

My Three Matriarchs: Eva Dorf, Sarah, and Hagar

Rosh Hashanah 5768 – by Julie Dorf

When the Rabbi asked me to do today's sermon, I thought I had already done my synagogue mitzvah this year by co-chairing the 30th anniversary dinner. But her timing was actually good, because I was trying to figure out what to do to honor my grandmother, Eva Dorf, who died in early August.

I've been familiar with the tradition of giving tzedakah in memory of people when they die, and I had been thinking that we'd sponsor an oneg in her memory, but I recently learned of an even lovelier tradition of studying or taking on a new mitzvah as a way of honoring the recently departed. My mother joined the chevrah kaddisha in Milwaukee-- the group that wash the dead before burial-- and my father is studying to lead the davening at his Orthodox shul.

My grandmother was the matriarch of our family growing up and was a big part of my life. She taught me to make kreplach and gefilte fish, to knit, and to treasure both family and friends. She was an incredibly modern grandmother, who sent regular email and took photos with her cell phone. Always wanting to be connected, she was very much alive for us when she died.

We were very close and I will cherish my memories of her and her many influences on my life, but we sometimes fought. In particular, we had our share of political arguments. She was the daughter of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who struggled to get their lives going in this country. Working through the Depression, she never went to college. After marrying my grandfather, they also worked hard together to build a successful business. They lived a comfortable life, were able to travel, and even spoil their nine grandchildren, and 16 great-grandchildren. They lived the "American Dream." And they believed it was available to anyone else who was willing to work hard. My Grandma was a true patriot.

I, on the other hand, was a leftist rebel. Growing up she and I fought about the Cold War, the Sandinistas, Reaganomics, English-only, feminism-- you get the picture. While I was

desperately trying to understand the relative privilege I was growing up with in the Jewish suburbs of Milwaukee, my grandmother was still responding to the anti-Semitism her parents fled in the shtetls of Poland. She was *so* proud of this country, and I couldn't relate. Where she could see only the good and let herself feel pride, I was obsessed with the parts of our world that needed fixing – a burgeoning voice inside that told me I was partly responsible for undoing the damage of the shameful behavior of our country and its leaders.

I have certainly grown over the years and refined when and how I respond to that inner voice –my injustice barometer. But I admit that the injustice dial was pointing pretty high when I was studying today's parsha.

The story in the Torah we're supposed to struggle with on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is about Sarah, Abraham, and their combination Egyptian maid/surrogate/concubine/wife, Hagar. It was infertile Sarah's idea for her husband Abraham to take Hagar as a surrogate mother to ensure a blood heir. But she grew jealous of Abraham's love of his first son, Ishmael, and his relationship with Hagar. After Sarah gave birth to Yitzchak, she didn't want *her* son to have to share the inheritance with his older brother, and told Abraham to cast them out. Abraham felt bad, but God told him to listen to his wife. With a heavy heart Abraham sent them off into the wilderness with a little food and water--knowingly sacrificing his first son and second wife.

My challenge has been to find something redeeming about the story of our matriarch abusing and mistreating another people's matriarch, and our patriarch caving in to Sarah. It's the beginning of the conflict between the Jewish people and our cousins - the Islamic people who descend from Ishmael. But then I remembered, that I'm doing this to honor my grandmother -- so how would she understand the parsha?

She would focus on the fact that Sarah *did* get pregnant after all, and gave birth to Isaac, who ensured the survival of the Jewish people, and our covenant with God. She would remind me how in the next chapter, God further tested Abraham's devotion, which deepened the covenant between our people and God. If Hagar and Ishmael had remained a

part of Abraham's home, who knows what may have happened to our people? And Sarah, Isaac's *mother*, thought Ishmael was a bad influence on Isaac; and a mother's intuition should be respected.

Well Grandma, that's one way of looking at it. But since I need to honor *my* part of our relationship, *I* need a way to understand these problematic decisions on the part of our people's first family.

