

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon **Rabbi Bloom – September 21, 2017**

Today and tomorrow we read two Torah portions, Genesis 21 and 22, ordained by the rabbis to be recited on Rosh Hashanah. The drama that goes on in these Biblical families makes me think to myself, “No wonder Jews are known as people of the drama as well as people of the book!” Who can top today’s portion and the story of Abraham’s two wives, Sarah and Hagar. Under pressure from Sarah after the birth of Isaac, Abraham exiles the concubine wife Hagar and her child Ishmael. All of this because Sarah doesn’t want them around anymore since she miraculously has Isaac at an advanced age. She doesn’t want to risk for a minute that there would be any chance that Hagar and her son would inherit the Patriarchal blessing and God’s covenant rather than Isaac.

Doesn’t that narrative sound more like an episode in a reality TV show? Then we go to tomorrow’s reading in Genesis 22 and the story of the binding of Isaac. Here God tells Abraham to get up one day and take Isaac to Mount Moriah to offer him for a sacrifice, as a way of showing that he, Abraham, is a God-fearing servant of the Eternal. This takes drama in the biblical family to an ultimate level.

Maybe because I am a rabbi and have seen drama in terms of never-ending family feuds, rivalries and jealousies in families for all kinds of reasons. The end is the same. Pain and suffering. For this reason I decided to focus less on theological implications of passing on the covenant to God’s appointed son or demonstrating loyalty to God by Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Instead, I want to talk about family conflicts and show how these two stories are valuable in cautioning us about repairing our own family relations today and the need to find ways to reconnect with estranged relatives.

There are consequences to our actions or lack of action and this ten-day period offers a special platform to work towards reconciliation and renewal of family. Isn’t that an institution we in Judaism have cherished over [millennia]?

We see these rivalries play out between adult children and their elderly parents, for example, when it comes to executing a will or agreeing to who pays for their aged parent’s upkeep or which child is in charge of making their health care decisions? Sometimes even elderly parents play one child off against another because of their own insecurities at this stage of life.

Or how about when a middle age couple marry and bring their respective adult children together hoping the kids will accept each other and the new spouse. Happily I have seen it work. Unfortunately, too many times it leads to the alienation of one spouse from a loved one’s children or even from their own biological children. Sometimes it’s about money and [on] other occasions conflict arises due to the politics of the family and who has the power.

Sadly and unsurprisingly, it often comes down to money or something valuable like it. There is a likelihood of unresolved conflict when hard feelings dominate and leave irrevocable pain from feeling betrayed, either by one’s parent or the new spouse of a parent.

I cite the midrashic story of Abraham and Sarah as an example. In one tale, Abraham knows that there is no way Sarah is going to go for Abraham taking Isaac to sacrifice him.

So he concocts a lie and tells Sarah to make a huge feast for the lad with the explanation that it is time to take Isaac to an elite rabbinical school. She believes him and arranges it.

After they both return from Mount Moriah, then Abraham explains the truth of what he really did. The sages say that upon hearing the truth, Sarah probably suffered a heart attack and died. What a price to pay to prove faith in God!

As a postscript to the Biblical story, in case we did not know this, according to Genesis 22, Abraham eventually marries another woman and has children by her. The upshot is that consequences of our actions are long lasting and sometimes irrevocable.

Just imagine the anger Ishmael felt towards his father Abraham. As we know, Ishmael turns out to be the father of the Arabs and we know how that turned out. Again we see two stories which leave behind damaged people for the price of divine [favor] and for proving one's faith.

What is so frustrating is how do we overcome feelings of betrayal when we walk the trail of anger that lifelong animosities leave behind. It's hard to stop walking that pathway and look for an alternative route towards peace. Yet, that is exactly what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are all about. This is the time when we are supposed to take the moral high ground. This is the time when we are to overcome hatred, jealousy, resentment and the list goes on. It is the time to change, choose reconciliation, dialogue, renewal and starting over. The High Holy Days represent, in modern terms, a spiritual and moral reset to the issues that we carry with us to the grave.

