



## Troubling Texts, Flawed Humans, and #MeToo

First Day of Rosh Hashanah 5779

Rabbi Aaron Levy

Shanah tovah!

Thanks for choosing to be here with us today.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Aaron Levy, the founding rabbi and executive director of Makom: Creative Downtown Judaism. I look forward to meeting you after services and getting to know you over the course of this new year.

We're about to read a very disturbing story.

Previously, Sarah had given Hagar, her Egyptian servant, to Avraham as a concubine when Sarah thought she was unable to conceive. Hagar gave birth to a son, Yishmael.

Then, in the today's Torah reading from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Bereishit/Genesis, we learn of Yitzhak/Isaac's long-hoped-for birth to Sarah and Avraham. Sometime after Yitzhak is weaned, Sarah sees Yishmael *metzaheik* – which could mean many things: playing, laughing, making sport, mocking, maybe even trying to be like Yitzhak.

Sarah demands that Avraham banish Hagar and Yishmael.

Avraham is reluctant to expel them, but then God tells him it's ok, as Yitzhak will be his true heir and Yishmael will found another nation.

So Avraham banishes Hagar and Yishmael. They nearly die of thirst in the desert, until God intervenes, gives Hagar a message of hope, and she sees a well, which may have been there all along.

From that point on, Hagar and Yishmael seem to live happily ever after. But as readers, we're stuck with the memory of Sarah demanding, God encouraging, and Avraham carrying out the expulsion of his concubine and son.

Actually, this narrative is doubly disturbing. Not only do the active protagonists behave in shockingly unethical ways, that are difficult enough merely to witness, but they're supposed to

be our founding Jewish ancestors, our spiritual heroes, our role models? With stories like this, how can we look up to them?

And then there's God, who's also implicated.

What do we do with all this?

The ancient rabbis were also bothered by the story. So they interpret Yishmael's action – *metzaheik* – as something sinister. In various midrashim, they see him as engaging in idol worship, sexual impropriety, or murder, possibly even shooting arrows at Isaac. These rabbis make Yishmael out to be a villain, in order to justify Sarah's, Avraham's, and God's reactions.

If we think of the Torah as just a text, just a story, then this method works. A little creative re-interpretation preserves the valour of the heroes.

But this approach feels problematic for a number of reasons.

1. This midrash blames the victims for the harsh treatment they receive.
2. We think of the Torah as not just stories, but as our people's history – whether or not we believe the episodes actually occurred. And events that happen, literally or mythically, can't just be explained away, because they have consequences. When someone wrongs someone else, we can't choose to be morally blind to it, just because it'd be more convenient to ignore the offense in order to preserve our pre-existing perceptions of people.
3. The midrash creates a facile dichotomy of perfectly righteous and wholly evil characters. But one of the beautiful and compelling aspects of the Torah is that *all* the characters, *especially* our ostensible heroes, are presented as deeply flawed, imperfect humans. **There are no saints in Torah.** Our matriarchs and patriarchs have severely dysfunctional family relationships. Prophets have hot tempers. Kings are overly libidinous. And everyday Israelites sometimes uphold the mitzvot, and sometimes pursue idolatry. All this makes their personalities not only more interesting, but more relatable and useful as models from whom to learn, even if not always directly imitate, because **there are no saints in real life either.**

So what do we do with the story in this morning's Torah reading and in so many troubling Torah texts that bother us ethically?

We can choose to recognize the complexity of the narratives and the characters that populate them. We can sit with our discomfort in their actions, rather than trying to interpret it away. And we can ask ourselves what the Torah is trying to teach us and what we can learn from these strange stories.

Skip ahead four thousand years.

We live in a time when the flaws and moral failings of public figures, even moral leaders, are more widely known than ever before. And this is a good thing. Hopefully, it enables us to pursue greater justice for victims, prevent further misdeeds, and improve society. It also prevents us from falsely viewing our leaders as inhuman angels, without nuance, struggles, and problems. But it greatly complicates our relationships with them, their work, and their legacies.

In Makom and in many Jewish communities around the world, the niggunim – the melodies – Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach composed are the primary soundtrack to our prayers. In his lifetime, he was revered by many as a spiritual giant, able to convey complex mystical teachings to the masses, uplift throngs of people with his songs and teachings, and show sensitivity to many struggling individuals. But four years after he died in 1994, his serious crimes of abusing young women became public.

In this era of #MeToo, a few of you have asked me whether we'd continue singing Carlebach's tunes at Makom, whether on Shabbat or these Days of Awe. This is a good question that requires honesty and thoughtfulness.

My approach, which is certainly open to critique, has been the same since I first read of his abusive behaviour in 1998. I freely learn and use his remarkably simple yet powerful niggunim, but refrain from speaking about him reverentially or telling stories about him, which would valorize him.

This is the same approach many of us inherently take to the music, art, writings, and teachings of other deeply morally flawed people. We shun the artist, but not the art.

There's a Talmudic parallel. Elisha ben Avuyah, a leading scholar and contemporary of Rabbi Akiva in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, became a heretic, totally abandoning Jewish belief and practice. There are various versions of the backstory as to why this rabbi left traditional Judaism. However, even after his apostasy, his principle student, Rabbi Meir, continued to learn from him. In one beautiful episode, Rabbi Meir walks next to and learns from Elisha while Elisha rode on horseback – on Shabbat. When the Talmud (Hagigah 15b) sharply questions how Rabbi Meir

could continue learning from Elisha after his abandonment of Judaism, another rabbi offers this in Rabbi Meir's defense:

רבי מאיר רמון מצא, תוכו אכל, קליפתו זרק.

Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate and ate its contents while throwing away its peel.

We're each in Rabbi Meir's position with regard to so many leaders, creators, and sometimes even our ancestors.

Earlier this year, Neshama Carlebach wrote of her father: "I accept the fullness of who my father was, flaws and all. I am angry with him. And I refuse to see his faults as the totality of who he was."

We shouldn't hesitate to recognize wrongdoing and name it as such, but nor should we overgeneralize and dismiss the good works, even of a severely flawed human.

Perhaps even more importantly, we need to see our own faults, but not to overstate them. As Rabbi Shimon says in Pirkei Avot (2:13):

ואל תהי רשע בפני עצמך:

Do not be evil in your own eyes.

Each of us has our shortcomings, which we must face honestly – a major theme of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But we also all have our positive attributes, which we need to acknowledge and build upon in order to grow.

We learn in the 5<sup>th</sup>-century midrash Pesikta de-Rav Kahanah (Piska 24, Shabbat Shuvah):

א"ר אלכסנדרי: ההדיוט אם משתמש הוא בכלי שבור, גניי הוא לו. אבל הק' אינו כן. כל שימוש כלים שבורים.

Rabbi Alexandri said: A typical person would consider it embarrassing to use a broken implement, but the Holy Blessed One is not like that. All of God's work is done with broken implements.

The characters in our Torah reading are flawed, our historical and contemporary leaders and artists are flawed, and each of us is flawed. But we are all still God's implements and have so much to contribute to the world, in all its messy complexity.