What I noticed in re-reading these stories, is that there are a lot of references to listening, to voices, and to seeing. God pretty consistently hears and sees the pain and suffering of the characters and responds directly. But the humans in the story seem to keep making mistakes, selectively hearing, and giving up hope. When Sarah asks Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, God says to Abraham, "sh'ma b'kolah – listen to her voice." God doesn't say listen to her words or her cries, but her *voice*. Rashi interprets sh'ma b'kolah as a lesson to men to listen to their wives because they sometimes know better. But I like better the idea that Sarah needed Abraham to listen to the *pain* in her voice. She needed help to deal with her confusing and complicated feelings about his two sons sharing the land of Canaan, and about her relationship with Hagar, the mother-to-be of Islam.

Later, when Hagar thought that Ishmael would die of hunger and thirst in the desert, she seemed to lose faith and stood away from her dying son, and "lifted up her voice, and wept." And then God heard the voice of the boy (not Hagar), and sent an angel who said to Hagar, "Don't fear, God has heard the voice of the boy where he is." God told her to get up, hold, and comfort Ishmael "ki l'goi gadol, asimenu - because I will make him a great nation." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water from which to keep her son alive.

Hagar's story ends in the next sentence of this passage, where she and Ishmael dwelt in the wilderness, and Hagar—the only woman in the Torah to do this—found her son a wife from Egypt. Hagar was also the only person in the Torah to give God a name – calling God "El Ra'i – the God of Seeing." She named the well where she re-gained faith as

“Be’er Lachai Ro’I - the well of the living God who sees me.” In that same section, God told her to name her son Ishmael – or “God hears.”

How is it that these two women couldn’t hear or see each other well enough to reconcile?

What is so striking to me about the story of Sarah and Hagar is how parallel their experiences were—yet they tragically went their separate ways without trying to work it out. According to both Midrash and the Koran, Hagar had been an Egyptian princess, and Sarai was a Babylonian princess. They were then both slaves in foreign lands, forced to have relations with other men. They both had the experience of being oppressed and oppressing. And they were both women whose spiritual stories are central to the Jewish and Muslim faiths—not just to their own respective faiths – but *both* women are pivotal characters in *both* faiths.

How lovely the story could be had they bonded over their mutual experiences, learned to share their lots in life!

In the Koran after Abraham left Hagar in the desert, she climbed back and forth between two mountains seven times before finding a gushing well in the valley in the middle, which became Mecca. To this day Muslims who perform their ritual pilgrimage—or hajj—will retrace the steps of Hagar and climb between the mountains Safa and Marwa seven times and then drink from the Zamzam Well—the well that is referenced in both the Torah version of the story and the Koran’s.

I recently learned that the name Hagar is quite popular in Israel– and has a beautiful sound to Israelis who have reclaimed it, despite it meaning “the foreigner.” Arab women are also often called Hajar. Midrash says that after Sarah died, Abraham re-married Hagar, and the Koranic version is that Abraham went back and forth between his homes with Sarah and Hagar throughout his life. When Abraham died, Yitzchak and Ishmael jointly buried their father. So there *are* moments of hearing, seeing, and reconciling.

Some people pray that it is in the commonalities of our peoples that reconciliation may be possible. All three major mono-theistic religions claim these matriarchs and patriarchs as their own. And if you're daring enough these days to travel to Hebron, you can visit the Cave of Machpelah, or the Cave of the Patriarchs, or the Ibrahimi Mosque as it is respectively called—where they say Sarah is buried with Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.

