

Torah Reading: First Day of Rosh Hashona 2013

L'shana tova. It's an honor to be here with you.

When Rabbi Yitz asked me to do this dvar for Rosh Hashona I felt very intimidated. But Rabbi Yitz explained that you don't have to be a biblical scholar to do this and he wanted me to share how this reading resonated with me based on my own experiences and my work.

This reading is about birth of Yitzchak, beginning when Sarah and Abraham became parents together for first time in their old age. Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 when Yitzchak was born. At the same time, Abraham also fathered a son with his servant Hagar. As we heard, Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her child away, and although he was reluctant to do so, with reassurance from God that Hagar and her son would be protected, Abraham sent Hagar into the desert of Be'er Sheva w/loaf of bread & a sack of water.

Hagar wandered in desert w/ her baby until water sack was empty. God told Hagar that God would make of her son Ishmael a great nation. God then opened Hagar's eyes so she could see a well of water before her and she and her son drank from the well.

Some of you may know that my work for past 35 years was as the director of Parenting Now! which was formerly as Birth To Three...and which is focused on the critical importance of parenting....bringing parents together to support each other, to get them information about raising a child, and to help them to do their best in this awesome and challenging role. Given that, it's probably not a big surprise that I approached this reading through the lens of parenting.

So, let's begin with Sarah. She had probably been waiting at least 70 years to have baby... and when Yitzchak was born, he brought her great joy and laughter. And like most mothers, Sarah was protective of her child. It may have been typical in those days for a husband to have children with a servant, but Sarah felt threatened by Hagar and her baby. She didn't want Yitzchak's inheritance to be shared with the servant's child. And, she may have not wanted Abraham's attention and love to be shared with another child.

But Hagar was also a protective mother and her child was precious to her as well. When Abraham sent her away, she wandered the desert in despair, and when the water she had brought with her was gone, she was blinded by grief. Hagar couldn't bear to see her baby die.

And then there was Abraham. He was father to both sons, and he feared to carry out his wife's wishes to send Hagar and the child into the desert because, as a father, he cared for his son Ishmael as well as his son Yitzchak. But God reassured Abraham that his child would be safe, and that God would make of Ishmael a great nation.

Each of these three parents cared about their children. They all tried to do best they could for them, given who they were, the circumstances they were living in, and

what they knew at the time. It would be easy to make judgments about their choices, and whether they were right or wrong, but when it comes to parenting, I've found it's often not as clear cut as it seems.

As I worked directly with parents through the years, as well as trained other professionals to work with parents, I've learned some powerful lessons. I learned that in the vast major of situations, parents love their children and try to do the best that they can for them.

Sometimes, like Sarah, they act out of fear, or like Hagar, their eyes aren't opened to see what is before them, and sometimes, like Abraham, they need outside support and guidance to help them get through.

I believe that being a parent is one of the hardest, most challenging, experiences in life and that it also can be one of the most rewarding. I also believe that parenting is a sacred responsibility.

Years ago, I helped develop a program called *Make Parenting A Pleasure* for highly stressed parents with young children. This included single parents, teenaged parents, parents who were unemployed or homeless....all of them dealing with tough situations in their lives.

What I learned from these parents is that they wanted to be "good parents" but most never had a parent who was there for them, or was a positive role model to learn from. So when life was stressful, which was often, these parents in our program didn't have the support or a positive history to fall back on. They just knew the ways their parents raised them, which was often inconsistently, frequently harshly, and all too often...abusively.

And, I would guess that it was probably the same for their parents. They parented based on the way that they were raised, and the cycle continued. But it can be stopped.

When the parents in our *Make Parenting A Pleasure* program were given the opportunity, they were eager to learn other ways...to understand child development, to see the world through the eyes of their child, to learn ways to cope with stress, and to really think about the values they wanted to teach their child, and how they could carry them out in their family in their everyday lives.

I remember visiting a teen parent group and sitting next to a 17 year old mom named Anna and her baby Rose. Anna had pale skin and long flowing strawberry blond curls that made me think of Botticelli's painting of Venus. I watched how lovingly attentive Anna was with Rose. She reported to the group that she read the book by Dr. Harvey Carp "The Happiest Baby on the Block", and she demonstrated how she carefully swaddled Rose the way Dr. Carp recommended.

Anna had come to the group without Rose's father. He was with his friends, skateboarding on the mall. He was a child himself, just 14 years old. And he was father of another baby. It was clear Anna wasn't going to have much help from this dad or from her own family in raising Rose. I felt so much respect for Anna's commitment to her baby and that she came to get the help she needed.... so she could finish school, support herself and learn how to be a mother.

When I asked this room filled with 15-19 year-old parents in the group what they were learning to do differently than their parents did with them they said things like:

“I tell her I love her (No one ever said that to me)”, or “Instead of hitting him I take 3 deep breaths and count to 10 and then talk to him”, or from a young dad: “We play together...my dad never played with me”.

There are a lot of judgments about teen parents, but I saw so many who did well as parents and with their lives, despite enormous obstacles.

