

Rosh HaShana First Day
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Shana Tova. Soon we will read from the Torah, about a family that could be any of us, or our neighbors. It is an “oh-so-real story” about a family in trouble, a family that is breaking up. Abraham is separating from Hagar and their son, Ishmael. They lose the family home and their resources are quickly used up. They are suffering. The Torah empathizes with Hagar and Ishmael, tells us “God heard the boy’s cry.” In fact the name Ishmael, means “heard by God.” The Torah never actually says the boy cried out or even raised his voice. God hears the silent cry of those in pain even when no words are uttered. God hears. And then Hagar’s eyes are opened and she sees a well of water. It

had been there all along, but in her anguish, perhaps even her depression, she was unable to see it. But now that they have been heard, her eyes open and she sees a well which saves their lives. Ishmael will survive and be blessed to father 12 desert tribes.

After our portion, Ishmael will fall from the pages of Torah. He is never mentioned again, except once. Long after Sara has died, and long after Isaac has grown up and married, Abraham after a long life, breathes his last breath and dies. The Torah tells us Abraham was buried by his sons, Isaac *and* Ishmael. The outcast son Ishmael, the rejected and banished son, comes back home, to the place of his father's tent, he comes back to the place where he had grown up on his father's knee. The place where

he had learned to walk and said his first words, and had played with his baby brother, his half-brother Isaac. One can only imagine the flood of emotions that Ishmael must have felt when he shows up to his father's funeral and must now meet the *other* family, of his father. And he must meet Isaac, his half-brother playmate from so many years ago. The Torah's language is very sparse. It merely tells us the brothers Isaac and Ishmael bury their father Abraham. Perhaps they are also burying their pains and hurts of their past, their past traumas. Ishmael banished and abandoned by his father, and Isaac nearly killed by his father at Mount Moriah. Both boys live with deep emotional wounds from their father. And now they meet again at their father's funeral. What do they say to each other? What are they feeling? The Torah does not say, but

in the legends of the Talmud, the Rabbis, the eternal optimists of the Jewish spirit, tells us that the brothers reconcile. That when they got a second chance to build a relationship as adults, they manage to bury the past. They manage to let go of the old hurts and grievances and together they plant seeds of life for a better future.

An Israeli poet Shalom Shapiro wrote

“Ishmael, my brother,

How long shall we fight each other?

My brother from times bygone,

My brother, Hagar’s son,

My brother, the wandering one.

One angel was sent to us both,

One angel watched over our growth -

You in the wilderness, death threatening through

thirst,

I a sacrifice on the altar, Sarah's first.

Ishmael, my brother, hear my plea:

It was the angel who tied you to me.

Time is running out, put hatred to sleep.

Shoulder to shoulder, let's water our sheep.

Today is Rosh Hashana. The time when we stop and think about our lives, our relationships and even though it is hard and uncomfortable we think about our regrets. Our tradition asks us to begin the new year by facing our own selves with brutal honesty and self-critique to ask ourselves "How can we become better people?"

Ultimately Rosh Hashana and our Torah portion are about hope. It is about second chances. We all make mistakes. Even Abraham made mistakes.

The question is can we learn from our mistakes?

Can we resolve that if we get a second chance we will do things differently? We will do things in a better way? Can we do Teshuva, meaning can we reconcile with our brother, sister, spouse, parent, child, friend and neighbor.

Today we begin a new year. May we look deeply and honestly into our own souls and figure out what we can improve. Isaac and Ishmael are a model for us of two brothers who reconciled. May their example be a source of strength and encouragement that we too can improve and repair our relationships. This is a message of hope. This is the message of Rosh HaShana.

Shana Tova.