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National Council of Jewish Women

Sermon Talking Points for Parshat Vayera

Here are some talking points that could be used for a drasha on Parshat Vayera that focus on Hagar and Reproductive Justice, connecting her story to some of the urgent issues of our day — most notably the case before the Supreme Court aimed at overturning Roe v. Wade.

They are, of course, talking points; they're intentionally a simple frame, aimed to offer you room for your own voice, your own Torah. Please absolutely add in your own perspective and ideas, tweak, use what of this feels right for you —this is neither comprehensive nor complete, nor is it meant to be.

If you do use this in some way, or speak about reproductive health, rights or justice during this parsha, or at any point, we'd love to know about it. Please drop a line to druttenberg@ncjw.org and let us know.

- Today, we read a painful story — one of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham and Sarah's household. But in order to understand the full implications of it, we must look a bit further back, and to understand Hagar's story in the context of **reproductive justice.**
- Hagar, here, is an enslaved woman — a cultural stranger, without linguistic or kinship ties, and perhaps any protection. We don't know anything of her backstory in Torah.
- But most critically, nowhere in these verses does Hagar consent to having her body taken, given--her reproductive life is not her own, she is not able to make choices, she is not given agency or dignity. Just look at the verbs that get used in the process of Ishmael's conception:

וַתִּקַּח שָׂרַי אֵשֶׁת־אַבְרָם אֶת־הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית שִׁפְחָתָהּ מִקֵּץ עֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים לְשֶׁבֶת אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן **וַתִּתֵּן** אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָם אִישָׁהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה:

So Sarai, Abram's wife, **took** her enslaved woman, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and **gave** her to her husband Abram as a wife. (Bereshit 16:3)

- She is taken, she is given--she is not asked, she does not get to choose. Her reproductive life is not her own. (We do not hear her voice or consent in the previous verses, either.)
- Then, in the today's reading, we see Hagar and Ishmael pushed out into the wilderness because Sarah does not want Ishmael to share an inheritance with Isaac. Again, Hagar has no voice, choice, agency. We see Abraham give her a bit of food and water and send her out into the wilderness with no recourse, no means of survival, no way to save her son.
- SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective defines reproductive justice as "the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities." Reproductive justice brings a racial and economic justice framework to the work for reproductive freedom, recognizing and addressing disparities in social, economic, and political power and how this impacts access to reproductive health care. The work for reproductive justice was started and continues to be led by women of color.
- Needless to say, Hagar did not have the right to make decisions about whether to have children or the right or ability to parent the child she did have in a safe and sustainable way. She was not given access to justice.
- Disproportionately, those impacted by restrictions on reproductive health care access are those without power in our, or any society--now, BIPOC people, people struggling to get by, immigrants, and others.
- I am a Rabbi for Repro/Cantor for Repro/Maharat for Repro/etc with National Council of Jewish Women, proud to stand for everyone's reproductive health, rights, safety, and freedom, and to fight for the reproductive healthcare which is also permitted by Jewish law--and even required, when the health of the pregnant person is at stake.
- These rights cannot be taken for granted. Since 2011, states have passed 566 restrictions to abortion access. And this year has been particularly devastating. Since January 2021, there have been 561 abortion restrictions, including 165 abortion bans, introduced across 47 states--83 of which have been enacted (these numbers are as of June.)
- Texas has pulled abortion rights from its citizens and put bounties on the heads of anyone who dare offer to help them, and Florida has recently introduced a similarly restrictive bill. Though a judge just blocked the Texas law, an appeal has already been filed, and the case may find its way to the Supreme Court.
- And right now, as we speak, there is a case before the Supreme Court that is a direct and explicit challenge to Roe vs. Wade. Oral arguments in *Dobbs v. Jackson*

[Women's Health Organization](#) -- which centers around a blatantly unconstitutional Mississippi 15-week abortion ban -- will be heard on December 1st.
- The [Women's Health Protection Act (WHPA),](#) a bill to help protect our Constitutionally guaranteed right to reproductive health care regardless of SCOTUS, passed the House in late September. It must now pass the Senate. We need to let our senators know that this is critical to us.
- As you know, we also read these verses over Rosh Hashana, during the season of tshuvah. Perhaps that's to remind us of the harm done to Hagar, and to give us the opportunity to remind us that we can and must do better--that we must fight for a world with more light, more dignity, more wholeness, for everyone. That we must fight for Reproductive Justice for everyone.

For more statistics, source sheets, as well as the personal stories of people who have had abortions with a number of different, complex experiences, you can look at our [toolkit](#) from this past year's Repro Shabbat. As we think about Reproductive Justice--remember, always a BIPOC-led movement that should be labeled as such--we also remind you of [forced sterilizations at ICE detention centers](#) and point you towards the work of [In Our Own Voice: The National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda](#). And for some more context on the Sarah/Hagar relationship and its relationship to a central mitzvah--caring for the ger--[this](#) post might be of interest.