

Introduction to the Torah— Rebecca Greene

I want to thank Treasure for giving me the opportunity to talk about this very important portion of the Torah, about Sarah and Hagar and about the creation and preservation of life. Of fundamental importance to Judaism and to me personally.

The esteemed Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written that Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the creation of the universe. Today, the world was born. And he goes on to quote the Mishnah (and more recently quoted in Schindler's List) that "a single life is like a universe" and that one who destroys a life is as if he destroys a universe. One who saves a life is as if he saved a universe."

These words particularly resound to me. Nine years ago, yesterday, Rosh Hashanah our son Ethan Frederick Greene was killed by a very virulent form of AML Leukemia. Only 13 days after diagnosis, a formerly very strong 32 year old died. Our family's universe was shattered. Never since to be repaired.

Today's Torah portion clearly shows the value of creating, protecting and preserving life. Abraham, then 100 years old, names his baby son Yitzchak because Sarah laughed. She said "God has brought me laughter, everyone who hears will laugh with me, for who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age." Sarah was then according to the Torah a mere 80 years old. Some have said that the numbers in the Torah are actually double the real amount, but even if Sarah was forty, she was old to have a child, especially at a time our sages knew little about sterilization, it would appear, nor about safe procedures for child birth. And yet she and in the Havtorah Hanah, also old, risked their lives to bare their sons. So important was it to them that Hanah dedicated her son to as soon as possible dedicate his life to serving the Temple and Sarah in exchange for her son's being born, even witnessed Abraham about to sacrifice

As we know, portions of the Torah instruct the Hebrews to wipe out certain tribes entirely. But this is not the spirit of this portion on Sarah and Hagar. Here, G-d makes clear that the life of Isaac and that of Ishmael must both be protected. Sarah says to Abraham,

“Cast out that slavewoman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” But the Torah continues that Abraham is so distressed because Ishmael is also his son, that he consults G-d about it. And G-d, the Torah says, says, instructs him to go along with Sarah since his offspring shall be continued through Isaac. And yet, G-d also assures him that the son of the slavewoman, his progeny too shall be a nation, because he is also your son.

Early the next morning, the Torah continues, Abraham gives Hagar bread and a skin of water and sends her on her way. She wanders around the wilderness near Beersheba. The boy becomes famished. She puts him in the bushes and sits aside because she does not want to see him die and she cries. Her despair and the silent cry of her son is heard by G-d. A poem by Rabbi Shawn Zevit says that his heart screamed inside of him with a silent scream. But G-d heard it. This calls to my mind a day at Legal Services when I was an attorney when our client’s child kept screaming for food what appeared to us interminably. We managed to find a can of food and the screaming subsided.

What happens next is an angel of G-d assures Hagar that her son will not die. She looks around and sees a well with drinking water. He lives. The story could have ended otherwise with the death of Ishmael but he lives. What this is about, is what Rabbi Kushner has written (the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*) by helping others you give yourselves a purpose to carry on.

Looked at another way, the story is about the accommodation to the needs of everyone in order to preserve life for not just our group but others too. Our prayerbook does not talk about Milchamah, War, it talks in many prayers, about Peace, most singularly in Sim Shalom. In the spirit of creating, not destroying life, of protecting life, let us hope that the war is gone soon and we have peace.

What can we learn from the ending? As Rabbi says with sharing we become a better person.

What does the portion also allude to –is peace –getting along. Indeed, it also ends with Beersheba being.

It should be pointed out that the word Milchamah, War, is not as far as I know mentioned in the prayers. It is not part of the religion of the prayerbook. Rather, there are several prayers- Sim Shalom, Peace which make clear that the objective is the reverse. In all, I count that at least times the word Shalom is mentioned. In this world, where the fear of fierce technology is taking over, where almost 2000 Israelis have been killed since October 7th – (by far more than the numbers of any other war) let us pray that we can be restored to peace soon. A peace which means that families can grow and grow and that happiness can be granted to everyone.