Yom Kippur 5778

A little more than 25 years ago, I attended a conference for Jewish Feminists in Los Angeles. There I met Savina Teuval who had recently written two books which showed how many of the puzzling actions of Abraham and Sarah, and their relationship with Hagar, could be understood in the context of the lives of Babylonian priestesses. As I was caught up in pregnancy induced mood swings, I asked her, in anguish, how she could still be a Jew after these disconcerting revelations. Clearly bewildered by my distress, she very kindly replied, “what does that have to do with modern Judaism? Our religion has grown and changed so much since then.”

What indeed? With a shout out to Jesse Gerwein, who pointed out earlier this year how weird the scapegoat ritual is, to Yossi Fendel and Judy Radousky who shared their wisdom on Rosh Hashanah, and with heartfelt prayers for refuah shlemah to Tirtza bat Shoshana u'Mordechai., whose recent diagnosis of leukemia is the reason that her sister Jenni Mangel is not giving the drasha today, I will try to give an answer to the question about why we are here today fasting and reading about all these weird things which our ancestors did in the distant past.

Let us start with the Torah. In Vayikra we read: “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts.” (and also sacrifices ). Why do we do this? Reuven Hammer, in his book Entering the Holy Days, states there was a Babylonian new year festival at this same time of year, and that ancient Israelites celebrated this day as the time of God’s coronation as our king, as the start of the new year, and as a time of cosmic judgment.

The Torah does not directly connect this day with Yom Kippur. We read: “Mark, the tenth day of the seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be a sacred occasion for you; you shall practice self denial,…expiation is made on your behalf before the Lord, your God.” As it turns out, Babylonians also had a time of atonement which occurred after their festival of the New Year, with many similar rituals to those recorded in the Torah, So, these 10 days are clearly linked, in the deep antecedents of our practice.

These 10 days are linked in a special way, different from our other holy days. To understand how, we have to understand time. The ancient Greeks identified two types of time, chronos, which is ordinary time, and Kairos, which is the right time, a critical or opportune moment. Kairos has etymological links to archery, and in rhetoric, Kairos is “a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved.” I first became acquainted with the concept of Kairos, through the works of Madeleine L’Engle, the author of the children’s book A Wrinkle in Time. She stated that this book, along with several other books involving the same characters, takes place in Kairos, rather than chronos. She used the Christian meaning, that is, the “appointed time in the purpose of God”, the time when God acts or an intersection with eternity. Theologian Paul Tillich felt Kairos indicated opportunities for an existential decision by the human subject.

So how do we know that these 10 days, these Yamim Noraim, are not in chronos, but a time apart? Ordinary holy days are connected with historical events and/or significant agricultural occasions. We celebrate them in ordinary time and our Torah readings for those holidays describe the offerings required on those days. Indeed, in the earliest practice of these Holy Days, we only read the Torah passages which described the prescribed sacrifices. Again, according to Reuven Hammer, this changed in the 3rd to 5th centuries CE, after exposure to the Greek and then Christian concepts of time. It was then we began the current selection of readings.

So that leads to my next question – why do we read about Sarah, and Hagar? Why the Akedah? If this is the New Year and we are commemorating God’s kingship, why not Breshit? Or the Ten Commandments? Why this parashah with so much that is troubling? I think we read these passages from VaYera on Rosh Hashanah, to prepare us for Yom Kippur. As Rosh Hashanah is considered to be one long day, we can consider the Torah readings from Day 1 and 2 to be continuous.

I believe that the verses we read on Rosh Hashanah are linked to our soul- searching during these days of awe. This is our story, this is how good people do wrong, and make atonement. This is the model of how we create family connections, and tear them apart, and try to rebuild again.

It is my contention that the real test of Abraham was not the Akedah, rather, it was how he handled the rivalries of his blended family. And in my mind, he failed miserably. What do we read? At Isaac’s weaning ceremony, a long awaited occasion, after Abraham has had a son with Hagar, his wife’s maid/companion ( which was, by the way, Sarah’s idea), Sarah decides that Hagar, the stranger, the other, and her son are threatening her son’s inheritance, his rights and privilege. And Abraham is troubled and seeks God’s council. Our text says that God tells Abraham, “Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says” because your line will continue through Isaac, and I will also make your other son a nation. But is that really what the text says? “Kol Asher Tomar elechah Sarah, shmah bkoleh. Everett Fox. Richard Elliott Friedman and our own Robert Alter translate this as “Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice”.

