

Commentary on Genesis 21 David Tendler

When viewing Rosh Hashanah as the Day of Remembrance, we might view the importance of Genesis 21 as being the time when God remembered his promise to Sarah, and allowed her to conceive a child, Isaac, at the ripe old age of 90. However, Rosh Hashanah has also been referred to as the Day of Judgment, as it is described in the Mishnah.

From that angle, we can examine this chapter through a different prism, and ask: What are the criteria by which it is acceptable to judge another?

In Genesis 21, read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we learn that Abraham is asked by Sarah to banish his first son Ishmael and his mother Hagar. Recall it was Sarah, who commanded Hagar, her Egyptian servant, to conceive a child with Abraham, so that Abraham would have a son to fulfill God's covenant. Yet, once her own son, Isaac, was born, she ultimately could not accept that Ishmael could be an equal heir.

By all accounts, Abraham loved his son Ishmael and was distraught by Sarah's request. He heeded because of God's reassurance that he would provide for Ishmael and make him a "great nation."

So why is it easy for us to cast off Ishmael? Is it because Sarah justifies her request by proclaiming Ishmael to be a dangerous influence to Isaac, one not worthy of being a true heir? The biblical evidence for that claim is shaky, at best. I suspect that we accept Ishmael's fate largely because of Hagar's status. But is Hagar fairly judged? She did not choose to be enslaved and did not seek to be a concubine. She was just a woman, albeit an Egyptian, a concubine, and even a surrogate mother. Shouldn't the son that she had with Abraham deserve to be treated as an equal? Ishmael may have been rejected from the covenant, but Abraham did not reject him as a son, and he was ultimately not rejected by God, so why are we able to reject him so easily?

Genesis 21 is a tough chapter to read. A distressing chapter. It's characters are flawed as humans. I think the rabbi's of the Talmud intended this chapter to force us to look at ourselves in a hard light. To examine our prejudices. To think about what the things are that separate us as people. It exposes issues of ethnicity, class, and perhaps even surrogacy. Who are we to judge others? I think this is an appropriate question for Rosh Hashanah, this "Day of Judgment."