

**D'verey Torah of Kehillah Congregants:
Andy Hart, Tamar Birckhead, Jonathan Kotch,
and Jonathan Weiler**

Rosh Hashanah 5774 – Andy Hart

The central figure in today's Haftarah is Hannah, a woman who wants to have a child but has been unable to conceive. In this passage we read that her husband, Elkanah, has a second wife, Peninnah. For Peninnah and their sons and daughters, Elkanah provides greater portions for sacrifice than he does for childless Hannah. Still, Hannah is his favorite and, perhaps out of resentment, Peninnah taunts her, saying "the Lord [has] closed her womb." Her husband's devotion notwithstanding, Hannah is miserable. What can she do? She prays for a son and pledges him to a life of service should her prayer be answered.

Prayer is an expression of our deepest feelings, needs, and wishes for ourselves and others. Hannah immerses herself in her prayers so thoroughly that a priest, Eli, accuses her of drunkenness when he misunderstands the silent movement of her lips. Hearing her humble and direct reply, Eli is sympathetic and wishes her well. I think it is significant that Hannah has not set out to seek Eli's approval or help from any other intermediary. Rather, she makes her case directly to God. It seems to me that for Hannah, prayer is a form of action – an act of courage and conviction, showing us that humility is not the same as passivity.

My reading of this Haftarah is shaped by the memory of my mother, who has been so prominent in my thoughts every Rosh Hashanah since she passed away fifteen years ago -- her funeral only hours before the beginning of the Jewish New Year. But the connection between today's Haftarah and memories of my mother is stronger than merely a shared point on the calendar. I see Hannah as a self-directed woman who, like my mother, did not readily accept the status quo.

In my mother's short life of 58 years, she was an outspoken feminist, a peace activist, and an advocate for gay and lesbian rights. As a psychologist, she helped people heal and take charge of their own lives. As a mother, she raised her children to be independent and think for themselves. Hannah's story and memories of my mother also resonate with my admiration for strong women in my life today: my wife, Judy, who brings such resolve to her volunteer leadership to make us all safer from gun violence; my sister, Helen, visiting with us today, who raises money every year to help cancer patients and their families cope with the disease that cut short our mother's life, threatened our sister, and took all too many loved ones in our extended family. While imagining Hannah as a lefty peacenik walking arm in arm with the women in my life, past and present, makes me smile, I don't mean to project all of my opinions and world view onto the Haftarah. Rather, I would only like to suggest Hannah's story reminds us not to be passive and fatalistic. Hannah reminds us that, whether in spiritual or secular terms, each of us has the right to ask for change in our lives and our world. Each of us has the potential to make a difference.

L'shana tova

**Rosh HaShanah 5774 Torah Reading:
Genesis 21:1-34**

Tamar Birckhead

Today's Torah reading concerns a central story of the family of Abraham. It is the troubling episode in which Sarah insists that Abraham expel Hagar and her son -- Abraham's first-born son, Ishmael -- from their camp.

The first few words Sarah says translate as "Cast out that slave-woman." Sarah doesn't use Hagar's name, which means "stranger." Sarah then says to cast out "the son of that slave." She doesn't use Ishmael's name, which means "God will listen." Earlier in this same parsha, when three strangers arrive at Abraham's camp, we hear a core teaching of Torah, to be generous toward the stranger. Yet Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be banished.

There are centuries of commentary about this incident, reasoned arguments "explaining" an action that seems not merely ungenerous but cruel. Immediately before Sarah speaks, she sees Ishmael with Sarah son, Isaac. She sees the two boys "playing," as the word is most often translated, although some translations say "mocking," with the idea that Ishmael is mocking Isaac.

But is this explanation enough to make us understand why Sarah, a wise and holy woman, "needed" to have a woman and child driven into the desert where they seemed certain to perish? When Sarah's words are read today, we hear their harshness - and beneath that harshness, her pain and fear. We hear the way her heart has closed toward Hagar, the stranger, and toward Ishmael, the stranger's son.