And in my travels to train professionals in parenting education, I met parents and saw other things that changed the way I see the world. I learned that parenting issues and challenges cut across cultures and countries even though life circumstances can very different.

When I was working in Romania, I visited the largest orphanage in the country, which is in Bucharest. There were 500 young children/babies there.

I visited the baby floor. There were 35 babies, each in a separate crib, crammed four to five cribs to a room, with total of just four caretakers for all the babies. The rooms smelled very bad....the babies and bedding weren't changed often enough.

Each child was in their same crib all day and all night. There were no blankets, no toys, nothing in the crib to hold onto. The babies were not held, there was no one to talk to them, hug them or comfort them when they cried. In the time I was there I didn't hear one baby crying. I would guess that after awhile they just gave up; they knew it was useless.

The children were tiny...a two year old might be size of a nine month old. I saw little ones sitting or sometimes standing....rocking back and forth, back forth, for stimulation, or lying on their backs with blank expressions on their faces. I asked caretaker if she ever became attached to any of the babies and she said no, none of them did, because they had too much work to do and they didn't have enough time.

Before I left, I walked into the last room of babies, and there was a little boy, maybe 18 months old and he was standing in his crib. He was thin, with dark hair and huge dark eyes. He looked at me...and he smiled. His face was Anne Frank's. Literally, I saw her face. I still see him today. I went to him and talked to him and stroked his hair..... and it broke my heart. I wondered how much longer he would stand up there in his crib, ready to smile at a stranger who came into the room.

And I wondered what it was about this child...his situation, his earliest days, or his spirit, that allowed him to hold that spark of life I didn't see in any of the other children.

Many of the babies in that institution were not orphans. They were left there by their parents. When I asked how parents could leave their children in this way, I was told that they believed they were doing what was best for their child.

These orphanages were a legacy of the dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu. People who were impoverished were told that the government could take far better care of their children than they could. They were told that the government had built big beautiful institutions where children would get good care.

Many of these families were struggling to take care of children they already had and had been taught not to question the government so they believed they were doing the right thing.

When *Make Parenting A Pleasure* came to Bucharest it was offered through Holt International Child's Services to parents in this same orphanage where they had taken their children. The impact was profound.

These parents learned what children need emotionally and cognitively, as well as physically. They learned that most of all, their children need loving parents. At end of the program, of the twelve families who had taken the class, all twelve families brought their children home from the orphanage. They understood that the warmth, love, stimulation and teaching they could give was truly what was best for their children.

In Kiev, Ukraine, I visited program for mothers who were struggling with HIV. These moms were living with poverty, recovering from addiction, raising children, and dealing with HIV. And, at the same time, on top of all of this, they were coming to their parenting group, so they could learn how to give their children a better life.

I met a mother named Ludmilla who told me she was thirty six, although she looked more like fifty. She said: "I never understood before what it is like for my son when I scold him or hit him. Now I learned different ideas and know better ways to be a mother."

In Pune, India, I met two mothers involved in a parenting program through Holt International, and who lived in the slums. Every day these women walked through the filth and over crammed, sleeping bodies to get to water so they could wash their children, themselves, their clothes and their children's clothes.... so that they could work to make the money to send their children to school.

After seeing how immaculately dressed these women were, in their beautiful, colorful saris, with their dark hair shining in braids, I would never have imagined how hard it was for them to do the things that are so easy for us and that we take for granted. And they worked so hard to make a better life for their children.

While the examples of parents I've given may seem a bit extreme, truth is none of us is born knowing how to be a parent. It is learned. And, class or income levels don't predict or guarantee either good or poor parenting.

I strongly believe that every parent needs support, no matter their income or life situation. That was why we created Birth To Three in 1978, and probably why 95,000 parents and children have been part of it just from our community alone.

And, whether a child is from a middle class family in Eugene, or is a baby born in the slums of Pune, India, parents share so much in spite of their differences. They want a good life for their children. And they have the ability to help shape their child's values, beliefs, their actions and their life.

This reading made me think about the idea that with the birth of every child comes the possibility of changing the world. And I wondered: What if Sarah, Abraham and Hagar had actually supported each other in parenting Yitzchak & Ishmael as brothers? And the brothers grew together and loved each other? And what if Yitzchak &

Ishmael and their wives taught all their children to cherish one another and live together in peace? And what if this was passed from generation to generation until today?

Then the messianic vision that Rabbi Yitz talked about on Erev Rosh Hashona would be fulfilled. But even with world as it is today, as our Rabbi said, that messianic vision is still a possibility.

This time of Rosh Hashona is a time of reflection that gives each of us the opportunity to think about the way we live our lives. I encourage all of us to think about how we support the parents around us or get the support we need as parents. This is a time we can reflect on we want to teach our children, our grandchildren, the young people we mentor, and the children around us.

Even today we have the opportunity to teach the next generations to care for, respect and honor others to build a legacy of peace.

So, let us pray and work for a world where parents are cherished so they can cherish their children and teach them caring, kindness & respect for all people, so that the descents of Abraham, Sarah & Hagar, and of Yitzchak & Ishmael, and the children of all the world will live together in peace. Amen.