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Writing the End of the Story

There are sad stories, and there are happy stories and there are Jewish stories.

As every student of drama and literature knows, tragedies end in a funeral; comedies end with a wedding. Everyone attending a Shakespearean tragedy or comedy knows how it will end before the curtain rises. And the same is true for someone attending a play by Euripedes (who only wrote tragedies) or Aristophanes. (who only wrote comedies). By contrast, a Jewish story is one in which we write the ending ourselves.

The Torah portion on this first day of Rosh Hashanah begins in hope but ends in a troubling place. God remembers Sarah, וְה' פָּקַד אֶת-שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמְרָה, and she gives birth to a son, just as had been predicted. But, if the birth of Yitzhak brings laughter and joy to his parents, it complicates the life of Avraham's older son Yishmael.

The Torah obscures the nature of what precisely went wrong:

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת-בְּנוֹ-הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרִי אֲשֶׁר-לָקָחָהּ לְאִבְרָהָם מִצְחָק:

Sarah saw Yishmael מִצְחָק playing. That sounds innocuous enough but elsewhere in the Torah the word clearly and unambiguously has connotations of sexual abuse, idolatry, and violence, and the rabbis accuse Yishmael of all of these behaviors. That explains Sarah's insistence that Yishmael be banished. Despite whatever Sarah saw, Avraham was greatly distressed. God, ultimately, instructs Avraham to listen to Sarah's instructions and Yishmael is banished. As may have been expected, Hagar and Yismael's food soon runs out, Hagar casts Yishmael aside so she will not see him die, but at the last minute, God hears Yishmael's cries of thirst and a well appears miraculously. Yismael is saved and he grows into a prosperous adult and our Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah comes to an end.

Is this a happy ending? How could it be? Yes, Yishmael is saved at the last minute through a miracle. But the family of Avraham has been shattered. If we are meant to share Avraham's distress, how can we accept a child of Avraham banished from our family? And if we are meant to see things as Sarah does, especially if we accept the midrashic interpretations, and concede that Yishmael was guilty of dangerous and transgressive behavior, is his banishment from the family the sort of end we hope for or celebrate?

And yet the story ends here.

But for the rabbis the story did not end there. Yalkot Shimoni, a collection of midrashim picks up where the Torah ends and shares the rest of the story.

לאחר ג' שנים הלך אברהם לראות את ישמעאל ונשבע לשרה שאינו יורד מן הגמל במקום שישמעאל שרוי שם
Three years later Avraham went to visit Yishmael and swore an oath to Sarah that he would not descend from his camel in any location where Yishmael was in charge.

והגיע לשם בחצי היום ומצא שם אשתו של ישמעאל אמר לה היכן הוא ישמעאל אמרה ליה הלך הוא ואמו להביא פירות ותמרים מן המדבר א"ל תני לי מעט לחם ומעט מים כי עיפה נפשי מדרך המדבר א"ל אין לי לא לחם ולא מים א"ל כשיבא ישמעאל תגיד לו את הדברים האלה ואמרי לו חלף את מפתן ביתך שאינה טובה לך ולא ראוייה לך וכשבא ישמעאל הגידה לו את הדברים וכן חכם כחצי חכם והבין ישמעאל ושלחה

He reached there in the middle of the day and found Yishmael's wife. He asked her where Yishmael was and she told him that he had gone with his mother to bring fruit and dates from the desert. He said to her, "Give me a little bit of bread and a little bit of water for I am tired from the journey through the desert." She said to him, "I have neither bread nor water." He said to her, "when Yishmael returns, tell him all of these things that transpired between us and then tell him he needs a new threshold for his doorway for the one he has now is not good for him." When Yishmael returned she told him all this and the son of a wise person is himself at least halfway wise and Yishmael understood what his father had meant to convey and he sent away his wife.

שלחה אמו ולקחה לו אשה מבית אביה ופטימה שמה. ועוד לאחר ג' שנים הלך אברהם לראות את ישמעאל ונשבע לשרה שאינו יורד מן הגמל במקום שישמעאל שרוי שם והגיע לשם בחצי היום ומצא אשתו של ישמעאל וכו' עד מיד הוציאה ונתנה לו עמד אברהם והיה מתפלל לפני הקב"ה על בנו ונתמלא ביתו של ישמעאל מכל טוב וממון וברכות וכשבא ישמעאל הגידה לו את הדבר הזה וידע ישמעאל שעד עכשיו רחמיו עליו כרחם אב על בנים.

Yishmael then sent his mother and she brought him a wife from her father's family and her name was Fatima. And once again, after three years, Avraham went to see Yishmael and he swore an oath to Sarah that he would not descend from the camel in the place where Yishmael was And he reached there in the middle of the day and he found the wife of Yishmael alone etc. And this time she immediately brought out food and water and gave them to Avraham. Avraham raised himself up and recited a prayer before the Holy Blessed One on behalf of his son, and Yishmael's entire home was filled with all good things and with wealth and *berakhab*. And when Yishmael returned home and his wife recalled to him all that occurred Yishmael knew *that up until that day his father had continued to feel mercy for him as a father is merciful for his son .*

All the characters come out better in this midrashic story. In this version of the story, Sarah is not opposed to her husband retaining a relationship with his firstborn son. In this version of the story Avraham does not give up on Yishmael. He never stops caring about him. He never loses faith in Yishmael's essential goodness, and he never loses faith that he can continue to influence Yishmael in a positive direction even from afar. And in this version of the story, Yishmael retains his identity as a proud son of Avraham who absorbed lessons of hospitality and kindness in his father's home.

