

Rabbi Fredda Cohen

D'var Torah – Chayei Sarah – 5783

These past few years have taken their toll on all of us with the outbreak of the pandemic. I imagine that, for most, the uncertainty that resulted from being in uncharted waters left us feeling vulnerable, helpless, and questioning. Certainly that was true of the staff of White Plains Hospital, where I serve as a Director of Pastoral Care and Education. During the first surge of the pandemic, the hospital was inundated with extremely ill patients who were suffering from the virus. In all my years as a chaplain, I have never experienced such unrelenting illness, loneliness, despair, and frustration. By necessity, families were not permitted into the hospital, leaving a deep void for our patients. Our doctors, nurses, cleaning people, food servers – everyone on the staff - had to try to fill that gap, and they did so in the most loving and compassionate manner, very often at a great emotional cost. The highs were very high when a patient was able to come off the ventilator and especially when they were discharged to cheers from the staff - but the lows were so terribly low. And I would wonder, how did they have the resolve, the determination, the resilience to return each day to the hospital, with such love and care. How did they muster the courage after facing trauma after trauma?

I would like to suggest that this week's *parasha*, *Chaye Sarah*, may offer some guidance. It follows on the heels of two of the most difficult stories in the Torah, each of which depicts an agonizing situation from which recovery would seem impossible. Two weeks ago in *Lech Lecha*, we read of our patriarch Abraham, who casts out his son, Ishmael, together with his mother, Hagar, to languish in the wilderness. Hagar's distress is heartbreaking: "Let me not look on as the child dies," she laments, distancing herself from the unimaginable. And Ishmael— the

innocent child – understands that he has been victimized at the hand of his father. No less horrific are the events in last week's *Vayeira*, in which filicide (at the instruction of God) is very nearly carried out by Abraham, again, this time against his beloved son, Isaac. It is the innocence of Isaac that pulls at our hearts. "Father," he says, "I see the firestone and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Isaac is saved, but not before Abraham lifts up his knife against his son.

And yet, in this week's *parasha*, the text reads that Abraham died "old and contented" and that "his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah." Together. As if their prior history had not occurred. This is the true wonder of these stories, that these young men apparently developed the resilience, in the wake of trauma, to learn, grow and persevere. What can we learn about overcoming fear, emerging from darkness, and not only prevailing, but living a life that is rich in meaning, fulfillment, blessing and love?

Resilience. In modern Hebrew, it is translated as *khosen*, which means impermeable or inoculated. But from our most recent experience with the Covid pandemic, we know that we are hardly impermeable. The phrase I prefer is *kosher hitohsh'shut*, which means the capacity for recovery.

In her book *The Road to Resilience*, Sherri Mandell writes that resilience is about becoming, not overcoming. It is taking the brokenness and vulnerability that enables you to connect to transcend yourself, to connect to other, community and God. She stresses that resilience is "not a personal quality that a few lucky ones possess." Rather, its potential lies in each of us. She prescribes seven spiritual steps: chaos, community, choice, creativity, commemoration, consecration, and celebration. Each is a necessary step, and of course, as we

have discovered with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages related to death and mourning, they are not always linear. But each has an important function. In chaos, we unleash our vulnerabilities. It is painful, but without it, we cannot move on. We allow ourselves comfort through the kindness of community. We regain our agency through choosing ways that will enable us to gain strength. The Psalmist asks: "I lift my eyes to the mountain. From where does my help come?" What lifts your spirit? The answer is individual and comes from within. Choice blends into creativity. Mandell teaches that we can transform our pain into creative renewal, a form of teshuva that we practice every day. The next step – commemoration – is bittersweet. In some ways, it is a return to the chaos. But we can frame these memories, we can tell the story according to our own truth. Reb Nachman of Breslav, an early Chassidic master, understood the power of storytelling. His stories reflect his understanding of the relationship between psychology and theology, that is, how sadness and joy affect one's ability to connect to God and to others. They also reflect Reb Nachman's own spiritual uncertainties, and paradoxically through this expression, allow for faith to be regained and healing to be effectuated. "It is said that stories can help put you to sleep," wrote Reb Nachman. "I say stories can help wake you up." The sixth step – consecration – refers to meaning-making. Each suffering has a sacred message to be discerned. How do we make meaning of what we have experienced? And finally, there is celebration, or as I prefer, choosing to go on with newly discovered strength. Celebration in the gratitude of being able to live a new day, taking that breath, rising up.

So back to Ishmael and Isaac and the lessons that we can take from them. The text is silent on what takes place immediately after their respective traumas. We don't know what brought about their rapprochement at Abraham's burial? Where did each derive the strength and power to overcome such adversity? In my own imagination, I can conjure a bunch of scenarios.

Perhaps the brothers re-united after the trauma, each one looking to help the other in an act of brotherly love. Perhaps the brothers did not re-unite but found solace in the creation of their own families, allowing them to experience love in a meaningful way that brought with it the ability to forgive. Perhaps Isaac, or maybe Ishmael, in trying to understand his father's actions recognized that Abraham himself had left his own father, and this separation had a profound psychological effect which rendered Abraham broken and not responsible for his own actions. All we do know is that the brothers were able to rebound, survive, and take care of Abraham in the purest form of *chesed*.

Perhaps by not providing us with the specifics, the Torah is teaching us that each of us, with our own unique difficulties and vulnerabilities, has the potential to experience healing, this internal turning, this teshuva, in our own time, in our own way, knowing that the wisdom of our texts, the love of our families, the compassion of our community, and the infinite measure of God's grace is there for us to draw upon. *Keyn y'hi ratzon*.