

Rosh Hashanah II

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Congregation Rodeph Sholom

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The Privilege of Looking Away

In an excruciating episode from the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading, Hagar and her only son Ishmael wander in the wilderness at the edge of life. Parched from the heat, their water-skin empty, Hagar makes the heartbreaking decision to cast her young son underneath the shade of a bush and walk away from him, the length of a bow shot. *אל־אֶרְאָה בַּמֹּת הַיּוֹد*, “Let me not see the child die,” she speaks aloud, before her pain cascades from her in cries.

Hagar’s abandonment of her suffering son is both horrifying to conceive of and totally relatable. We shudder at Ishmael’s victimization, imagining him, a frightened child, expiring and alone.

And yet, how many of us daily live that all-too-human impulse to turn away from horror?

I sympathize with Hagar. My unquenched thirst for hopeful news about Covid-19 and about the direction of our country led me to distance myself from the world, the length of a bow shot, far enough where I could not hear the frantic cries for justice and breath of our suffocated brothers and sisters. News could not make me feel good, so I consumed as little as necessary. I turned to fiction and sitcoms, filling my mind with distracting worlds fairer and less painful than ours.

And then, by accident, I clicked on a video that contained George Floyd gasping for air. I can still hear the asphyxiation in his voice as he desperately wheezed “I can’t breathe”. I grew hot, tears filled my eyes, my heart began to pound, and I knew, as soon as I clicked mute, that I would never ever unhear George Floyd’s cry. His suffering took root inside of me, and I felt a long overdue disquiet. A human had been strangled by the police. Deprived of counsel. Deprived of justice. Deprived of life.

Like the scorching heat of the indifferent wilderness draining the water out of Ishmael, a callous police officer looted George Floyd's life. And until I heard it and saw it, until I bore witness to the horror of his murder, I was not angry enough to act. I deplored another tragic killing of a Black man, donated money to bail funds, even posted a blank black box on social media. And I continued, like so many, to navigate the doldrums of the pandemic. I did not march, I did not clamor, I did not risk my own vulnerability to demand a change to policing in our country.

Reading about the protests erupting throughout New York, I contemplated why I wasn't there. It was so obvious to march for women's rights and gun control and environmental protection, but now when the sanctity of Black lives was on the line, I had become a bystander.

"Bystander" is a hard word for any Jew to swallow. It is charged with imagery of the Shoah and the indifference of the world to our ancestors' extermination. But in a moment of shame-filled self-reckoning, I discerned that I had emerged from my impassioned social justice-fueled 20s as an adult who was beginning to tolerate a fair amount of injustice in her world. All of the marches I attended were about me—my rights, my children's safety, my planet. Now that it was someone else's body, someone else's children, someone else's world—the urgency had attenuated.

Thankfully, fearless advocates ensured that George Floyd's voice reverberated much farther than a bow shot. His plea for breath was a shofar blast into my soul, alarming me awake to the fierce urgency of racial justice. And once I witnessed his violent annihilation, I thought of his parents and his siblings, his children and his fiancée, and his family who called him a jokester and the "cousin who everyone loved."¹ The thing is, they never could have ignored his death. He was their brother and son and father and spouse, and now he would never come home, never laugh with them or embrace them or console them again. They were forced to suffer his murder, to endure their grief, to live the injustice of our racist country. The prerogative to look away, to scroll past the video of George Floyd's neck crushed beneath an officer's knee, is mine and not theirs. Ignoring the news is an expression of my privilege.

¹ Erica Davies, "[DEVASTATING' George Floyd's family say they saw video of deadly arrest BEFORE realizing it was him & demand murder charge for cops](#)," *The U.S. Sun*, 27 May 2020 [accessed 4 Sept 20].

Vulnerable people are denied the luxury of being oblivious. There is no physical shield from tumult and no emotional escapism from adversity.² Pastor John Pavlovitz skewers the curatorial inclination of privileged Americans who opt out of the news because other people's pain interrupts our seamless lives. "Yes, we want America" he insists, "but we want it without the warts and scars and wounds that people of color show us we have."³

As Hagar wails for her dying son, Torah tells us that God hears Ishmael. An angel calls out, "What troubles you, Hagar? Have no fear, for God has heard the cry of the boy where he is. Get up, lift the boy, and hold him with your hand."⁴ While Hagar removes herself from the sounds and images of Ishmael's death, Torah tells us not once but two times in a single verse *va-yishma Elohim et kol ha-na'ar; shama Elohim et kol ha-na'ar*—God hears Ishmael's voice. Amidst human suffering, God behaves differently than Hagar, drawing near to the afflicted and listening closely. To embody divinity, our text suggests, is to acknowledge suffering, to be present with it.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spent his life awakening white America to the suffering of Black Americans. He knew that if white Americans allowed Black pain to take root in us, we might be stirred to action like God was stirred by the cry of Ishmael. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" he writes:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not...the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice...who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom....⁵