At a time when there are heightened tensions among religious groups (such as those between Christians and Muslims in Pakistan over claims of blasphemy), and at a time when in the United States (founded on the enlightened, still-radical principle of religious liberty), a white supremacist killed 6 people at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, it's all too easy to see how the deep wound between Sarah and Hagar -- women of different faiths -- has played out on a global scale.

But these days in the Jewish calendar involve not only geopolitics but also psychology - looking inward. On the most intimate, personal level, are there people in our lives against whom we have closed our hearts?

And here I don't just mean former friends, estranged relatives, and rejected intimates.

Recently I used the phrase, "it's a small world," after one of my students had mentioned someone I knew decades ago. He smiled and said, "Actually it's not a *small* world; it's just not a *very well-mixed* world."

I've thought about that a lot ever since. Most of us remain in the circles in which we are most comfortable. If we step away from them, it is only to move into a concentric circle. We avoid veering outside our comfort zones – literally, we take the same routes day after day from one place to another, and figuratively, we surround ourselves with others who look like us, talk like us, and think like us, so that we close our hearts not just to those we once knew, but to those we will *not allow ourselves* to know.

Likewise, we must ask whether there are *parts of ourselves* that we fear and despise as the stranger, as Hagar, and attempt to cast into the wilderness? In the parsha read every year on the Shabbat before Rosh HaShanah - we're told that God will circumcise our hearts; God will, in essence, cut away the scar tissue that keeps us deadened and closed.

This message is graphic – and intense. We have scar tissue on our hearts for a very good reason, because we've been hurt. And none of us wants to be hurt again.

But consider. In the verses we read today, after Hagar is banished, when she despairs and expects to die, God opens her eyes and shows her life-sustaining water in the desert. What is it that exists within Hagar, whom Sarah can see only as "that slave-woman"? What extraordinary, divine spark shines within this feared stranger, so that she is favored by having a direct experience of God?

What if, during these Days of Awe, we take the risk of circumcising our own hearts, at least a little, to help us see the divine sparks in the Hagars around us – not only those whom we once knew but those whom we have never taken the time to know?

In this way, we may also be favored, and like Hagar, we may glimpse the divinity and beauty within ourselves.

Yom Kippur 5774 Haftarah

Jonathan Kotch

Today's Torah service juxtaposes two different approaches to atonement. First are the priestly atonement rituals of sacrifice (burning sin offerings to ashes) and riddance (sending the scapegoat into the wilderness) which are described in the Torah portion. Then the Haftarah relates Isaiah's injunction that, instead, we have to transform our sins by doing the right thing ourselves. No longer can we show up at the Temple steps with a ram and a measure of grain and oil and ask the Priest to atone for us. From the days of the prophets Jews have been told that ethical conduct is more important to God than priestly ritual (p.526). Since the advent of the rabbinic era, we have added the personal duties of reflection, return and renewal (p. 527).

This transition to community-wide atonement brings with it new responsibilities. We the people are now the rememberers, the ones who enact God's mercies (p. 540). According to Mordecai Kaplan, God's presence is manifest in people and in society by those qualities by which evil is overcome (p. 305). Would there be mercy for the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the naked were there not good people to do what Isaiah tells us God wants us to do?

Furthermore, we are enjoined, indeed, we are warned, that fasting is not enough. The mere trappings of atonement are not sufficient. We are called upon to open the bands of wickedness, unfetter the bonds of yoke, to let the oppressed go free. But who are the oppressed today? Not the slaves in tunics and sandals of Cecil B. DeMille's 10 Commandments. Today's oppressed are children without adequate food or education,

laborers without jobs, the sick and the disabled without access to health care, the elderly without pensions, all of whom are yoked to the consequences of the deliberate acts of selfish and mean-spirited politicians and capricious and greedy financiers.

So this Haftarah is about hypocrisy. The self-appointed arbiters of how to deal with the human suffering of the economic recession would have us believe that poverty and hunger are the rightful consequences of laziness, that justice in fact demands that the unemployed get what they deserve, which is nothing. Never mind that there are still fewer jobs available in North Carolina today than there were before the recession began in 2007, a recession, I might add, that the unemployed had nothing to do with creating.

