

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, some communities read from the very first passages of Torah, in honor of the notion that Rosh Hashanah celebrates the birthday of the world, all new beginnings. If you grew up in the Reform tradition, or first encountered Judaism in that setting as an adult, you may be anticipating that reading of the Creation story.

Here, as in most synagogues in the Diaspora and Israel, we offer the traditional series of readings from Parshat Vayera – Genesis 21, relating the birth of Isaac followed by the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael on the first day of the new year, followed by Genesis 22, the powerful *Akedah* or Binding of Isaac by his father Abraham, on the second day.

Our gabbay will offer you the themes for our five communal aliyot in a moment, five being the traditional division for the Torah readings on a Rosh Hashanah that does not fall on Shabbat. This short comment is only to draw your attention to a concept embedded in the reading, and a passage or two, before I speak with you again following the Haftarah, where we hear the evocative story of Hannah's fervent prayers from the opening of the first book of Samuel, echoing Sarah's and Hagar's voices from the Genesis passages.

The concept I want to highlight, more visible prior to today's readings but glimpsed at in these verses, is that of the *brit*, or covenant. God had promised to Abraham and Sarah that their offspring would be assigned *ha-aretz ha-zot*, this land, and cut a covenant to signify the compact. When his name was still Abram, he had heard God's voice urging him to leave his homeland for a new land that God would assign to his offspring. "I will assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of the Canaan, as an everlasting holding ... as for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep my covenant." [Gen. 17:8-9]

Their names are changed, and Isaac's birth is predicted. First Abraham laughs, and later, so does Sarah. The couple tries to move along their future legacy by engaging Hagar to bear a son for Abraham, as they are both advancing in age and cannot understand how else God's promise is to be fulfilled. Ishmael is born, visitors drop by to repeat the promise; this time it is Sarah who laughs, and shortly we arrive at today's readings.

We hear the narrative today, tuning our ear to mentions of *brit*, to the inner struggles it is barely concealing about legacy, heritage, family and land.

Listen to the verses in the aliyot that identify and name both Yitzhak and Ishmael, and the legacies promised through them; listen for the mentions of *brit* and its connection to place. And consider the words of the poet Yehuda Amichai, who adds to the evocative naming of the two boys a third son, from the root for “to cry.”

Abraham had three children, not only two.

Abraham had three children - Yishmael, Yitzhak and Yivkeh.

No one heard Yivkeh, because he was the little one,

The dear one who was brought as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah.

Yishmael was saved by his mother Hagar, the angel saved Yitzhak,

But no one saved Yivkeh. When he was little

His father called to him with love and said, Yivkeh, there will be tears,

My small, dear one. But he sacrificed him at the Akeidah.

In the Torah it says it was a ram, but it wasn't, it was Yivkeh.

Yishmael didn't hear again about God, all the rest of his days.

Isaac didn't laugh again, for the rest of his life.

And Sarah laughed only once, and never again.

Three children had Abraham,

Yishmah, Yitzhak, Yivkeh

Yishmael - God will listen

Yitzhakel - God will laugh

Yivkeh-el - God will cry.