

Relationship Lessons in the Fall Holy Day Portions
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Rosh Hashanah

Day One Torah Portion: [Genesis 21:1-34](#)

Maftir: [Numbers 29:1-6](#)

Day One (Reform Movement): [Genesis 22: 1-24](#)

Day Two Torah Portion: [Genesis 22:1-24](#)

Maftir: [Numbers 29:1-6](#)

Day Two (Reform Movement) [Genesis 1:1-2:3](#)

Short Synopsis – Genesis 21:1-34.

In the Torah portion read on Rosh Hashanah, there are multiple relationships being depicted. The first is Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. Sarah dealt with infertility for many years and was unable to produce an heir for Abraham. She gave her handmaiden, Hagar, to Abraham so that he would have an heir. In this Torah portion, Sarah gives birth to Isaac (at an old age) and is beyond happy, saying: “God has given me laughter.” (21:6) Happiness ensues, until she sees Ishmael (Hagar’s son) and Isaac playing together outside. She doesn’t like this situation, perhaps because Isaac should be the rightful “blessed child”, or because of jealousy, or something else? Ruthlessly, she tells Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Having very little choice, and feeling distressed, Abraham does as Sarah commands. God tells Abraham not to be distressed, as through Isaac he will have offspring. Also, God says that through Ishmael will there also be made a nation (Islam). After being exiled, Hagar and Ishmael wander until they are out of food and water and then Hagar weeps for the outcome, she fears they will endure. God comes to Hagar in her sadness and tells her not to fear, God will provide. And they are provided for.

Commentary:

Throw this slave girl and her son out... 29:10. From a feminist perspective, the call for the expulsion of Hagar raises troubling questions. The story portrays the oppression of one woman by another; it also places responsibility for the enmity between two peoples – the descendants of Isaac and those of Ishmael – upon women, especially Sarah. As a story about domestic relations, the narrative builds sympathy for Hagar at Sarah’s expense. Some scholars respond by pointing out that Sarah’s concern is legitimate. As an old woman she anticipates her young son’s vulnerable position in the event of her death. She takes steps to protect him by removing the competition for Abraham’s possessions – and possibly also for his affection. Rather than casting a human drama in simplistic terms, the story of Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham poignantly illustrates the dilemma of multiple commitments. Among other things, this passage may seek to sensitize the reader to the plot of the outsider. (The Torah: A Women’s Commentary. Edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L Weiss)

Guiding Questions:

- Can you imagine how Sarah felt when she saw Isaac and Ishmael playing? What reactions were there?
- What emotions does Abraham have being torn between Hagar and Sarah?
- Essentially, Sarah makes Abraham choose between his sons, Isaac, and Ishmael. Was this fair? Plausible? How does a parent make that choice? Could this happen today?
- How do you think this relationship dynamic impacted Isaac and Ishmael?
- What role does God play in this story?

- How about divine providence... was this “meant to be?” Was Sarah merely fulfilling God’s destiny for Abraham and Isaac?
- Are there lasting repercussions for Ishmael?
- What lessons can we learn from this text?
- Are there themes that relate to Rosh Hashanah?

Short Synopsis - Genesis 22:1-24

This Torah portion is called the Akedah. God put Abraham to the test. This is one of the ten trials through which God put Abraham. God told Abraham to take his son, his precious one, the one he loves, Isaac, (vs 2) to Mt Moriah and offer him there as a sacrifice. Abraham sets out doing what God has asked. He took two servants and his donkey and set out early in the morning. As they walked, Isaac (old enough to know what’s going on) looked up at his father, noticed there wasn’t another animal for the offering and asked his father about it. Abraham responded that God would provide. As they approached the place of the sacrifice, Abraham was about to slaughter his precious son when God sent an angel to stop him, placing a ram there instead. Isaac’s life was spared, and God told Abraham that because he was willing to do as God asked, that all the nations of the earth should be blessed through his descendants. Abraham and Isaac both returned from the mountaintop. Though, it is unclear if they walked down together.