Isaiah specifically addresses this hypocrisy in verse 9, when he calls upon us to “stop pointing fingers and speaking maliciously.” What he is talking about, according to a footnote in the Hertz (2nd Ed., p. 962) version of his Haftarah, is “a gesture of scorn against the poor, of the powerful against the weak.” It is unjust that the victims of the malfeasance of others suffer the consequences, regardless of what the politically ascendant would have us believe.

Justice and mercy are sometimes seen as opposites. We think of God on the occasion of each New Year sitting on a throne, measuring our strengths and weaknesses, and passing judgment. But the sounding of the shofar is said to be an opportunity for God to switch roles, from the throne of justice to the throne of mercy. But what if justice and mercy coincide, that in fact justice itself demands that we be merciful to the oppressed? Aren't sharing our bread with the hungry, or clothing the naked, metaphors for a more fair distribution of income? And when we elevate that shared responsibility to the community level, we begin to address, as a community, a genuinely fair social policy.

Finally, I wonder, since we are called upon to be the instruments of God's mercy, if we are not called upon to be the instruments of God's justice as well. It is insufficient to wait for those who are guilty of "sins engendered by greed" to themselves take Isaiah's message to heart, and voluntarily restore workers' rights, voters' rights, women's health, Medicaid eligibility, unemployment compensation, school budgets, racial justice, teachers' salaries, and environmental protection. If executing justice means redressing an imbalance (as in redressing an imbalance of political power, as suggested in the Forward Together Lectionary, p. 7), then Isaiah is telling us that God wants us to take these matters into our own hands, to be the vehicles of goodness and mercy, to make these changes happen. By joining forces with the like-minded from those communities most affected by poverty, unemployment and disenfranchisement, we can make Isaiah's vision come to pass.

L'shanah tovah, and may you have the fast that Isaiah would want you to have.

Rosh Hashanah-5773
Jonathan Weiler

This week's Haftarah reading deals with the story of Hannah, the favored wife of Elkannah who nevertheless feels bereft because, the story tells us, her womb is closed.

After praying to the almighty, with some sage advice from Eli, Hannah is blessed with a child, whom she vowed would live to serve God. Thus was Samuel born.

As told to us, Hannah believes her life to be, ultimately, devoid of meaning as long as she is childless. Undoubtedly, many of us feel that, for one reason or another, there is some fundamental hole in our lives. And we often pray, each in our own way, for that void to be filled. For some, it might be the gift of a child. For another, escape from a loveless relationship. For others, a wish to have more money and so on. Such longings are, of course, human. But what's also human is our tendency to believe that once that hole is filled, all will be right with the world. We focus our attention on concrete deficiencies, or specific grievances, convincing ourselves that once that particular problem is solved, we will be happy and content, living out our lives as we imagine the character of a Hollywood movie must once the credits start rolling.

But in my reading of this parshah, anyway, something interesting happens to Hannah. After she is favored with a child, she naturally thanks and showers praise on God, promising to make good on her vow that her son will serve God. But she also can be read as having a moment of recognition – that having had a child does not necessarily ensure a lifetime of fulfillment and contentment. Circumstances change. Our needs and longings change. Once we are content in one area of our lives, new discontents appear before us, often with greater force and significance than before.

She says: "They who were full sell themselves for bread." And later: "the one with many children is bereaved." It is the Eternal, she later tells us, who dispenses poverty and wealth."

One way to understand this passage is that the material and tangible things we long for, vitally important though they often are, are not cure-alls. That we will continue to struggle to find meaning and fulfillment. And it might be argued, the one sure-fire way to sustain a sense of purpose is not to wish for salvation in the form of those tangible things (I know wishing for children is in a complicated category by itself), but rather by looking inward to find the motivation and desire to devote oneself to the well-being of others, rather than looking outward to satisfy inner longings. This time of year feels like an especially apt

moment to summon that inner sense of fulfillment, so that we might focus our energies toward the well-being of others.