

The older I get the more amazed I am at how many times I can read/hear the same Torah Portion and still gain something new from it. This year reading the story of Sarah, Hagar and Abraham, the text came alive in a whole new way. One of the first things I noticed was how much the story changed depending on where the story began. Whether I begin the story in Gen. 21:1 as the rabbis do on Rosh Hashanah or begin it in Gen 16:1 as it does in the bible transforms what I read and understand as the truth of the story. You see, in Genesis 16 we read about the horrors of being barren in a patriarchal society where the total reason for a woman's being is to produce sons for her husband. When Sarai at the time, later to become Sarah, believed that she would have no biological sons, she became terrified of what being barren meant to her and about her. For being barren was seen as a judgment of sin and unworthiness. She was a failure in the eyes of her community because she could not get pregnant. She introduces surrogacy into our story. Hagar, her concubine, her slave, is given to Avram so that Sarai "shall have a son through her." Of course there were some very important differences between surrogacy in biblical times and today. Today, the most important being Hagar probably did not have a choice in the matter, nor was she paid. Nonetheless, in the world in which Sarai lived, she had every right to assume she was becoming a mother, not Hagar. And her son, through Hagar, would inherit all of Avram's wealth.

Fast forward to today's Torah portion, where both Sarah and Hagar have biological children. It is unclear from the text if Sarah ever really adopted Ishmael as her own son or if he remained Hagar's son in the end. What **is** clear is that Sarah bonded with her biological son, Isaac, and not her adoptive one, Ishmael, causing her to fear that Isaac's relationship with his father was at risk because of Ishmael. At that time, she did what she felt she needed to do to protect her child.

She had Hagar and Ishmael banned from their home knowing that, as a former slave, a foreigner from Egypt, and a woman with a young child, the likelihood of her having a means to support herself was about nil. Finally, Sarah could have the respect of her husband and her community that she felt she deserved all along.

The second thing I noticed was how the story changed dramatically if I told it from Hagar's point of view. You see, the reader was not even aware that Hagar existed until Sarai needed help bearing children. Was she born free or a slave? Had she sold herself into slavery to pay off a family debt or was she bought off the market? We don't know whether she was Sarai's only slave or one of many. Hagar's life before Sarai's need to have a son is irrelevant in the biblical author's mind. I can't imagine it was irrelevant in Hagar's mind. For that matter, we don't even know if Sarai asked Hagar's permission before telling Avram to "consort with my maid." Did Hagar have a choice? Did she know that the child she would carry and birth would become Sarai's son? Or did she think this was her chance to finally have the status as wife she deserved all along. Either way, Hagar, unlike Sarai, gets pregnant quickly, which means in the biblical world that Hagar is righteous and deserving of Gd's favor while Sarai is not. According to the biblical text, after Hagar conceived, Sarai "was lowered in her esteem." Now if you ask me, if I were a slave forced to sleep with my mistress's husband and I got pregnant right away, it would prove to me that I was righteous and she was not. After that, I might look down at my mistress as well. Of course, Sarai could not tolerate an uppity slave, so she abused her. Hagar ran away. And this is where something truly fascinating happens. Hagar becomes the first woman in the biblical text who on her own receives a visit from either Gd or the angel of Gd. Her whole existence is validated by this one event. She has received a gift that even her mistress Sarai has never witnessed. Hagar is in direct communication with Gd. She returns to

Abraham. Fast forward to today's Torah portion and we learn about Sarah's pregnancy. Now it is Ishmael, Hagar's biological son, that Sarah is jealous of. Sarah has them both sent out and once again Hagar enters into a dialogue with Gd allowing Hagar to find a life for herself and Ishmael outside the parameters of slavery.

In many ways, it feels to me like we just read two very different stories. Now, if we had more time, I would go back and tell the story again from the point of view of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and/or Gd. Every time the story is told, what is truth changes. Who the righteous one is, who the victim is, who the villain is, is a moving target. But mostly the truth takes on a different hue depending on the person telling the story.

As some of you know, this summer my family went to Massachusetts for our summer vacation. One of the many places we visited was Lexington. In Lexington we went to many different historical sites, two of which were the Munroe and the Buckman Taverns. You might already know this, but I didn't. The Munroe Tavern is set up as a tavern for the patriots telling us about the American Revolution from the American point of view. The Buckman tavern is set up as a tavern for the redcoats telling us about the American rebellion from the loyalists' point of view. Leaving Lexington later that day, I realized that as proud as I am of being American, and I am very grateful to be an American, I was not sure that if I had lived in the 1700s, if I would have been a patriot. In fact, I think that there was a lot of truth to how the loyalist told the story.

Of course soon after returning home, my parents gave me a book to read entitled *The Hairstons*, by Henry Wienczek. This book is a biography of a family, the Hairstons, who, until

very recently had been divided into two very distinct parts: the African American Hairstons, and the Caucasian American Hairstons.

As the author interviewed each family member, we were let into the history of our country from the early 1800s to the present day, see-sawing back and forth from plantation owners to slaves, from white privilege to black lynchings, from shame to pride. We are let into the reality of a family, of a country built on many different truths, each one valid, and each one forming our perspective, reactions, and understanding of the world in which we live today.

