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Rosh Hashanah & African Slavery

What are we celebrating on Yom Teruah? Is it the creation of the world or the creation of humanity? Chazal (Sages) teaches that the world itself was created in the month of Nisan!

So, on this day, we celebrate the creation of our world, our relationships, and our actions. Our humanness and the imperfection that comes with it. In this Parasha, Leikh Lekha (Genesis 21:1-34), Sarah has just given birth to Yitzhak, a miracle in their lives because she never believed she would bear children. During the reading we found the event where she saw Yishmael playing with his baby half-brother baby Yitzhak and Sarah became upset. It is unclear from the text why exactly she became upset; some infer from the language that perhaps Yishmael was doing something inappropriate with his younger brother via words or actions.

On a personal note, as I read through the text with my limited view, I can perceive Sarah, an adult, a woman in a leadership role, I believe she saw something else.

Yishmael was about sixteen when Yitzhak was born. I can imagine from the rabbinical interpretations of Avraham that his son who was becoming a man was a tall teenager and probably really starting to resemble his father Avraham, but he also began to resemble his mother Hagar. To the eyes of all the onlookers He was clearly a man, clearly the heir to Avraham's legacy. It was at that moment when I believed Sarah's fears were being realized. (see Parashat Vayyera 18: 15)

Back in Leikh Lekha Chapter 16, Sarai, not yet having been named Sarah, gave Hagar to Avram to conceive an heir. I repeat, she gave Hagar to Avram to make children. This notion

should give a conscientious and critical reader time to pause and reflect on what is actually happening.

During my [Rabbinical studies](#) I had the privilege of discovering an essay entitled, “Sarah and Hagar” (1996), by biblical scholar Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, z”l. In this essay she points out that *“Neither Sarah nor Avraham nor the ancient texts obtain the slaves’ consent: Using another person’s body as a surrogate for one’s own is part of the fabric of slavery. The womb, like the muscles, could be utilized for the good of the master. So, Sarah proposed to be “built up” through the action of Hagar’s womb.”*

A fascinating discovery is that when Hagar conceives, the text says, וַתִּקַּל גְּבוּרָתָהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ: that Sarai was lowered in esteem in the eyes of Hagar (see 16:4). Interestingly, these same words get repeated to Avraham (see 16:5).

As I was taught by my rabbis the Hebrew text, without using names, gives us a glimpse of what is going on for Sarah. וַתִּקַּל גְּבוּרָתָהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ: can also be translated as “her mistress was lowered in her own eyes.”

Is this a human thing to do? To feel a certain way, then project our feelings onto someone else as their feelings about us?

Incidentally, now can understand that because Sarai perceived a threat, she was afraid and she abused Hagar, her slave-woman.

As readers of Tora, we will discover a similar incident with the spies in Shelakh Lehkha 13:33, *“We were like grasshoppers in their eyes!”*

What happens here is the scouts sent by Moshe perceived their own insecurity instead of trusting in what Hashem had already told them. And here too, Sarah perceiving a threat to Hashem’s promise of bearing and heir she sees in Yishmael and Hagar the death of that promise. And so, Hagar and her son must leave!

When I read the text, I always think lovingly of the mother of our people. Yet year after year, I battle with this text; I battle with myself. This reading each year hurts my heart; it hurts because in truth I can understand the human nature of it. With my own eyes, my own understanding, I can see that Hagar probably felt that finally she would be raised in esteem, she would be more than a slave-woman; but Sarah our mother, instead of seeing

that Hagar would be grateful she saw her as an equal, competition, she felt that if Hagar were raised, that must necessarily mean that she is being lowered.

In my studies of what I like to call real **African American history; I can see this same dynamic playing out in the racial disparities in America right now. Like Sarah and Hagar's relationship, our country the United States of America and our relationships with its past, and its inhabitants are also built on slavery.

In America, slavery was the plan. It was proposed that the American white would be "built up" through the actions of the enslaved African people. However, the personhood of African heritage people thwarted those plans; when I read the text through these lenses I can see that it was really the personhood of Hagar and her son Yishmael, this was what triggered Sarah so deeply, so deeply that she lost her balance, her focus, her belief in the promise, their personhood caused Sarah our mother to break up the family in order to keep her "esteem high".

In my studies I have learned that Freedom for the African Slaves especially in the south destroyed the European plan, it was destroyed not because the people were now free; it was destroyed because the people felt "lessened" in the eyes of the formerly enslaved. They felt "lessened" not as in looked down upon, but lessened from their believed superior status to equals, which for them was much worse.

As offensive as it may seem, for Sarah, Hagar her slave-woman was essentially only a "womb with legs," having a viewpoint and status of her own was not a concern of her mistress. This same mentality flourished in the times of former enslavers during the Reconstruction in our country, and we continue to see the byproducts of that offense today. <https://www.genome.gov/about-genomics/fact-sheets/Eugenics-and-Scientific-Racism>

And unlike Hagar, who runs away and unlike the Yisraelites who left Mitzrayim (Egypt), and were free from their oppression and oppressors, formerly enslaved Americans and their descendants remain in this land.

As an Afro-Sephardic Jew, I ask my co-religionist and non-Jews to understand this complex relationship and history. I ask that we use our ancient yet living text known as the Tora to be an agent of healing for this country, to assist in the teshuva and the tikkun that is way overdue.

When we accept an American identity, when we choose or continue to live in this land, each moment we benefit from it, then we are also heir to its sins, regardless of who or what we are now. For me even though my foremothers and forefathers were not a part of the violence of this land. But as a first-generation Afro-Sephardic Jew living in the south US of America, I accept the truth and am willing this new year to help make the changes. Let us sound the sound of the Shofar for freedom and let freedom come!

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