

# THE MESSINESS OF POTENTIAL

*Sarra Alpert*

In the prescribed Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah, we don't read about laws of repentance or restitution; we read instead stories about people. And not stories neatly wrapped and ready for emulation, but truly messy stories: stories of jealousy and longing and cowardice, of possibly deliberately hurtful choices with potentially terrible consequences.

In one of the two readings, we begin with ancestors Abraham and Sarah at a particularly joyful moment: after years of not being able to have children, they finally have a son. And in this spirit of joy, they name him Isaac after Sarah's laughter — first skeptical, then happy — at the idea that she could still bear a child in her old age. However, immediately following this moment of joy, we see Sarah turn towards a place of fear and suspicion. Earlier in the narrative, during the years that Sarah thought herself unable to have children, she had told her husband to have a child with her handmaiden Hagar. Now that Sarah has her own son, however, she tells Abraham to cast Hagar and their son Ishmael out of the household. In the text, her reasons for this are not entirely clear. It says that she sees Ishmael *m'tzahek* - a word with the same root as her son's name, the word for laughter, which the text translates as "playing" - and then tells Abraham that she does not want Ishmael to share in Isaac's inheritance. Many commentators, seemingly wanting to find some worthy explanation for Sarah's actions, have interpreted the word "playing" to mean some sort of dangerous or mean-spirited interaction with Isaac, but the text itself includes no explanation.

Throughout this story, everyone takes different approaches to the conflict but no one attempts to actively resolve it. Sarah's response is rejection. Abraham concedes; though he's described as distressed, we do not see him attempt to do anything about it. Hagar leaves believing she and her son will die in the wilderness. And God simply reassures Abraham that all will be okay and then sends an angel to Hagar to show her water and to promise a blessing to her son. There is no active work towards peacemaking, just a "separate corners" kind of approach, a fairly superficial avoid-the-conflict path to achieving peace.

And yet, when we read this text we are already in the period of ten days in which we are expected to be anything but avoidant, everything but passive. We are expected to actively engage with those choices we have made that were hurtful or immoral and to do everything we can to make those things right. In his book *Hilchot Teshuvah* (Laws of Repentance), Maimonides, a Jewish legal scholar and philosopher of the 10th century, wrote that there are five steps in the process of repentance. The first four steps involve recognition of the sin, renunciation, confession and some form of reconciliation. We must face our mistakes quite starkly: acknowledging our wrongs, confessing to them fully, recognizing the ways that they have hurt others, and finally attempting to do what we can to make those things right. The fifth step is tricky — Maimonides writes that our repentance is complete only once we have found ourselves in the same situation in which we originally sinned, and are this time able to act differently. The first four steps are about accounting for past mistakes; the fifth one is about changing the potential for future mistakes.

In his book *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, Rabbi Alan Lew addresses the question of how we can expect to face that fifth step - how do we know that the circumstances will recur? "Don't worry... They always do. The unresolved elements in our lives -- the unconscious patterns, the conflicts and problems that seem to arise no matter where we go or with whom we find ourselves -- continue to pull us into the same moral and spiritual circumstances over and over again until we figure out how to resolve them... Spiritually we are called to responsibility, to ask, what am I doing to make this recur again and again?"

None of this is linear or simple. Even though we are at a moment of renewal — the moment that we celebrate a new year together — we are starting that year by looking back at the past one, by grappling with our choices and considering who we want to be as we move forward. In order to do that, we have to somehow believe that change is possible — and perhaps the way to believe that is not to hear stories from the far side of repentance and hindsight,

but to consider how we have felt in our most conflicted moments. The emotions motivating all of the characters in the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading are painful and real — protectiveness, loneliness, the desire to keep the peace, the experience of being torn between two conflicting sets of needs, the search for compromise even if that means separation. We see a live version of the *U'netaneh tokef* prayer — some wander, some are degraded, some are tormented, some are brought low. We have all been at these places of pain and difficulty before, we have felt how hard it is to make the right decisions, and we will likely be there again. We have probably made the wrong decisions before and we may do so again. And if we cannot acknowledge that honestly, then we cannot do the work to consider what it would take to do better in the future, to know how to work through those feelings when they come up and to get to a better and more generous version of ourselves.