Why is this important, why is this a test? Listen to her voice, **not** her words, especially**, not** do what she says. When your spouse says, don’t get me a birthday present, do you do what he or she says? When your mother says, nothing is wrong, do you stop worrying? No, you listen for the feelings behind the words? When Sarah says “the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son” Abraham, and we, should hear fear and uncertainty– will you favor Hagar and her son, over me, your wife, and our child who is not your first born, but is mine? Will there be enough love, enough inheritance? And Abraham did not hear the answer that God handed to him – yes there will be enough. He could have reassured Sarah: Isaac will carry on our relationship with God, You are still my wife, my love. And there is enough, too, for Hagar and Ishmael- they are not threats; they are part of our family. But Abraham blew it. He sent Hagar and Ishmael away and they would have died, had an angel not rescued them from Abraham’s folly.

And so, as the text says, “some time afterward God put Abraham to the test”. Don’t you think that Abraham was waiting for this, for the other shoe to drop? The Midrash says, Abraham responded to God this way – Take your son (I have two sons); Your only son (Each is an only son to his mother), whom you love (I love them both), and finally, Isaac. Much has been made about how Abraham did not argue. How could he? How much guilt did he feel over sending Hagar and Ishmael away? How could he point out to God that offering Isaac as an Olah, a burnt offering, would negate God’s own promises to Abraham, when Abraham did not live up to his own responsibilities as a father. And what do you think that sending away Hagar and Ishmael did to Abraham’s relationship with Sarah? We never again hear about Sarah until her death.

And, this too is interesting. Abraham is stopped by an angel (as an angel also rescues Hagar and Ishmael) and sacrifices a ram to God. Do you know where else a ram is specifically mentioned? In Vayikra, there are commandments about various animals to be offered to God, for various offenses and occasions. However listen to the first time when a ram, specifically is mentioned: When a person, without knowing it, sins in regard to any of the Lord’s commandments about things not to be done, and then realizes his guilt, he shall be subject to punishment. He shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish…the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for the error he committed unwittingly. There then follows a list of other actions that a person commits against his fellows which can be redressed, and then expiated with an offering of a ram.

To me, this is very telling, and the reason we read these passages at this holy time. Abraham, listening to the words of God, and trying to do the right thing, acts wrongly against his son and the mother of his child. He acts wrongly again, against his wife and his other son, out of love and faith and guilt, and this time, a ram is provided for his expiation. And what were his sins? He did not listen, did not really hear, the concerns of one whom he loved. He misunderstood God’s message. He bought into a world where the needs of one were threatened by the rights of another. He could not support his blended family with their differences of opinions, desires, and needs.

And, these are our sins, too. We live in blended families: our Jewish family, a mixed multitude, is divided, over practice, over Israel; our American family is in conflict and much of this is rooted in fear and misunderstanding and we cannot even claim to yet have a global family. How many of us have felt pushed into corners where we had to make a decision that we knew would cause someone hurt? How many of us have done what we thought was the right thing, only to see unintended consequences which hurt our souls? This past year, in particular, has been a year of anguish for many of us, a year when we do not recognize our country, our relatives, or even our friends. We feel torn apart and do not know what to do, how we can fix things. As we read today in the Haftorah, expiation is not as easy as sacrificing a ram, sending away a goat, or even giving to the Yom Kippur appeal. It takes chesbon hanefesh – examining our souls.

We say in the Al Het, forgive us for sins we have committed knowingly and unknowingly, willingly and unwillingly. This is Kairos, when Al Het, missing the mark, can be addressed. We can re-aim; we can refocus, we can start again to listen to each other, not just to the words, but to what is underlying the words – fear of loss, desire for acceptance, fear of the other, desire for belonging, for safety, for something better; despair and also, hope. We can make existential decisions that put our Selves back together, moving past fear, and moving past guilt, seeing the image of God in the other, and, perhaps hardest of all, forgiving ourselves. This time is a gift we are given and we must use it wisely – there will be no angels to rescue us from acting wrongly. And, we ask God’s help, for if Abraham, who talked directly with God, could not succeed, how can we? We try and we fail, and we make expiation and we atone, and we try again. We do this every year; we are given this opportunity every year and, hopefully, every year we do a little better.

So, in this Kairos, in this time of cosmic judgment, when our very souls are on the line, I pray that, at the end of the day, we, each and every one of us, are refocused; we are recommitted; we are ready to begin again. Gmar Hatimah Tovah.