

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon - Tangled up in Complexity

One father, two sons.

The eldest, he takes out into the wild place, together with the boy's mother. He gives her water. He leads them out, away from the family home. He walks away.

The younger son, the favourite, he gets up early in the morning; he sets off on a journey of three days. Where are we going, asks his son. We are going to make a sacrifice. Where, he asks his father, is it? I can see we have the fire and he knife...

The story of the eldest. When the water runs out, Ishmael's mother Hagar, casts her boy under a bush

*V'tashlech et ha yeled tahat achad ha-sichim.*¹

She threw the child under one of the tangles of growth. The sort of untamed mound of branches you see in wild places. The water is gone, she thinks he will die, and she cannot bear to see him suffer.

Isaac, meanwhile, reaches the top of the mountain. His father puts him on the altar. Stretching out over him, with his knife in hand.

An angel calls out, Avraham, Avraham

*Al tishlach yadcha el ha-na'ar*²

Don't stretch out your hand against the lad.

Tashlech tishlach

"She threw him", he "stretch out" his hand, different roots, but the same sounds.

"Do not kill the lad". Abraham lifts his eyes and now he sees: a ram caught up by its horns in the *s'vach*- tangled up in a thorn bush. The angel tells him to take that ram and offer it in place of his son.

Meanwhile, in another wilderness, the angel - maybe the same wilderness, maybe the same angel, calls out to Hagar, Ishmael's mother, "I have heard the cry of the lad *b'asher hu sham*" who is over there. God opens her eyes. She sees the well.

Isaac makes his way down the mountain beside his father.

Ishmael travels through the wild places, the marginal lands, together with his mother. She finds him a wife from among the Egyptians.

The great Bible teacher Aviva Gottleib Zornberg's explains that the ram, caught up by its horns, tangles in the *s'vach*. The thorn bush. A word that shares a three-letter

¹ Gen 21: 15

² Gen 22: 11

root with *mesubach*. *S'vach*, a tangle, is inside the word for complexity, *mesubach*. The horn, the same horn as the shofar, trapping the ram among those thorns, is the same shofar, which blasts the call that breaks apart the gates of heaven. Its attachment to the ram, still living, is an entanglement in complicated meanings.

But someone else is in the undergrowth. Ishmael, his mother threw him, *tachat ha-sichim*. Ishmael is already a grown man. Why must he be hidden? In this of all places, *sichim*. This word used only three times in the entire Tanach to specifically mean something that grows, sounds familiar. The singular word from *sichim* is *siach*; it means *conversation*. Is Ishmael trapped underneath the power of conversation? Of being in fact **unable** to speak? In the entire Torah, Ishmael, Isaac's older brother, never speaks a word. Even in their most desperate of moments, **only Hagar cries out**. Does anyone hear her cry? *Va yishma Elohim et kol ha-na'ar*, **God hears the lad's voice**, and the angel says, just to drive home that point "God has heard the voice of the lad who is over there". Is the Angel mansplaining? Is Hagar's voice *unable* to be heard? What does this mean about Ishmael's capacity to speak, hidden as he is, in the wild bramble bush of conversation?

Two peoples, one story. Tomorrow, at Sha'arei Tsedek, the community reads the story of Ishmael, on Rosh Ha Shanah Second day, the binding of Isaac, the Akedah.³

One brother, Ishmael, whose cry is heard, but only in heaven. And the younger brother, Isaac, pressing their father with difficult questions.

Will the brothers talk? Can Ishmael take the hint from his hiding place, the place of conversation? Can Isaac turn his gift for difficult questions and for a love of what is complicated, the *mesubach*, enough to disentangle not only the ram, but also himself, from his father Abraham's desire to prove himself, by going almost to the point of taking his beloved child and making him into a sacrifice? Can both brothers stop before there is too much silence and too much sacrifice, can we emerge from entanglement and silence, from fear, and from pain? From the landscape of mountains and the wilderness of the margins. Can Ishmael find and claim his voice? Can they both build a future free of their fear?

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³ The reverse of the usual Reform minhag