

Rosh Hashanah 5770 – Invisible People

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Each year we read the story of Ishmael and Hagar as our Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Each year this story of a cast-off son and a heartbroken mother calls us to examine the text's nuance, to experience what it means to feel irrelevant and to be invisible in the eye of the other. I want to examine today's portion as a way of challenging us to open our eyes to what blinds us as well as to open our ears to what we do not hear.

We read in the first verse **וַיִּהְיֶה פָקֵד אֶת־שָׂרָה** God **פָקֵד** takes note of Sarah as he promised. **Pakad**, to take note perhaps is to see on a deep level, to see her in her full humanity and to be aware of her pain. In the act of God “taking note”, Sarah is not alone, God knows her greatest disappointment and blesses her with conception and giving birth to Isaac. Yet her happiness is not without fear. Sarah sees Ishmael, the son of her husband Abraham and Hagar as a threat to Isaac. She orders Hagar and Ishmael to be banished from their home because she worries Isaac will have to share his inheritance with Ishmael.

What happens when Hagar and Ishmael leave is fascinating. Ishmael, is a teenager, not a small dependent child. At the very time when a teenager is developmentally visible Ishmael becomes voiceless and nameless. He is diminished in the text by being referred to as *hayeled*, the child.

Hagar and her nameless son are sent away. They wander and are lost in the wilderness of Beersheva. When they run out of water, Hagar casts off her only child and leaves him

under one of the bushes and sits in the distance. She no longer has the strength to care for, or even to 'see' her son, lest as she describes "she sees the child die".

Hagar lifts her voice and cries. Perhaps out of fear of witnessing his suffering, she turns from seeing and hearing Ishmael. We can only imagine her son's pain. His confusion, anger and deep despair are not only because of his physical thirst but because he was abandoned and invisible to his father and he is dying in the presence of his mother, who has turned away.

We are next told that God hears the voice of the youth, *hanaar*. It is interesting that, God 'sees' Ishmael for who he really is—he is no longer a *yeled*, a child, but a *naar*, a youth, a teenager. Even though it was Hagar who called out and cried, the Torah tells us God heard the boy and not Hagar. Did Hagar not hear her own son? Was it of her own doing because she closed her ears to his cries and shut her eyes to his existence?

God tells Hagar not to worry. God heard Ishmael and invites Hagar to lift up the boy and hold his hand – for her to 'see' Ishmael and greet him in his full humanity. Then, God opens up Hagar's eyes and she sees a well of water and fills her skin of water and gives it to her son to drink. This is not a new well, we are led to believe the well was in her view the whole time. However, Hagar could not see it until she could see her own son. In 'seeing' Ishmael, in not running from his fear, his confusion and his pain, her eyes are opened. And before she can see Ishmael, she needed some one else— in this case, God, to take note and value him.

This Torah reading illustrates an example of what we hide from ourselves, what we choose not to see or hear. What we ignore and avoid- this is a source of our distance from

God, each other and our own inner truth and still small voice calling within, the *Kol demamah dakah*.

A story:

A *yeled* a child who grew up at Beth Shalom, now a *naar*, a young man, Danny Low, is studying in Kenya. He recounted recently in a letter to his family and friends his attempts to adapt to the local culture and lifestyle. He wrote that people in Kenya live in unbearable poverty.

He said, "I have been exposed to numerous problems requiring change. Naturally, this prompts the question of how can I, how can we, make positive change? Interestingly, part of the current problem, and possible solution, came to me while studying the Swahili language. I was learning new words when I came across the verb 'kuunga mkono,' meaning to support. Support has such a positive connotation and is a great thing, but I fear it is precisely the thing preventing real action and significant change. When asked, most of us will tell how we 'support' human rights, we 'support' global education, we 'support' access to healthcare for all. But what does this 'support' really mean? How does this 'support' correlate to action? In other words, what are you, what are we, really doing on a daily basis to support a cause? I will argue that support is insufficient. Support will not elicit change. **We need more.** Interestingly, 'kuunga mkono,' the Swahili verb meaning to support, when translated literally, means to join hands or to join arms. This is the action necessary if we are to really evoke change in education, healthcare and human rights. We don't need supporters of causes, we need champions of causes. It's time we stop turning a blind eye."

From our very own *naar*, Danny, the voice of the youth cries out to remind us what the Torah tells us. Behold all the children of God. Danny lives amongst them experiencing the reality of their thirst and hunger. He does not ignore or distance himself. He is a keen observer of pain and suffering. His letter is also a call to us. A call to hear the cry of the poor, to render them visible. The call to hear and to see is in Kenya. And it is also here on the streets of Seattle, and even within our own shul walls. The homeless, the elderly, the infirmed, the physically and mentally challenged, the person who is different.

To champion change, we need to face our fears and our habit of shutting our eyes and closing our ears. The philosopher William James said "no more fiendish punishment can be devised than that one should be turned loose in society and remain unnoticed by everyone".

What does it take to open our eyes and our ears? Often times it is a crisis, a health scare, a loss, a failure. But these are The Days of Awe when we are charged to examine what we don't want to see or hear, we are charged to examine how to live our lives.

One of the roles of the shofar is to awaken us to the call of teshuva, of repentance, the call of doing better, of changing our ways. A wake up call to see and to hear. As Maimonides describes "arise from your slumber, you who are asleep; wake up from your deep sleep, you who are fast asleep; search your deeds and repent." The sound of the shofar helped bring down Jericho's walls. The sound of the shofar can break down our strongest defenses – the walls we build around ourselves, the walls which keep us from seeing and listening.

Today is Shabbat. Our tradition is not to blow the shofar on Shabbat. We don't have the visual nor the auditory cue—the shrilling blast of a ram's horn—to awaken us.

During the recitation of the musaf amidah, I challenge you to pause when the shofar is silent and listen to the unheard tekiah, teruah and shevarim. Take a moment. Allow yourself to be Hagar, not the one at the beginning or the Torah reading, but the one at the end of our reading. Open your eyes and listen to God's voice speaking to you—hear the cries whether they are your own or the cries of the hungry, the poor, the overlooked. See the well—*God has placed it there for each of us. We just need to open our eyes to see it.* It is *our* source and *our* strength.

And then take this awareness with you beyond the amidah, beyond the sanctuary, beyond today.

Shanah Tova