

The Brutality of Repentance

David Stern

THE TORAH READING THAT IS MOST COMMONLY associated with Rosh Hashanah and the meaning of the holiday is the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac. In Jewish tradition, that story has come to symbolize what absolute obedience to God's commandments means, not only in terms of Abraham's own character as a perfectly righteous man but also more functionally, in the practical significance of his deed for subsequent generations of his descendants. Abraham's silent, unquestioning obedience to God's command that he sacrifice his son earned, according to the tradition, a *zekhut* or merit — heavenly Brownie points, as it were — that *we* — Abraham's descendants — are able to invoke on our own behalf on Rosh Hashanah, the day of judgment, when we seek God's forgiveness for our own misdeeds and failings, because we lack sufficient merits or good deeds of our own to justify our being forgiven. Even if there are those among us who find Abraham's obedience to be misguided, the relevance of Abraham's behavior and its practical import for Rosh Hashanah is clear, at least as it appeared to our ancestors.

In contrast, the relevance of the *first* day's Torah reading to Rosh Hashanah is not obvious. What could the story of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's other son, ever have to do with Rosh Hashanah? What can it teach us about the Day of Judgment? Truth be told, the reason why we read the story of Hagar and Ishmael on the first of the two days of Rosh Hashanah is not clear. The first Rabbinic text to mention Genesis 21 as the beginning of the reading on Rosh Hashanah is Tosefta Megillah 3:3, but it gives no explanation for the choice. Some later sages explained that the reason was because Genesis 21 begins, *Va-Adonai pakad et Sarah/And God took note (or remembered) Sarah*, and the theme of remembrance is key to the Day of Judgment. Others have suggested that the story of the birth of Isaac is

a corollary to Rosh Hashanah's other theme as the birthday of the world's creation. And part of the reason must surely lie in the fact that the narrative of Isaac's birth is the natural beginning to the story of the Akeidah that follows in the next chapter in Genesis. It is not the story of Isaac's birth, however, that most of us remember about the Torah reading of the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Rather, what sticks in our minds, if not our throats, is the far more troubling narrative of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. What relevance can that story have to Rosh Hashanah?

Part of the answer may lie in the connection between the two stories in the two chapters, the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael and the Akeidah. Somewhat strangely, the classical commentators do not remark much on their connection, but modern commentators and readers have often seen clear parallels between them. For one thing, both are stories in which Abraham either loses or is threatened with the loss of an only son — that is, the only son of the child's mother — in the case of Ishmael, Hagar, Abraham's *pilegsh* or concubine (although she is actually Sarah's maidservant, not Abraham's); and in the case of Isaac, Sarah herself. In both stories, the two sons are saved by an angel. (See Gen. 21:17 and 22:11, whose wordings are virtually identical save for the name of the addressee.) And in both stories, when Abraham gets ready to fulfill God's command, we are told, *Va-yashkeim Avraham ba-boker /Early next morning, Abraham...* [Gen. 21:14 and 22:3]. As the commentators on the Akeidah comment, the reason why the Bible tells us that Abraham got up *early* in the morning was not to teach us that he was an early riser (or couldn't sleep) but to indicate his readiness to perform God's commandment — whether it was to sacrifice his son or to cast him out into the desert. Through these various repetitions and parallels, the Bible seems to be drawing our attention to the connections between the two stories, although, as usual, it never specifies what they really are.

On the other hand, for all their parallels, there are also profound differences between the two stories. Probably the biggest difference is their mode of representation, the way they present their stories and characters to the reader. As many have noted, the most striking thing about the Akeidah as it is presented in the Torah is what the text does *not* tell us: it does not tell us why God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. It does not tell us what Abraham felt or thought. Nor does it tell us what Isaac thought or felt. (Isaac, in any case, has only one line, the famous “where's the animal to be sacrificed, Daddy?”) We

do not know when the Akeidah took place; in point of fact, we do not even know where the land of Moriah is (or the mountain of Moriah, though the tradition ascribed it to the Temple mount). And just as we do not know why God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, we do not know why the angel tells Abraham not to. And where does the ram come from? We do not know.

