

Both of the Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah, the one we read today and the one we read yesterday, contain painful and awkward moments.

In the first day's Torah reading, Sarah had been waiting for a son for decades. Abraham had a son through Hagar, Sarah's servant, but he was still waiting for the son who would carry on the covenantal promise, to be born to Sarah herself. At long last, our Torah tells the story of the birth of that promised son, Isaac.

Prior to Isaac's birth, there was already tension between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah had chased a pregnant Hagar out of the household once already, but God assured Hagar that her son Ishmael would be blessed, and that she should go back and submit to Sarah's harsh treatment. Isaac's birth only exacerbated the tension. This time, at Sarah's prompting, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away. Hagar, wandering, grieving, and waterless in the wilderness, abandons her son to die. God again intervenes, provides water and supports the mother and child.

The Hagar story is a tale of exclusion rather than embrace. Sarah and Hagar are at odds. Abraham is caught in the middle. Isaac and Ishmael, hinted at in the text, colorfully explained in Midrash, are at each other's throats in a competition for the role of their father's favorite heir.

What do you do when you can't get along with someone, when their needs clash with yours, or even when their beliefs or politics are at odds with your own? The model of the Torah reading is problematic - it is to banish and exclude.

The Torah tries to make up for the pain. God intervenes and comforts Hagar, hearing the cry of the child, even as his mother tries to ignore it. God promises that Ishmael will become a great nation, so he does in fact inherit at least part of the Abrahamic covenant. And then the end of the Torah reading contains a different reconciliation. Abraham cannot make peace in his own household among his own family, yet somehow he manages to smooth over a potentially serious disagreement over water with Avimelekh. We are left with these two contradictory models - awkward separation and uneasy reconciliation.

And then we get to today's Torah reading, in which God asks Abraham to do the unthinkable to that precious child. Abraham's silence is deafening, especially in the wake of the courageous hutzpah he demonstrated when he disagreed with the Almighty and argued with God about destroying Sodom and Gemorrah. Following Isaac's near sacrifice, he and Abraham separate and never speak again; and Sarah dies, so Abraham also apparently never speaks to Sarah again.

When I imagine myself in Abraham's place, I see a person torn between loyalty to his family and loyalty to God. He is torn between loyalty to tradition and loyalty to the needs of those he loves.

Reframed, the challenge to Abraham is the greatest challenge of Judaism -- what do you do when your personal beliefs, shaped by the way you grew up, political affiliation, the set of values you have absorbed from the community around you, is challenged by a world view put forth by God and Torah? When your beliefs put you out of step with your religious community? Or when your devotion to Torah distances you from family or friends?

When the dissonance between one's personal set of beliefs and those of a Jewish institution become too great to bear, an increasing number of people are choosing to check out of the Jewish community entirely. Not only the Jewish community, but in all of North America the fastest growing religious group are the "nones," those with no religious affiliation. Since all of you are here today, you have clearly not chosen this option. We should all recognize that you have made a significant decision, that of throwing your lot in with a particular Jewish community, at least for this day. Our job is to encourage you to grow that connection and to participate more deeply and

more broadly. We think that religious institutions add value to your life and to the life of this community. The general breakdown in religious institutions means that people are not being exposed to intergenerational, diverse communities in which they are challenged to examine their beliefs and behaviors.

There is an important lesson in the awkward tensions in Abraham's life. His dual loyalties and resulting struggles bring him precisely to the place he is supposed to be. He has to listen both to God's voice and Sarah's voice. Sometimes he obeys God's command and sometimes he argues. He, like each of us, lives in an in-between space of uncertainty. The Rosh Hashanah lesson is to remember that uncertainty is not a condition to be feared or avoided. On the contrary, it is precisely this expansive space in the middle of the narrowness of certainty that forms the ideal place to be.

The medieval commentator Rashi comments on a verse near the end of the High Holiday Psalm (27:13), beginning with the phrase, "If not for the fact that I believe":

In the manuscripts, the word for "If not," *Lulei*/לֹא־לִי has dots on it to teach: I know that You give reward to the righteous in the world to come, but I don't know if I have a portion with them or not.

**I don't know.** This is Rashi's fundamental statement of the uncertainty of faith. You might prefer to live in a world of black and white certainty, but the normal world around us is full of textured colors and grays. Rabbi Menahum Nahum of Chernobyl (1730-1797) [*Me'or Einayim, Bereshit V*] taught:

ואחר שלומד כל התורה אז הוא יודע כלום, כי תכלית הידיעה שאינו יודע.

A person who has truly learned the entire Torah realizes that they know nothing. The culmination of knowledge is the awareness that one does not know.

The more you know, the more you know how much you don't know. The more you know, the more comfortable you ought to be living in the realm of the unknown. You need not be afraid of differences and disagreements. Mature people can disagree agreeably and remain friends. You need only remind yourself at frequent intervals that it is not always necessary to prove yourself right and your compatriot wrong. That the sense of compulsion you feel in your gut to say or do something that belittles another person is NOT God's voice speaking to you. It may be your ego speaking, it may be driven by your desire to feel important, but it is not God's voice. Let the lesson of these Torah readings be that it is not always a benefit to be right, if it comes at the cost of relationships.

As a small Jewish community, Ahavas Israel needs to embrace diversity. As a centrist congregation, we believe that the greatest opportunities for personal spiritual growth come from spending time with and learning from people not like yourself. And as a Masorti Conservative congregation, we embrace pluralism. We believe in wrestling with positions put forth by Torah that make us uncomfortable, because only in discomfort and dissonance is there growth. You learn more from people not like yourself. A pluralistic approach challenges you to admit that your position is not the only Jewish or ethically supportable position.

I remain troubled by the depiction of the family of Abraham and Sarah torn apart by rivalry and jealousy. I redeem the stories by learning lessons of reconciliation amidst the story of separation.

May this new year bring new balance into your lives among the different communities of which you are a part. May you hear God's voice with wisdom and discernment. And may you see the beauty of the world through the lens of a Torah of many colors and shades.