The sad thing is that when I speak to good and decent people who are unaware that they are in a prison of hatred towards a family member, they indicate that they can't find that way out of those emotions. "It's too late to change", they proclaim. I ask, "Does it always have to be that way? Just think about what kind of example you are setting for your children and grandchildren." The truth is that children see from our example how not to resolve family conflicts. Shut the person out, stop talking to them as if they never existed. What happened to the enduring and honored Jewish family?

The Torah proves this example when we see later on in Genesis examples of how our patriarchs and matriarchs model dysfunctional family behavior. A few examples: Isaac's children, Esau and Jacob, become arch rivals. Jacob tricks [Esau] and his mother Rebecca tricks their aged father Isaac to bestow the first born blessing upon Jacob instead of the real first-born sibling Esau. How about the jealousy of Jacob's sons and how they kidnapped their brother Joseph and eventually sold him into slavery and then lied to their father that an animal killed him. There are many more examples later on in the Bible of family division and betrayal in the politics of the monarchy, especially during King David's reign, [where David finds himself] fighting against an armed rebellion that his own son Absalom has led against his father.

I suppose what makes the stories of the Torah and the Bible so powerful is not that the characters are perfect, [but] rather, [that] they are flawed and maybe that their stories are reminders to us about how we are not suppose[d] to live our lives. Of course, these stories also provide us with guidance as to how we can do better.

I have several suggestions for us this year to address how to lift the burden of longtime conflicts within a family. First, send an email or a text to a relative, just to open the door for future reconciliation. Wish them a happy new year and ask how they are? See if you receive a response and take it slowly from there.

Second, try to forgive someone in the family who hurt you. Is there a way to put the pain aside and move forward in a relationship that went awry? Is there a way to look deep inside yourself to find the strength to say, "I forgive you." We need that conviction. Can we take the leap of faith just this one time to give someone a second or even a third chance?

Third, write a letter to yourself, first describing how someone hurt you. Put it all down and let it be for a few days. Then review it and see where the opportunity is to heal. What do you really need to reestablish relations with that individual?

Remember when making peace with relatives it can't always be about who is right. To follow that pathway gets us nowhere. I maintain that small steps of confidence building is also a reasonable strategy to rebuild the ties that bind a family together. Is family -- mishpachah -- important in Judaism? Is it worth putting aside pride, jealousy or envy? Instead of asking who is right, let us ask, who is wise? That is the direction that Judaism asks us to pursue. This time of the year we ask, "if not now, then when?"

There are consequences to our actions and consequences to our lack of action. Keeping up the dialogue with relatives may be the best one can achieve. We do not have to solve the problem up front. What we could be doing is working for an incremental approach. I would like to suggest that we strive to open the door to start addressing the problem. That in and of itself would be a giant step.

To conclude there is a story told that to maintain peace in Abraham's house, Sarah demanded that Abraham promise that he would never speak directly to his beloved son Ishmael. He went to visit him but promised her he would never get off his camel. The first time he went to visit, Ishmael had grown up to be a man and had taken a wife. [Ishmael] wasn't there when Abraham arrived and [Abraham] identified himself to the wife. He asked for food and water, but she said there wasn't any. "Tell him please," Abraham declared to Ishmael's wife, "that an old man came from Lebanon to see him and that this house is not in good repair." Upon hearing this, Ishmael supposedly divorced her. Years later Abraham returned and repeated the same actions with Ishmael's new wife. This time she gave him water and bread. Again Ishmael was not home to receive his father, but this time Abraham went home and entreated God to bestow all the blessing on his beloved son Ishmael. His house became prosperous and more importantly, the midrash concludes, "Then Ishmael realized that his father truly loved him."

Little steps is all that it takes to move forward and let a loved one or family member know that we care about them, even though we have been alienated from them. Little steps make all the difference in the world towards achieving peace and moving away from strife in the family.