In this story, we never see more than two characters interact at a time — we do not see either Abraham or God attempt to bring the household together. We see instead a chain of communication that keeps the two main conflicted parties — Sarah and Hagar — distant from each other. We don't see Sarah pushed to face Hagar, consider her as a full person and attempt to find common ground. It is tragic that Sarah sees the world in that moment as a zero-sum game, one in which Ishmael's existence automatically takes away from what is available to her son.

It is hard work to remind ourselves that it doesn't have to be that way — that we can learn to depend on each other, to trust that others are looking out for us, to genuinely believe that we can work together. And perhaps that is one of the other reasons we read this story today, to show us the lonely consequences that result when we turn away from that. These ten days are an intensely personal time, but much of that time is spent in community, praying together with words that take responsibility as a community for each others' sins and acknowledge together the terrible fear of not knowing what is to come in the year ahead. Because remembering that we all feel those same fears can make their burden just a little bit lighter.

I wonder whether Sarah ever came to regret her choice and would have wanted to try and make things right. We now have so many ways of reaching out to those we have wronged, so many ways of finding those we have grown distant from. But Sarah's world was, of course, a very different one, one where she had no way of knowing after these events whether Hagar and Ishmael were still alive or where they could have settled if they were. The commentaries where scholars try and find rational reasons for her decision in the first place do not sit well with me — I find it more likely that Sarah, as a woman who had experienced very little stability in her life, gave in to the selfishness of fear and lashed out. But I also believe it is entirely possible that she would have come to wonder later about what had become of Hagar and Ishmael, of whether they could have formed a family together, and to wish that perhaps she could repair the harm, turn towards that more expansive conception.

And that, of course, is the incredible gift of this time of year for us: the chance to step back, consider ourselves honestly, and work to make ourselves better. And while that is a serious and often painful process, the fact that we get to do so is remarkable and can even be joyful. The best version of who we are walks with us always, just across the line dividing what is from what may be. Just reaching towards it blurs that line, requires the two worlds to meld, sometimes in small ways, sometimes in transformative ones.

One of the things that stands between who we are and who we seek to be is the understandable fear of stepping over that line, of holding ourselves to that standard — the fear of all the mistakes we will continue to make on our way. During these ten days, we stand in recognition of those mistakes, those we have made as individuals and those we have made as a community, those which have hurt others and those which have hurt only ourselves, those where we did not try to do enough and those where we tried to do too much, those of false belief and those of lack of belief. We admit weakness, we seek strength, we ask for help. We hope that when we are confronted with Maimonides' final test of repentance in the year to come, we will not make the same mistakes again. But, knowing that sometimes we will, perhaps we may better understand them and how to make them right. We make that much more progress towards dissolving the boundary between what we feel limits us and what we believe could be possible. A space both uncomfortable and expansive, where we stand as who we are, transforming every moment into who we may be.

Suggested activities for imagining our way to more a more creative and radically loving future:

- Watch [Message From the Future ii: The Years of Repair](#), created by The Intercept and The Leap.
  - Consider: which of those visions of a better future are you working towards or do you want to be working towards? Which new approaches to old ideas did you experience or see this past year that you want to be a part of enacting as consistently more just ways of being in the world?
  - Set a goal for yourself: look up an organization working on one of the issues you just identified and find a way to get involved in the new year.
- Check out the wonderful [“Vent Diagrams” series](#), a project created by educator E.M./Elana Eisen-Markowitz and artist Rachel Schragis: “The idea of a ‘vent diagram’ as a diagram of the overlap of two statements that appear to be true and appear to be contradictory... Making vent diagrams as a practice helps us recognize and reckon with contradictions and keep imagining and acting from the intersections and overlaps. Venting is an emotional release, an outlet for our anger, frustration, despair -- and as a vent enables stale, suffocating air to flow out, it allows new fresh air to cycle in and through. We’re trying to make “vents” in both senses of the word: tiny windows for building unity and power, emotional releases of stale binary thinking in order to open up a trickle of fresh ideas and air.”
  - Think about two ideas you hold that are both true, that you struggle with in some way, and that are important enough to you that you want to find a way to hold them together. Put those ideas into your own vent diagram. Decorate the middle section with some sort of art that represents how you think it would feel to genuinely be able to hold these ideas together, literally or symbolically. Tuck that piece of art into something you carry with you regularly, where you can catch a glimpse of it every so often and re-inspire yourself to reach beyond simple contradictions and imagine more creative and complex ways of moving through the world.