A few weeks ago I overheard my 8 year old talking to a friend. “Do you think President Bush is a good guy or a bad guy?” The other kid says a bad guy. Hazel says “Okay, good,” and proceeds to tell two anti-Bush jokes. I thought it was kind of sweet that she first checked out the other kids’ politics before telling the jokes, but I found myself with a little “ick” response nonetheless. L’dor v’dor – from generation to generation, I want my children to be critical thinkers and challenge authority. But L’dor v’dor, I also want them to hold respect for the *office* of the President of the United States. Wouldn’t it be nice if I could un-ambivalently help them feel proud of being American, like my Grandmother? It’s easier for me to help them feel proud to be Jewish, but I have the same parenting dilemma of how to instill pride in their relationship to Israel. I’ve spent too many years working as an international human rights professional to either turn a blind eye or hold double standards for the government of Israel—which is what it sometimes feels is required of me by my Jewish community. I understand the need to passionately defend the Jewish state, in the context of a world where many want Jews driven out of that land. But there are many ways to respond to that threat, and I ache for a community that can really hear the diversity of voices that we Jews have, without dismissing the different ways that we show our love and support for Israel, and some for Palestine.

Before having children, it was a little easier to ignore the dilemma that grew out of the struggle between the descendants of Hagar and Sarah. But one of the commitments that Jenni and I made at each of our daughters’ naming ceremonies was to work for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Israel and Palestine.

We'd like to see peace -- between the children of Hagar and Sarah -- in the lifetimes of Hazel and Sylvie.

That commitment has put me on an exploration of my own spiritual and political contradictions – the desire for a Jewish state, the love of Israel, but the abhorrence of religious governments, which I know to be a bad idea for so many people including women and LGBT people throughout the world—and certainly for Palestinians and Israeli-Arabs.

But where has that exploration led me?

My very partial answers include that I consider myself a progressive Zionist, and I define my desire for a Jewish state not necessarily politically but culturally. I think it is good for Jews to have a place in the world where we are not a minority culture. But I believe that religion and politics should be separate in a democracy. When I refer to Israel, I try to refer to both Israel and Palestine, in hope that it will hasten the reality and consciousness of an actual Palestinian State. We have Palestinian and Muslim friends, and ensure that our children understand that the land of Israel and Palestine are sacred to many different people . We try to expose our children in age-appropriate ways to all sides of the conflict and teach them to work for peace because it is part of their responsibility as Jews. We send them to a school where they learn to love Israel, while teaching them at home that “all people are chosen and all land is holy.” But I still struggle with the contradiction between my longings – to be proud like my grandmother was, honoring our history as an oppressed people, while never ignoring or using that as the excuse for the mistreatment of others. I must “sh'ma koli” – listen to my own voice—the one that tells me to confront injustice where I see it—even when it puts me at odds with the community I belong to.

When we were going through my Grandmother's things after she died, I found a bag of old 8 mm films. One of them was from a trip to Israel in May of 1967 (one month before the Six-Day War), which I just watched for the first time. I loved seeing my grandmother in these fabulous 60's dresses, hats, and sunglasses. I remember her talking about how she looked through a chain-linked fence at the western wall, and how much she wished for a

united Jerusalem. As I watched the footage of the divided city, I too long for a united Jerusalem—where all sorts of people of different faiths, nationalities, genders, and sexual orientations can equally share that very special place.

Rabbi Rolando Matalon recently wrote in a drash for the American Jewish World Service: “On Rosh Hashanah we both celebrate the world in its radiant glory and are shocked by its ugliness. But we must go beyond bearing witness and being shocked:… we must expose the ugliness and begin to fix it. On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate *and* we claim responsibility. We celebrate *and* we reject the status quo of our lives and of our world.”

In this New Year, may we all find ways of seeing, hearing, and reconciling our inner contradictions and our relationships with ourselves and others. In particular I wish for each of us to find our relationship to both the beauty and the ugliness in Israel and Palestine—and claim responsibility for our individual and collective piece of that conflict. I will continue to honor the memory of my grandmother, Eva Dorf by searching for my inner patriot – for ways of feeling proud while living with my eyes open to the injustices that I seek to undo.

On this holy day we ask God , “L’sh’ma koleinu – to hear our voice.”

May we *all* Sh’ma Koleinu and hear *each other’s* voices.

L’Shana Tova Tikatevu.