**Rosh Hashanah Day One David Neufeld Compassion and The Possibility of Change September 10th, 2018**

Shana Tova.

In preparing my drash for today, I had a realization: Rosh Hashanah is tough on kids. I don’t just mean the long services and the long, late meals. I mean in the text itself.

A lot happens to and around kids in the Torah portion we just read*,* both good and bad: First, Isaac is born and Abraham performs the first Jewish ritual circumcision in history (on someone other than himself, anyway). Second, Ishmael, Abraham’s son by Hagar, engages in some questionable behavior around Isaac, and a horrified and frightened Sarah tells Abraham to banish both mother and child. Abraham doesn’t really want to do this, but God tells him to listen to his wife--which, based on my experience, is generally pretty good advice--and he consents, casting them out with nothing but some bread and a single skin of water. Hagar and Ishmael wander in the desert, starving and dehydrated. At a particularly low moment, Hagar gives the boy up for lost. She stows him under a bush, walks far away so as not to see him die, and literally cries out to Heaven in despair.

And there’s also some stuff about a well which was stolen from Abraham by a guy named Abimelech, but a little more on that later.

As I re-read this, I was struck by the fact that in each of the two readings for the two days of Rosh Hashanah, a child is essentially condemned to death. In today’s portion, this condemnation is indirect—Abraham, at God’s behest, agrees to send Ishmael and Hagar out into the wilderness, where, without more than a little bread and a few mouthfuls of water, Ishmael will surely die. In tomorrow’s portion (the *Akedah*, or the binding of Isaac), it is much more direct. Abraham, again at God’s command, literally takes Isaac up a mountain to sacrifice him. This is horrible stuff. Why on earth do we read it on Rosh Hashanah of all days? If the stories ended there, the holiday (or at least the Torah reading part of it) would be a pretty depressing one.

But the stories don’t end there. In today’s portion, God hears Ishmael’s cries as he lies dying under the bush, and an angel calls out to Hagar. The angel reassures her that no harm will come to the boy (and that in fact, God will make a great nation from him), and when Hagar opens her eyes a well of water appears which saves them both. In the *Akedah* (spoiler alert!), just as Abraham is about to plunge the knife into Isaac, an angel of God calls out again. The angel tells Abraham not to harm his son, and when Abraham opens his eyes he sees a ram caught by the horns in a nearby thicket, and uses it for the sacrifice instead. Isaac survives, and through him the Jewish people survive as well. In both cases, at the last moment God intervenes and saves the child, who later grows up to create a great nation. This transforms the narrative from one of sadness and despair to one of compassion and hope.

And now we start to see why we’re reading this today. Compassion is all over this story. In Isaac’s birth, we see God’s compassion for Sarah who wants to have a child. In the wilderness, we see Hagar’s compassion for her son, and also for herself when she walks away so as not to watch him perish. In God’s intervention at the moment of Hagar’s deepest sorrow, we see God’s compassion for Hagar, and indeed for Ishmael himself. Entering into a new year with all of its unknown joys and challenges, what better thing to be thinking about than compassion—how can we hold it for ourselves, and how do we earn it from others?

Well, what did Ishmael do to earn God’s compassion? As is often the case in Torah study, to answer that question, we go back to another question—why did Sarah want him banished in the first place? If we go strictly by the text, it tells us only that Ishmael was “playing” or “making merry” (depending on the translation). Not much of a reason to banish someone and essentially condemn them to death. Rashi, though, expands on this. In his commentary, he tells us that Ishmael was engaging in idol worship, and that he was also pretending (or perhaps threatening) to kill Isaac by aiming a bow and arrow at him while claiming he was only shooting at birds. So, okay. According to Rashi at least, Ishmael was up to some sketchy stuff. Whether banishment and death-by-exposure is the most appropriate response to these behaviors is a conversation for another day, but for now, let’s look at the moment Ishmael was saved.

Quoting directly from the text:

God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

A quick side note: I love that in this moment, Hagar is not instructed to go get the boy, or take the boy out of the bushes, or even merely just to pick the boy up or give him a drink. The angel tells her to “lift up the boy and hold him by the hand.” It’s a beautiful image of compassion, celebration, and redemption for them both. Maybe if someone had lifted Ishmael up and held him by the hand when he first started playing around with idols and feeling some big feelings about his brother Isaac, he wouldn’t have been in this spot to begin with.

Anyway, before that lovely moment, we get a very interesting bit of language: “God has heard the cry of the boy *where he is.”*  On the simplest level, one could just assume that the text means God heard Ishmael crying from under the bush, where he physically was at that moment. But what if we look deeper? There is a midrash which tells us that at this moment the angels began to question God’s decision to save Ishmael, on the grounds that he had done bad things in the past and was likely to do bad things again in the future. God responds by asking them, “What is he now, righteous or wicked?” and the angels must admit that in this moment, alone and vulnerable and afraid, Ishmael is righteous. “Right,” God says (and I’m paraphrasing here) “And I will judge people only by their deeds at the time of their judgment, right now, not by what they have done or may do in the future.” Despite Ishmael’s dabblings with idolatry and possibly homicidal definition of “play,” the thing that matters is that in this moment he is righteous. This speaks to me of another big theme in this reading: the possibility of change. Whatever we have done in the past, whatever mistakes we might make in the future, we are judged by what we are doing now.

Change is all over this story too. Sarah’s sadness changes to laughter when Isaac is born. With the circumcision, Isaac is changed from a garden-variety baby into the first person ever to be entered into the Jewish covenant with God at birth. Certain death in the wilderness is changed into survival and the creation of a people. We even see one of Ishmael’s biggest sins—aiming the bow at Isaac with possible intent to kill--turned into a positive. When Ishmael grows up, the Torah tells us, he becomes a skilled archer. His childhood mistake turns into the start of a positive adult identity. He becomes much more than an archer, of course, but we all have to start somewhere. We even see change in the Abimelech portion of the story: When Abraham confronts Abimelech about the theft of his well and the two of them argue bitterly, they eventually wind up coming to an agreement. They make a pact, Abraham gives Abimelech seven sheep to seal the deal, and anger and resentment are changed into peace and understanding.

Compassion and the possibility of change: If that’s not a recipe for “what to think about on Rosh Hashanah,” I don’t know what is. So let’s enter into these Days of Awe with compassion—both for ourselves and for those who may have wronged us. Ishmael may have done some bad things, but I’m a firm believer that there are no good kids and no bad kids—there are simply kids who have needs and try to get those needs met by using strategies. Some strategies are just better and more successful than others. And the same goes for adults. We all have needs that we try to get met, and if each of us was able to recognize that in others, the world might be a much kinder place.

Let’s embrace the possibility of change too—like Abraham and Abimelech, even in the midst of bitter disputes we can change anger and resentment into agreement and healing, two things that are needed now more than ever. Like Ishmael, at any moment, regardless of what came before or what may come after, we can be righteous. And maybe that moment is all that matters. Lift each other up, hold each other by the hand, and we’ll be a lot closer to making 5779 a wonderful year.

Shana Tova.