Not only do the characters come out better in this version but I find the story to be moving. Not because of sympathy with Avraham, or because of sympathy with Yishmael, who, after all, inhabited a rather unique family situation, but out of solidarity and appreciation for the writers of this midrash who took "a sad song and made it better."

Ultimately, our capacity to write new endings to sad songs, is a quintessential human super-power, a capacity that is at the very core of this season of teshuvah and introspection. And it is also a very important Jewish superpower by which the infinite meaning contained in the Torah is explored and embraced, and then deployed to give us the stories we need, and the examples that can inspire us.

Paul McCartney wrote the lyrics to the song Hey Jude, including the charge to "take a sad song and make it better' to encourage a child from a broken marriage, just like Yishmael. It speaks to the human capacity for resilience and rediscovery. Whenever we are the victims of fate, we have the opportunity to ascribe new meaning to the storms that buffet our lives and transform that fate into a chosen destiny whose direction and purpose we choose.

That is essentially the meaning of Rosh Hashanah, a date that does not commemorate the creation of Heaven and Earth, but a date that commemorates the creation of humanity, with our capacity for perpetual renewal. In the words of the Sefas Emes, the great 19th century Hassidic leader, on Rosh Hashanah, the ability for renewal is itself renewed each year. This means that on Rosh Hashanah every year, in his words, *מחדש העולם* the world itself is renewed through our ability to tap into the potential for taking our lives in a new direction and by telling a new story.

The *Sefer haHayim*, the Book of Life that is open today is described in our liturgy as a book from which God reads וּמֵאֵלֵינוּ יִקְרָא. If God reads from the *Sefer HaHayim*, who writes the *Sefer HaHayim*? I believe that we write our own stories into the *Sefer HaHayim* through our actions throughout the year and our actions for the coming year can have their origin in the commitments we make today.

I do not have my own Wikipedia page and my understanding is that it is considered bad form to create your own Wikipedia page or to edit your own page when it is created by others. It isn't fair, it isn't objective, to intervene and write about your own life and the significance of your contributions to the world for the Internet's largest and most comprehensive encyclopedia of everything. But the *Sefer HaHayim* is not like that! We decide what gets recorded there. And not only is it not considered bad form to edit what is written about us in the *Sefer HaHayim*, it is even a mitzvah to engage in the process of teshuvah and thereby edit what is recorded by our names in the *Sefer HaHayim*. We write our own stories in God's Wikipedia.

Sad stories can have happy endings if we choose to edit the past through teshuvah and create a brighter future through mitzvot.

The potential for finding a new ending to a sad story, which the midrash about Yishmael exemplifies in such a poignant way, is at the heart of what it means to study Torah. The Talmud teaches, אֵין בֵּית מִדְרָשׁ בְּלֹא חִידוּשׁ, which means there is no *beit midrash*, there is no gathering dedicated to Torah scholarship, without innovation, without new ideas, without finding better answers to old questions, without finding happier endings to sad stories. Taking a sad song and making it better is to expand the palace of Torah towards new horizons.

When scholars search for halakhic solutions to vexing problems of family, society, and modernity, they are insisting that the story can have a happy ending if we learn more and learn better and discover new truths as the Torah reveals additional facets of its infinite capacity for renewal. And so too the rabbis could not allow the story of Avraham and his son Yishmael to end the way it ends in the Torah. They searched the Torah itself for hints and clues and they collected and analyzed ancient traditions, and a new ending was written to an old story.

I need to confess, before concluding today, that I have been somewhat deceptive in ascribing this midrash to "the rabbis", a term which often connotes the rabbis of the classical period of the Mishnah and Talmud. Many collections of midrashim date to those ancient rabbis, but Yalkot Shimoni, which tells of Avraham's visits to Yishmael, was compiled from earlier material by an unknown author in the medieval period centuries after the classic rabbinic period. One hint that this midrash is late can be found in the Arabic name it assigns to Yishmael's wife - Fatima. That name does not appear anywhere in the Torah but it is the name of Muhamed's wife in Islamic tradition.

With this awareness we see that Yalkot Shimoni is not just encouraging us to admire the effort to repair the shattered family of Avraham, but it is encouraging us to think of reconciliation between all of us, the children of Yitzhak and Rivka, and our Arab and Muslim cousins. That story seems very far from having a happy ending. But human beings, and Jews in particular, need to always remember that the power of renewal offered by this season entails the ability to improve any sad story.

Just days ago I saw a photograph of the Calatrava "chords bridge" in Jerusalem decorated in the colors of the Moroccan flag as an act of solidarity with the victims of the horrific earthquake there. That act of solidarity, and the pragmatic help from Israeli NGOs like United Hatzalah, who worked on the ground in the Atlas Mountains this past week, are a modern echo of Avraham's insistence that all of his children know רַחֲמֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ כִּרְחֵם אֲבִי עַל בָּנָיו that Avraham's mercy, and God's own mercy, extends to all of God's children.

Perhaps the most important idea that Judaism offers the world is that there are no tragedies and there are no comedies. Every story is unfinished and every story can have a happy ending. As we edit the stories of our lives we write the next chapter of the human story. Today is the day to re-engage in that process of editing the

stories of our lives. And today is the day for the commitments that can take us all to better places in the year to come.

Shannah tovah.