Commentary:

The medieval philosopher Joseph Albo taught that God, who knew how Abraham would respond, wanted Abraham to discover the great depth of his faith. ‘The reward for potential good deeds is less than the reward for actual good deeds.’ (From Eitz Chayim Torah commentary)
The word Hineini is used multiple times, both between Abraham and God and Abraham and Isaac. This prompts the understanding that Abraham was as responsive to the voice of his son as he was to the voice of God. (Eitz Chayim)

Guiding Questions:

- Why do you think that God emphasized Isaac, the precious one, the one you love?
- Was it fair of God to ask Abraham to do this?
- Do you think that Abraham was really going to be able to sacrifice his son?
- Why did God have to test Abraham?
- What do you think was going through Isaac’s mind as he asked his father the animal missing for sacrifice?
- What do you think was going through Abraham’s mind?
- Sarah is not mentioned at all in this portion. What role did Sarah play in this?
- The Torah is ambiguous about whether Abraham and Isaac walked down the mountain together. Could you have walked down with Abraham after this moment?
- Why do you think this portion is read on Rosh Hashanah?

Yom Kippur

[Leviticus 16:1-34](#)

Afternoon [Leviticus 18:1-30](#)

Haftarah – [Book of Jonah](#)

(Reform) [Deuteronomy 29:9-14, 30: 11-20](#)

(Reform) Afternoon: [Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-18, 32-3](#)

Short synopsis of the Book of Jonah:

God went to Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh and get them to repent because they were wicked. Instead of going to Nineveh, he went towards Tarshish and tried to escape from God by going on a ship. God cast a huge wind to cause storms to the boat. While the storms happened, Jonah went to sleep. The men on the ship figured they had to try and figure out on whose account the storms were caused. They woke up Jonah, who ascertained that it was his fault, and asked them to throw him overboard, which they did. God provided a huge fish who came and swallowed up Jonah. After three days in the belly of the fish, the fish threw him up onto dry land. Then after God told him for the 2nd time to go to Nineveh, Jonah finally relented and told them to repent. They listened, and God withdrew the need for punishment to the people of Nineveh. Jonah, after all that he had been through to follow God's command, was not happy with their punishment being spared and complained. While Jonah contemplated life (and presumably pouted), God made a gourd to appear to shade him, which Jonah loved. The next day God destroyed it in an act to show Jonah that just as he grieved because the gourd had died, so too did God grieve at the thought of wiping out the many citizens of Nineveh; it was for this reason that God reversed the punishment. The gourd taught Jonah the lesson of forgiveness.

Commentary:

The book stresses divine forgiveness when sinners repent sincerely. It propounds the same theme as does Yom Kippur.

The book is essentially the personal story of Jonah, a prophet whose weaknesses along with his qualities acquaint us with his humanness.

(The Haftarah Commentary. Edited by Gunther Plaut)

Guiding Questions:

- Why do you think Jonah was reluctant to listen to God?
- Can you imagine what the men on the boat were thinking about Jonah when they found him asleep?
- What does it say about the men on the ship that they were quick to throw him over?
- How must God have been feeling about Jonah when he repeatedly chose to not listen, or complain?
- What lessons do Jonah teach us on Yom Kippur? About life?
- What are your thoughts on the believability of this story?

*If you're interested in learning more about why the Reform Movement reads slightly different parts of the Torah on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, check out [this article](#).

Though there are some great story narratives to depict relationships in the *parshiyot* read for *Yom Kippur* and *Rosh Hashanah*, there aren't with *Sukkot* and *Simchat Torah*. The following are the Torah portions, so you can check them out yourself:

Sukkot

[Leviticus 22:26-23:44](#)

[Numbers 29:12-16](#)

Simchat Torah

[End of Deuteronomy](#)

[Beginning of Bereshit](#)