. That's the gift of the well.

The bowshot. The man who was predicted initially to grow up into a "wild ass" instead grows into a skilled bowman. The Torah is being very clever here. Hagar casts Ishmael "a bowshot away" from her in that moment of utter despair, as if to say that very experience of near-death will establish his true nature and his unique gift to the world. The Hebrew for "bow," - *keshet* - doesn't just apply to the weapon but also to the very first "bow" of the Torah, the rainbow, the sign of the covenant that promises growth after disaster.

For us, right now, this language of promise raises the idea of vision. How will we choose to let our experiences over the past year reshape how we see our futures? Perhaps we have realized that technology is not to be feared and that all of us are capable of using it - that it can be a powerful tool for creating community over distance, the way that an arrow flies.. Perhaps we have grown to prefer working from home and find it more productive. Perhaps we will take a physical change of direction - a different school, a different job, a different calling. Perhaps we have learned that when our

present can change so radically, we can be less fearful of change itself. The image of the bowshot teaches us that we can always recalibrate.

When we look forward, we expand our perspective. We are capable of greater vision. And that's the gift of the bowshot.

Relationships. The start of both Hagar narratives is not a promising landscape for positive relationships. Yet Hagar finds Ishmael a wife from her own country. He settles and raises a family and so far as we can tell from the Torah, it's a happy one. Hagar vanishes from the narrative, but the Rabbis don't forget her. At the end of parashat *hayyei Sarah*, Abraham remarries, a woman called Keturah. The Rabbis teach that Keturah is Hagar. This isn't just the tucking in of a loose end. The woman who was twice cast into the wilderness comes home at last, and, at last, is loved. This community knows better than most that relationships do not require a building or a structure, and that a community does not need walls or windows, just the willingness to find ways to be together.

All through the year, we have been rediscovering the power of relationships. Hands up if you have joined a group of friends from a previous period in your life? - college reunions, high school reunions, whatsapp lists of people with whom you might have been out of touch for 40+ years?

When we turn towards relationship, drawing strength from relationships of the past, we connect once again with the power of love. And that's the gift of the end of the story.

Let's allow the twin narratives of Hagar to set our agenda for the year ahead. The more we open our eyes, the more we will be able to perceive what was there all the time that can sustain us and be grateful for it. The more we raise our eyes, the more new horizons will beckon to prompt us to greater vision. And the more we nurture our relationships, the greater our capacity for love becomes.

And then it won't matter so much when we've run out of water.

Shanah tovah.