These are just some of the silences and holes in the text; there are many more. And yet it is fair to say that the power of the story comes from the very fact of these silences. As the great literary scholar Eric Auerbach pointed out more than sixty years ago, the Akeidah is “fraught with background.” The less the text tells us, the more we, the story’s readers, are tempted to fill in the silences and blanks. Of course, we can’t do this honestly. Instead, the Torah essentially asks us to accept the story the way it is and to submit to its truth silently, just as Abraham silently submits to God’s command.

The Torah essentially asks us to accept the story the way it is
and to submit to its truth silently

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is presented in virtually the opposite way. It tells us much about the characters and their feelings and motivations. *Va-teire Sarah et ben Hagar ha-mitzrit asher yaldah l’Avraham m’tzacheik / And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had born to Abraham “m’tzacheik.”* This is what angers Sarah and sets off her demand that Hagar be expelled. Of course, we already know that Sarah doesn’t like Hagar. Four chapters back, at the beginning of Genesis 16, after Sarah realizes that she is barren and gives Hagar her maidservant to Abraham as a surrogate — a legitimate practice in the Ancient Near East — and after Hagar becomes pregnant, we are told that *Va-takeil g’virtah be-‘eineha / Her mistress, Sarah, was lowered in her eyes.* Apparently, Hagar’s pregnancy went to her head, and she flaunted it before Sarah, who was outraged at her behavior. With Abraham’s consent, Sarah then proceeds to torture Hagar until she makes her flee from their house into the desert where an angel ultimately saves her and convinces her to return to Abraham’s house and to give birth to her son.

Essentially, this story is the model for the later story, a kind of doublet, the main difference between them being that in the earlier story, Hagar brings her expulsion upon herself through her own behavior; even if her punishment

seems somewhat excessive to her arrogance, it's her own doing. In our story, however, we have no idea what Hagar did to bring her punishment upon herself and her son. All the text says is that Sarah saw Hagar's son *m'tzacheik*. This word is somewhat enigmatic — it means “laughing” or “playing” — but why exactly laughing or playing should bring upon Ishmael and Hagar what amounts to a death-sentence is not obvious. The classical commentators tell us that the word is the same as *m'sacheik*, and that it is either an allusion to idol-worship — Ishmael was an idolator — or that he was making fun of Isaac or ridiculing Sarah and saying that she had become pregnant from Abimelekh, the Philistine king (who had taken her from Abraham in a previous chapter) and not from Abraham. Still other commentators propose that the word has a sexual connotation, either fondling or molestation.

None of these answers, though, is entirely satisfying because the surrounding text itself doesn't lead naturally to any of them. I would suggest that what the word really means — especially in light of the next verse where Sarah demands that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael because she does not want the son of that maidservant to share in the inheritance with Isaac — is that *m'tzacheik* is “being Yitzhak,” Isaac-ing, as it were, acting as though he were the favored son. This is what Sarah cannot abide.

Abraham, we are told, was distressed at Sarah's demand, and understandably so, because Ishmael after all is also his son. But then, even more amazingly, God tells Abraham *not* to be distressed and to obey Sarah, his wife. He then adds that He, God, will take care of Hagar and Ishmael, and make Ishmael into a great nation. Yet sending Hagar and Ishmael off into the barren desert seems a strange way, even for God, to take care of someone, and this very perplexity is also complicated by what follows: Abraham obeys God, gets up early in the morning (eagerly, that is), and sends Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert with a little bread and some water, apparently enough only for a day, because, as we're then told, Hagar and Ishmael run out of water and food very quickly, and Hagar leaves Ishmael under a bush in the desert to die.

