

Dear Chavraya,

There are times we read the day's news through the lens of Torah, and there are times when we read Torah through the lens of the day's news, suddenly realizing in either case what the other is about. This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayera* overflows with immediacy. So full in its narrative, in its heart-gripping telling and teaching, the Torah readings for both days of Rosh Hashannah are drawn from *Vayera*. We witness the casting out of Hagar and Yishma'el. We are there on the mountain when Isaac is bound on the altar, the *Akedah*, the binding, then to be slaughtered and offered through the flames to God. In the dramatic tensions of the Torah text we are bidden to hear "what if" in the text and context of our own lives when we think there is no other way.

We enter the book and engage life. That is the purpose of Torah as *Torat Chayyim*, living Torah. It is about us. Our feelings in response to the stories are part of the stories themselves. That is why we read them, they are meant to elicit feelings that impel us then to act as the stories unfold today. God forbid, that we just stand there as Hagar and Yishma'el are sent away. Do we at least offer them our tears to help replenish their spent water skins? How do we see them in the dim light and shadows of that fateful early morning? Do we remember if Isaac was awake yet and if he said anything to these two he was so close to? Wide-eyed and still, like the desert air, did he wonder in the loneliness of his heart how his mother could tell his father to "cast out this handmaid and her son," the words still echoing within him as he tries to make sense of them? Flesh and bone of his own father, of himself, how could his father accede to his mother's demand? He had heard the argument on that dark night, angry words added for good measure, "the son of this handmaid shall not inherit together with my son Yitzchak." He felt his mother's pain, too, she who cried over him each night with joy and fear, having waited so long, she couldn't bear the thought, lest anything happen to him. But why couldn't she say their names, Hagar/Hajar, Yishma'el/Ismail? How ironic the pretext, for his mother had seen his half-brother *m'tzachek*, making mockery, making sport. How confused and twisted words become, and the feelings of which they speak, in the jealous, fearful heart. *M'tzachek*, the same root as his own name, *Yitzchak*, it simply means he was laughing! Yishma'el also laughed. The two brothers were joined by a bond beyond words, laughing until they cried. What if his mother had asked him, the one who would bear the burden of the past into the future? What if he had run at that moment and hugged his brother Yishma'el? What if Hagar had put her arms around his mother and said, "I understand?" The two mothers embracing, weeping for all that had been and would be, and in that moment, what if his mother had also said, "I too understand, there must be another way."

That is the question that we are left to ask, what if?, and to know there must be another way. The words are still waiting to be said. What if we could speak them through all the yearning and pain of the two mothers, of the two sons, through our own pain? What if we could say, "I understand, I understand that you can't wait any longer for a state of your own?" What if we could say from our own place of strength, so easily abused, "we will stop building on the land of your

desire, come, let's talk directly, there must be a way?" And what if Hagar's children and children's children, so long down the winds of time could say, "we understand your pain, all that you have endured since that time of our separation? Let the fear and pain that each of us has known no longer stand between. Like you, we wish to announce before the nations our presence among them. Let us sit together and talk until the rising of tomorrow." There we would sit, perhaps, by the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me, *B'er Lachai Ro'i*, near where the Negev and Sinai deserts meet, where God opened Hagar's eyes to see the well that had been there all along, that her son might drink of its living waters and be revived, an oasis in the sands and in the arid reaches of our hearts.

Isaac too, following the Akedah, drew life from the same well of the Living One Who Sees Me, children saved from trauma visited upon them by adults for some great purpose. In the tradition of his people, it is Ismail who is placed upon the altar. That we read the story differently in Torah and Quran is not a problem, but a source of connection. It is all the same, a child to be sacrificed, Yitzchak and Yishma'el both knowing the same terror.

Reading Torah in all of its immediacy, not about them and then, but about us and now, for the sake of all of our children, may we ask what if and find another way.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor