

"The Wandering Parent"
דרשה (sermon) for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah 5768
September 13, 2007

Have you ever been lost? It can be a very scary experience. We don't know where we are, and we don't know how to get where we are going. Are we in a safe place? Will we run out of gas? Will we get where we are going on time, or even at all?

Today we read in the Torah portion about Hagar, the mother of Abraham's son Yishma'el, losing her way after being expelled from Abraham's house. Hagar set out, presumably for her homeland of Egypt. The Torah tells us "וַתֵּתַע בְּמִדְבָּר" *and she wandered in the desert* (Gen 21:14). As her wandering continued, Hagar ran out of water, and ran out of hope. She placed her son under a tree and walked away, unable to bear watching his tortured, life-threatening thirst. Seemingly at the last minute, an angel calls out to Hagar, saying that God had listened to the cries of her child. "קוּמִי שְׂאִי אֶת הַנֶּעֱר וְהִחַיֵּקִי אֶת יָדָךְ בּוֹ כִּי לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֶשְׂכַּמְנֶנּוּ" *arise, and pick up the lad, take him by the hand, for I shall make him a great nation.*" (21:18) Apprised that her son was destined for greatness, Hagar's eyes were opened, and she finally saw a well of water that it seems was right in front of her the whole time. Hagar had led her son around in circles, losing hope with every passing step. Only when she realizes her child's potential, is she able to see the source of life, a well of water.

In many ways, Hagar's story is a metaphor for the experience of so many parents and grandparents today. So many parents today spend their time as not-so-glorified chauffeurs for children, shuttling them between schools, and bands, and teams, and clubs. I suppose there is some thought that all this activity will help children be happier and more "well rounded." Still other parents sacrifice quality time with their children and family in pursuit of more income to facilitate this constant pursuit of happiness. Grandparents rightly savor their opportunities to take their grandchildren to parks and fairs or on vacations. And while the lives of children are overflowing with activity, it seems that they are simply wandering from place to place, but without any real sense of direction.

The one thing that Hagar had going for her, though, is that she knew she was lost, and she knew she was thirsty. And with that realization, she could eventually be reminded of what her son could achieve, and her eyes could be opened to the resources that were around her. Sometimes, we get so busy trying to provide children with an active and happy childhood, that we don't even know how lost we are, and we don't even know what our children should be thirsty for.

In Jewish thought, we don't believe that life is simply a pursuit of happiness. We look to live life in pursuit of purpose. We know that ultimately our lives will be judged not by how many home-runs we hit, nor how much money we have in the bank, but on how many lives we touched, and whether the world was a better place for having us in it. But if you looked at the itinerary of the average child and their parents, you would never be able to guess that that was what it was all about. If all our efforts are funneled toward volleyball and baseball, toward trips and cruises, then life is just the pursuit of happiness, and we continue to wander without a true sense of direction.

In the Bible, Hagar is told that her child will achieve greatness, and she is inspired to find water, the source of life that will allow this to be so. So too we must remember that our children are capable of becoming people of great character. And with that realization, we must open our hearts and renew our thirst for the source of meaning in life, and bring that source into the lives of our children.

עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה ותמכיה מאשר. דרכיה דרכי נעם וכל נתיבותיה שלום.

It is a tree of life to those who hold onto it, and those who uphold it are fortunate.
Its ways are ways pleasantness, and its paths are paths of peace. (Proverbs 3:18, 17)

The Torah is our source of life, our reminder of our purpose. By holding fast to its values, by fulfilling its mitzvot, we can find a path of pleasantness, a path of peace. Just as Hagar was lost and hopeless without water, our sense of direction in life is lost without the lessons of the Torah. Without those lessons, we and our children find ourselves mired in the pursuit of happiness, oblivious to our true goal, the pursuit of purpose.

The Torah teaches us that as God completed God's work of creation, God created humanity *בצלם א-להים*, *in the image of God*. In many ways, our divine image is found in the fact that we have such power to influence the world God created. We can go to war, or we can heal the sick. We can destroy the environment, or we can preserve our resources. We can promote dog fighting, or we can build animal shelters. Judaism teaches us of our role in *תיקון עולם*, *repairing the world*. As beings created *in the image of God*, we become partners in God's creation. We have the power to fulfill the needs of all of God's creations. What a majestic role humanity has in this world. Have you shared that message with your children and grandchildren? Have you told them that that is why they are on this Earth? Have you told them that they were created in the image of God, and that that image is reflected in their capacity to do good? Have you told them that there is something for them to do beyond the pursuit of happiness? How can we show our children that this is what you value in your life, and this is what you hope they value in theirs?

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't have a problem with children playing sports or participating in a band or in a club. In fact, I think it's wonderful, and it enriches children to have these experiences. But ask yourself this: Is it more important that your child be a virtuoso, or to be a virtuous person? Is it more important that your child or grandchild collects happy moments during childhood, or is it more important that he or she collects good values, and learn how to appreciate their divine capacity to do good? What is more important: that a child score the winning goal, or that your child displays good sportsmanship, and is caring and polite to her teammates or to his opponent? Would you rather your child go 5 for 5 with two doubles, or would you rather your child know that whatever happens in the game they are valuable and precious because of who they are? If these really are our values, should our children miss Hebrew School to get to soccer practice, or should it be vice-versa? Should we be waking up on a weekend morning with a zeal to get our child to the baseball game, or should we be eager to bring our children to synagogue? Should we spend more time sitting at our grandchild's recital, or sitting with our grandchildren in synagogue?

If we agree with the premise that we want our children to live a life of meaning, then are we now akin to Hagar, wandering about without hope, even while the source of life is right before our eyes?

So, it seems we have a choice. Are we chauffeurs for a child's pursuit of happiness, or are we guides for their pursuit of purpose? What will it be? Instant gratification, or a a life of meaning? To me, the choice would be obvious even if you had to make a choice. But the fact is, you don't. The fact is that having a sense of spirituality and purpose is a big factor in personal happiness and satisfaction. I'm sure you've heard the studies, though maybe you didn't think to act on what you heard. Study after study have found that people who have religion in their lives are happier. An ABC news report quoted Dr. Harold Koenig of Duke University as saying "Generally, religious people have a positive view of the world. They believe they are here for a reason. They see a purpose and a meaning in their life and have hope." These studies also say that religious people are more able to deal with stress and anxiety: "They feel that God is with them and gives them strength," Dr. Koenig said.¹

Do you want a meaningful, purposeful, fulfilling life? Do you want that for your children and grandchildren? Then like Hagar, it is time to see the source of life that is right before your eyes. It is time to stop wandering around in the pursuit of happiness, and to walk in the דְרָכֵי נֵעִם (*darchei no'am*, pleasant paths) of Torah. The truth is, you can have it all . . . peace, satisfaction, even happiness. But that all starts with the realization that life is about so much more than baseball games and piano recitals. We have to learn that message, and we have to model that message for our loved ones.

Where will you be running tomorrow? Where will you be running this Shabbat? What is your destination, and how will you get there? Will your children and grandchildren be on that path with you? In this new year, may God open up our eyes to the meaning of our lives. May we be inspired by our צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים, our *image of God* to reflect our spirituality through our words and our deeds. May we find that through coming closer to God and Torah, that our paths, and the paths of our loved ones are the pleasant paths of the Torah, and that our ways, are ways of peace. Amen.

¹<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Health/story?id=435412>