Now, if Abraham truly believed God that He would take care of Hagar and Ishmael, why does he see fit to give them *any* bread and water? God will take care of them. Yet if the reason he gives it to them is because he doesn't want to rely on miracles, why does he give them only enough for a day? It's almost as if, by giving them a *little* sustenance for the road, Abraham

is really assuaging his own guilty conscience for sending them to what seems to be their inevitable deaths.

And this is what indeed happens. Hagar gets lost in the desert, the two run out of food and water, she realizes they are going to die, she hides her son because she can't bear watching him die, she weeps, and apparently Ishmael cries even louder because it is his voice that God hears, after which He subsequently orders the angel to save them.

In this story, then, completely unlike the Akeidah, we are told an immense amount about the characters and their actions even if their motivation and meaning are sometimes ambiguous because the information we're given is either contradictory or unclear. The real problem is that the more we are told about the characters, the less we find them sympathetic or exemplary. Abraham initially seems to feel the right thing when Sarah first demands that he expel Hagar and he balks at doing it, but then God — for reasons that seem paradoxical at the least (nearly killing someone is a strange way to protect them) — orders Abraham not to follow his better instincts, and *then*, Abraham, a little too eagerly, follows his *worse* instincts, and as we've already said, sends Hagar and Ishmael off with a little food but clearly not enough to sustain them for very long. We are more sympathetic to Hagar and Ishmael — they don't at all appear to deserve the way they are treated — but it's sympathy for pure victims. Hagar seems to resign herself entirely to death; she doesn't try to do anything to save herself and her son, and though it's understandable that she doesn't want to watch Ishmael die, hiding him under a bush seems a little too cavalier.

And most problematically of all, there is Sarah. Back in Genesis 16 when Sarah persecutes Hagar until she flees, Sarah's anger is at least given some justification, even if the punishment she inflicts upon Hagar is excessive. We can understand how sensitive and vulnerable the barren Sarah must have felt when she was unable to conceive for so long, and Hagar appears to have slept with Abraham one night and instantly gotten pregnant. But now, four chapters later, Sarah has been granted her greatest wish; she has a son; she knows that her son will be Abraham's real heir (God has told them so repeatedly); and yet, she is still jealous of Hagar, and jealous of Ishmael for her own son, Isaac. As my friend and colleague Sara Horowitz once pointed out in her own Rosh Hashanah dvar Torah, this jealousy is a kind of unnecessary spitefulness. Even though Sarah now has what she wants, she still can't bear to

see someone else have it, too. We all know this kind of spite. We all have felt it, and felt deeply embarrassed when we felt it.

The Bible is famous for not pulling punches when it portrays its characters. Jacob begins as a trickster, and ends up a wizened but slightly embittered patriarch; his sons kidnap and sell their brother; most of what we know about the Israelites after they leave Egypt is how they disobey God and His commands, and are repeatedly ungrateful for the kindnesses He does them. The story of Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion, however, is, I think, one of the Bible's most unsparing and honest portrayals of its characters, and especially so in comparison with the very idealized portrayal of Abraham and Isaac in the story of the Akeidah that follows. In the parashah that we read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, no one comes out looking very good; all the characters look very human, very much, all too much, like ourselves, even though we hardly wish to recognize ourselves when we behave like Abraham and Sarah in this story.

And that, I would propose, may be the meaning that this parashah can hold for us on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, on the day before we read the Akeidah. As I noted at the outset, we read the Akeidah in order to invoke Abraham's righteousness and the merit or *zekhut* of his righteousness for our own sake on this day of judgment. But Abraham's *zekhut*, the *zekhut avot*, the merit of our ancestors, does not work automatically — alas! It helps, but you also need to do teshuvah, to repair your own ways, and to do that, you first need to look at yourself as closely, unsparingly, even harshly, as the Bible looks at Abraham and Sarah in the earlier parashah. Repentance begins with brutal honesty.

DAVID STERN is a professor of Classical Hebrew Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He has written widely on midrash and medieval and modern Jewish literature, and currently studies the history of the Jewish book as a material artifact.