Ignoring the news because it hurts too much is negative peace; it is the willful disregard for the suffering of others to avoid tension. Dr. King contended that societal tension was the generative

² John Pavlovitz, "[The White Privilege of Ignoring the News](#)," *Medium*, 2 Jul 2020 [accessed 1 Sept 2020].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Genesis 21:17-18

⁵ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "[Letter from Birmingham Jail](#)."

nucleus for social change and sought to use direct action and nonviolent protest to “create a situation so crisis-packed that it [would] inevitably open the door to negotiation.”⁶ Because Black Americans could not avoid the tension imposed upon them by racism, they learned to wield it as a force for social change. How radical and enduring such change might be if we allowed ourselves to encounter this tension, if we were willing to share in some of our fellow Americans’ pain. Might we, like Hagar, lift them up and hold their hands?

Two-time National Book Award author Jesmyn Ward recently wrote a piece about grieving her husband’s untimely death through Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests.

Did you see it? My cousin asked me.

No. I couldn’t bring myself to watch it, I said. Her words began to flicker, to fade in and out. Grief sometimes makes it hard for me to hear. Sound came in snatches.

His knee, she said.

On his neck, she said.

Couldn’t breathe, she said.

He cried for his mama, she said.

I read about Ahmaud, I said. *I read about Breonna.*

I don’t say, but I thought it: *I know their beloveds’ wail. I know their beloveds’ wail... I know their loss burns their beloveds’ throats like acid. Their families will speak,* I thought. *Ask for justice. And no one will answer,* I thought.⁷

Ms. Ward’s 33-year-old husband died this past January of acute respiratory distress syndrome. She found him in their son’s room panting, “Can’t. Breathe.” and they waited together in the emergency room for over an hour before he was seen and ultimately died. Jesmyn Ward did not distance

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jesmyn Ward, “[On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic](#),” *Vanity Fair*, 1 Sept 2020 [accessed 4 Sept 2020].

herself from her beloved. She hovered in the doorway of the ICU, terrified, she describes, “[o]f the terrible commitment at the heart of me that reasons that if the person I love has to endure this, then the least I can do is stand there, the least I can do is witness, the least I can do is tell them over and over again, aloud, *I love you. We love you. We ain’t going nowhere.*”⁸

Hagar’s impulse to withdraw from her dying child does not mean he was unloved. Overwhelmed by her family’s plight, she flees the most harrowing scene, modeling our very human inclination to hide from what hurts. It is God who listens, God’s angel who counsels her back to Ishmael, and ultimately God who provides a way forward: “Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and let the boy drink.”⁹

Once Hagar mustered the strength to approach her son and witness his suffering, she found additional reserves to lift him up. And as she uncovered new capacity to shoulder the pain of another, the well appeared that would save and sustain them both.

The fear of others’ pain and our discomfort with tension keep us many of us out of earshot. If we can scroll past and mute it, we perpetuate only a negative peace, devoid of justice. And we remain people of good will setting a timetable for the freedom of others.

Torah challenges us to emulate the Holy One in offering sacred presence alongside our suffering brothers and sisters *where they are*. We cannot mistake talk show commentary or news analysis for witnessing. We must begin with the unfiltered and uncensored voices of the afflicted. This means turning our eyes, ears and hearts toward the testimony and, yes, even the video footage of Black trauma. To bear witness is to allow their agony to touch us, to change us, to make us conscious of its urgency.

On Yom Kippur morning we read the words of the prophet Isaiah:

This is the fast I desire: to unlock fetters of wickedness... to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke...and not to ignore your own kin. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly...Then, when you call, Adonai will answer; When you cry, [God] will say: *Hineini*, Here I am...[God] will slake your thirst in parched

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gen 21:19

places and give strength to your bones. You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail.¹⁰

The truest fast requires deep engagement with brokenness. It is a fast from comfort, a fast from selfishness, a fast from unwarranted tranquility. We may not have the wherewithal, like God, to be vulnerable to others' suffering at all times. But we can and must learn from Hagar, recognizing when we have distanced ourselves too far and rectifying our error. Our country remains a punishing wilderness for too many. They are thirsty, they can't breathe, and they are dying. It is an emergency, and we cannot feel that until we see it. Then and only then will we uncover the deep wells that can sustain us all until we reach the Promised Land.

¹⁰ Isaiah 58:6-11