

Rosh Hashona D'var Torah  
(9/30/08)

Good morning! Thank you for the opportunity to reflect with you this Rosh Hashona morning on the story of Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham; of Ishmael and Isaac; and God. It is a story of promise and doubt, of hope and of fear, of choices, and of consequences, and, above all, it is a story of change. Appropriately, Rosh Hashona is the time in the year in which we are called to focus on change – on renewal, on possibility, and, yes on hope. It is a time of choosing – our future, we are told, depending on our capacity for change in ourselves, in our relationships with others, and, perhaps above all, with God.

And what an extraordinary time it is to reflect on change, choices and their consequences, not only in our own lives and the in lives of our communities, but in the life of our nation and, indeed, our world.

- The most improbable of presidential election campaigns draws to an end just 5 short weeks from today. Although much is at stake, one of the key questions is whether our country has finally grown strong to free itself from the crippling legacy of a birth half slave and half free.
- A war of choice drags on, consuming scarce human, economic, and moral resources; another heats up. And time is running out on our oil based economy that fuels so much of it.
- And for the past week, most of us have been observes as our financial system is being changed before our very eyes, while efforts to deal with it remain very much in flux. The lesson of the miner's canary, that although the poison in the mines gets the most vulnerable first; sooner or later, it gets all of us, is once again driven home.

Apocalyptic times? Probably not. But, as my friend Tom Hayden once said, “change is slow, except when it's fast”, and this is such a moment.

So, what is a more appropriate focus for us today than the subject of change: the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar; of Ishmael and Isaac; their relationships with each other, and with God. These readings are the culmination of the story of our first generation - of our birth as a people, a tradition, and as a source of moral understanding.

The story began 24 years earlier, when God had called Abram to a journey into the improbable:

“Go forth” God says in Chapter 12, “from your land and your birthplace and you father's house to the land I will show you. And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and those who damn you I will curse, and all the clans of the earth through you shall be blessed.” And Abram, at 75, takes wife, nephew, and all he has and “went forth.”

Sure thing. Although 75 looks a lot younger than it used to, at least to some of us, think about that. Would you?

Eleven years passes, Abram is now 86 and so in Chapter 15 he is seized with doubt. “Look” he says to God, “to me you have given no seed.” So God takes him outside, shows him the night sky and says “Look up to the heavens and count the stars. . . so shall be your seed.” What a lovely image. . . like a father would take his outside into a star-filled desert night, revealing to him the wonder that will be.

At the same time, in Chapter 16, Sarai also despairs of God’s promises but she urges Abram to take her slave girl, Hagar, to have a child through her. As soon as Hagar begins to grow with child, however, her sense of herself grows with her, change that Sarai experiences as disrespect and to which she reacts with oppression. Hagar, out of desperation or, perhaps, anger, will have none of this and flees. God’s messenger finds Hagar and asks “where have you come from and where are you going.” Hagar can only respond with where she has come from. The messenger then urges her to return and to endure the suffering because she will bear Ishmael, he will become the father of a great nation, and this “will surely multiply your seed and it will be beyond all counting.” She does return, knowing, perhaps like Abraham, that she will have to endure hardship, but also assured that her son will come into a legacy of his own.

The action then moves 13 years forward, in Chapter 17: Ishmael is 13, Abram is 99, and Sarai is still without child. God reassures Abram and Sarai, changing both their names to reflect the greater responsibilities they will soon have, specifically naming the yet unborn Isaac through whom the covenant will pass, although Ishmael too will be blessed. And everyone is circumcised: Abraham, 99; Ishmael, 13. In fact, the more remote the child bearing, the more specific God’s descriptions. But in Chapter 18, told through the visitors that she will bear a child, Sarah laughs skeptically, to which they respond “Why is it that Sarah laughed. . . is anything beyond the Lord?”

And that brings us to today’s chapter, 21. Sarah has conceived, borne her child, and tells Abraham to send Ishmael and Hagar away so as to protect Isaac’s legacy. But Abraham doesn’t want to, even though he knew this was to come. God tells him he must. And, as is foretold, God takes care of Hagar and Ishmael.

So what are we to make of all this? Why do we read it at the beginning the 10 days of awe, the beginning of the new year. What does it tell us about change?

First of all, this story is about loss, loss that enables the new to emerge. Abraham gives up his home, Hagar gives up her freedom, Abraham gives up his son – and, in the next chapter, even faces the possibility of giving up his other son, Isaac. Later, Ishmael and Hagar must give up their home, if Ishmael is to realize his potential. Change entails loss, even as it holds out a promise renewal. And loss isn’t fun.

Second this is a story about finding the courage to act. Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar know what is required. But finding the courage to act on it another matter. As St. Augustine expressed it, not merely “knowing the good, but loving it.” Sarah knows the covenant will pass through Isaac, but, to be sure, must get rid of Ishmael. Abraham knows that Ishmael will be okay, but resists giving him up. Hagar knows that her son will be made a great nation, but despairs, before God’s angel appears to her, restoring her faith.

Third,, and perhaps most importantly, this is a story about hope. The God we meet in this story is above all else, a God of possibility. Maimonides once observed that hope is belief in the plausibility of the possible, as opposed to the necessity of the probable. This story is about anything but the probable. Again and again the protagonists are asked to suspend disbelief, to take a chance, to break the bonds of probability. In fact, the character who suffers the most misery, Sarah, is also the character who finds it hardest to suspend her disbelief, to risk hope.

The source of challenge – and of hope – and of courage - throughout the story is God. And this, in a special sense, is the promise of this day. We are finite creatures, we live in a finite world, a world of probability, but we have been blessed with the capacity to touch – and be touched by – the transcendent. We can experience the power of hope, empathy, and self-worth through our experience of each other, of worship, of learning, and of our relationship with God. We are wise to allow ourselves – to open ourselves to - the hope that can free us from the snares of probability..

Returning, then, to the challenges of renewal, rebirth, and change in our own lives, and the life of our country, may we find, in these days, in our private lives and in our public lives, help us find the courage to act on what we must; the love to give up that which we must give up; and the hope for which our relationship with God can be the source. It is a time for hope, not for fear. And that is the blessing of our tradition. The blessing of hope.