And then as I am coming up to the chapters about the reconstruction in the United States after the civil war, Michael Brown was shot by Darren Wilson. But I must admit when I first heard the story, I heard it without names, without histories, or details. I just heard that an unarmed black teen was shot by a white police officer. Ever since then, I have been caught up in our country's desperate attempt to discover the truth about what happened that night. Did Mr. Brown threaten Officer Wilson? Was Officer Wilson over-reacting based on stereotypes of African American males? Was this an isolated case or is it part of the contemporary American landscape? The most shocking answer to these questions were the statistics that came out weeks later in a Pew study of the whole country's reactions to what happened in Missouri. By about four-to-one (80% to 18%), African Americans say the shooting in Ferguson raises important issues about race that merit discussion. By contrast, Caucasian Americans, by 47% to 37%, say the issue of race is getting more attention than it deserves. 65% of African Americans say the police have gone too far in responding to the shooting's aftermath. Caucasian Americans are divided: 33% say the police have gone too far; 32% say the police response has been about right. About half of Caucasian Americans (52%) say they have a great deal or fair amount of

confidence in the investigations, compared with just 18% of African Americans. Roughly three-quarters of African Americans (76%) have little or no confidence in the investigations.

We, as a country, are living multiple truths formed by our experiences, our perceptions, and, yes, our race. Of course, I believe it is the court's job to find the truth and act accordingly in this one isolated case. But it is also our job to find the many different truths to prevent these travesties from occurring over and over again. For until we honor all of our truths, we will continue to live a splintered existence. I cannot help to look around my own community and notice the number of African Americans who ride the buses and the number of Caucasian Americans who own cars; the number of African Americans who spend hours in DSS offices and the number of Caucasian Americans who don't even know where the office is; the difference in success rates in the very same schools based on race and economics. Here at home, not far away in Ferguson, there are many different truths. Are we ready to listen and tell them? Ralph Ellison wrote that "the persistent drive to define human hope in the United States...[is] not through avoiding those aspects of reality which were brutal and dehumanizing, but taking that too as part of the given scene, and then determining to go beyond it. Not to ignore it, not to pretend that it didn't exist, but to humanize it, to take it in, to make it connect with other aspects of living-with the dream, with the sounds of the future and the sounds of hope." As Americans we are looking for something new to do, see, experience. As a result, we often forget that the latest new thing is a product of the very past we avoid confronting. We have so much to learn about dialoguing with our different pasts and presents to create a new future. And yet, as we have seen over and over again, until we do engage in our different truths, how can we ever hope to incorporate all of the truths into the overall truth of who we have the potential to become?

Dare I say the same could be said for the reality in the Middle East, in Eastern Europe, in Western Africa, in my home on Bright Hawk Street. Many of you have heard me talk about Mt Rushmore before. Forgive me for being repetitive.

But I really do think it is the perfect metaphor for the reality of the validity of many different truths. As one approaches the mountain, all one sees are green trees, rocks and beautiful rolling hills. Of course there is the road with all the cars on it. But if you ignore the road and all that is on it, all one sees is beautiful nature void of humanity. It is only as one turns the bend does one see the magnificent sculptures of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. Both are true. Both are incomplete without the other.

What don't we see because we do not allow ourselves to enter into the possibility that we have only a portion of the truth rather than the whole thing. The rabbis taught that Gd spoke to each person in the voice that they could hear. At the time, we were not capable of hearing the sacred as others heard it. Are we today? Can we hear the voice of our spouse, children, parents, neighbors, those that radically disagree and even challenge the truth we have based our whole life on? Another way of understanding truth is by understanding the myths we all create to explain our life choices. As Henry Wiencek wrote, "Myths would not be so dangerous except that we live by them. Myths determine the beliefs people have about themselves and tell people what place they have in the world. Myth bestows ownership of the past and declares who are its heirs today."

This year as we read about Sarah and Hagar, may we reexamine the truths we accept and the truths accepted by others. May we acknowledge our role in others stories, listen for the many truths, avoid easy solutions and work in coalition to dialogue about the truth we live , as well the

ones that live whether we acknowledge them or not. So that next time we hear the stories of Hagar and Sarah, we may realize they sound different because we are different, capable of understanding more truth than just one.

For as William Faulkner wrote, “The past is never dead, it is not even past.” What are we being asked to do? We are being asked, as Ralph Ellison wrote, to stop creating “a false identity” by thinking that we “can ignore what went before.” Rather, we must consciously accept “the harsh realities of the human condition, of the ambiguities and hypocrisies of human history as they have played themselves out.” For only then can we begin to approach what we believe might be The Truth.

In a moment we are about to rise for the Amidah on pp. 324. This prayer begins by acknowledging our ancestors, not because they were perfect, but because they are the foundation that gave birth to everything that connects them to me. Ironically this prayer ends with our own contemporary silent plea to Gd. Somewhere in between the first Jew and me are the roots, trunk, and the branches that have given me life. The question I am asked on Rosh Hashanah is, “What am I to do with that life? How can I begin to understand that question without knowing all the truths that have created ‘the me’ I have grown to know, never mind ‘the me’ I hope someday to become?” Please rise.