

This talk was given in tandem by Bridget Flynn and David Meketon on 9/19.

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Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources including, and here I quote from the 6 sources, “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love” and “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” During the Jewish High Holidays the practice is to closely examine a few of the sacred texts found in the Torah in a way that allows us to examine the human condition and our relationships with one another and to explore how this teaches us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. In Jewish tradition this is called T’shuvah, which literally means, “to turn.” Although UUA lists one source as “Jewish and Christian teachings, we would also include Islam as it is the third branch of the Abrahamic traditions. It is in this spirit that we examine the story of Sarah and Hagar, the wives of the patriarch Abraham or Ibrahim in Islam, who is the father of all three traditions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It is no coincidence that these three traditions each tell a version of the story of Sarah and Hagar.

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I have always struggled with the interpretation of bible stories. When I was a little girl I had plenty of opportunities to hear and read the stories of the Old and New Testament of the Christian Bible. And I was outraged by the story of Sarah and Hagar. To me it was a cruel story in which a jealous mother casts out another mother with the intention that she should die in the wilderness and that her son, Ishmael would also die, while her husband, Abraham, a powerful man, stands by not knowing what to do until God tells him to do as Sarah says, cast out Hagar, and so he does. Yes, he gives her a flask of water and some bread, but that is clearly not going to sustain her through her wandering in the wilderness. God’s repeated message that Hagar would go forth and create a great nation and the fact that the angel rescues Hagar gave me little comfort in my early readings of the story. I was much more concerned with the interpersonal dynamics. And they troubled me.

The most troubling questions to me were:

How could God sanction the behavior of Sarah and tell Abraham to cast Hagar out?

How could Sarah, an important matriarch, model such reprehensible behavior and never really atone for it?

Understanding that I was to draw inspiration from the stories of the Bible I wondered what in the world I was supposed to learn from this story.

This was my view of the story through the lens of childhood but these same questions trouble me today.

As an adult I have learned that one way to interpret these stories is to do so as one would a dream, with each character representing a part of myself. When I do this I am able to see that the whole range of human behavior, good and bad, is within me whether I express it or not. I am free to confront my own jealous tendencies and put myself in Sarah's position. I can acknowledge to myself that I too could be capable of doing such a reprehensible thing. If I take the character of Sarah into my heart I can forgive her. If I can forgive Sarah then I can forgive myself for my own weaknesses. These stories allow us to acknowledge our weaknesses while provoking us to consider what is the right thing to do. This way of looking at the stories from the Bible is particularly meaningful to me as a Jew during the high Holidays. At this time of year we are to review the past year and account for our wrongdoings. It is a very introspective practice that requires much self-reflection. We are to judge ourselves and these stories can act as catalysts to help us recall and recognize some of our challenges.

From a storyteller's perspective, however, the story of Sarah and Hagar takes me on a very different journey. This story has all of the classic features of a folktale. There is a victim, Hagar, a villain, Sarah, and the agent of change, God / angel. Abraham functions as the device through which change can occur. In a folk tale the victim is the focus of the story. At the end of this story Hagar is freed and she goes off to start a good, productive, new life. And like in all folk tales what happens to the villain, Sarah, is somewhat irrelevant. We don't expect the villain to change. Often they just run away and are never heard from again. But

Sarah doesn't go away nor does she repent. She goes to her grave never making peace with her wrongdoing. Sarah is an important Jewish matriarch. She is actually named as the mother of Jewish converts. In a ceremonial context I am called by my Jewish name, Bracha bat Avraham v' Sarah, Bracha daughter of Abraham and Sarah. So why is it that Hagar, who is never mentioned again in the Torah, plays the role of the heroine? Why is it that Hagar, whom Jews consider to be the matriarch of the Arab nation, becomes irrelevant while Sarah, the matriarch of the Jewish people, is allowed to remain unfinished as a folkloric character?

It always seems to come back to Sarah for me? And I still have many questions.

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This time of year, the Jewish Holidays, we spend time with our extended family and so they dominate our thoughts. And so to me, this story is all about family and family grudges.

When I was growing up my father would frequently say, "Charity begins at home". I took this to mean, in my adolescent self, that before you go out and fix the problems of the world please clean your room. As I grew older I came to understand a deeper meaning. While we might speak of loving our fellow human beings as ourselves do we provide our family members with the same consideration that we grant strangers. Or in the words of the Christmas carol, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me". Our families have a particular capacity to cause us pain. They have seen us at our most vulnerable and they know all too much about our true selves or at least the self that we do not let others see. The story that we talk about today is one about trouble in the family. It is about competition for affection, personal fears of inadequacy, sibling and spousal rivalry, and it is set within the construct of the "father" of two great nations. The story of Sarah and Hagar is both the metaphor for the birth of two nations and it is also the story of how oppressed people fight back. As Dan Gotlieb says in his radio show, "Voices in the Family", "hurt people hurt people". Please note the name of his radio program. "Voices in the family." There is a Yiddish word *mispocha* that means the entire network of family, extended family, and sometimes friends. This story is about trouble with *mispocha* and how it has permeated centuries of human interaction. One might argue that trouble in this family may threaten our very existence. The conflict between the

Semitic peoples, the competition for “property” claimed by possible inheritors, and the bad feelings left by centuries of seeking parental approval leaves us in this most volatile of circumstances. These are family members with post-traumatic stress disorder. This is also a story about how patriarchal priorities distort the experience of women and that women who are subjected to narrow definition of self will lash out against each other. It is the classic example of the self-loathing that can be a product of discrimination that can cause a victim to identify with an oppressor. The bible has numerous stories about barren women. Two of them are read during the high holidays. What might be the purpose for that? If we consider that in ancient times men dominated religious life and that the woman’s role was primarily in the home the audience for these stories might be primarily men. At a time when fertility treatments were not available and that a man might discard a woman who was unable to bear children it is conceivable (ha) that this was a tale to encourage men to have faith and “stand by your woman” or at least to relax so that nature can take its course. Bridget and I took 5 years to conceive our first child. What if I had thrown Bridget out after year 2 because of her inability to conceive?

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I am sure that you have all had the experience of sharing family stories with siblings and finding out that each of you remembers the story differently. In retracing the events of such a story it is nearly impossible to sort out what really happened. Similarly it would be a mistake to consider one version of this complicated story as the “true” story. Of course, in our own families we spend many of our waking, and sleeping hours trying to understand the conundrum of our children, our siblings, our parents, our family our mishpocha and we still have family drama. How much time do we have left over to build a deep understanding of other religious and cultural perspectives? And yet that is what it takes to begin to heal some of these ancient wounds. What we want to do as UUs is to tell these stories, hear these stories, and begin to make sense of the differing interpretations brought forth in these stories. There are many different lenses on this story and it is important to know through which you are looking. This is how we might begin to build those understandings.

While David and I were working on this piece we would often stop each other with questions having to do with Islam. We became distracted by our curiosity about Islam and its lens on this story. We are no longer satisfied by the Jewish or Christian recounting of the story of Sarah and Hagar. Just as our three children can recall the same event in three different ways, these three religions find themselves in the same dilemma. We want to hear the Muslim account in order that we might put these three versions of a family history together and make some sense of this family drama.

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Deepak Chopra who is Hindu by birth, and a wellness guru from California, proposes in his fictionalized biography of Mohammad, that Jewish scribes, who were the literate people of 7th century Medina, recorded Mohammad's thoughts. Every student of world cultures recognizes that when cultures collide they rub off on each other. This is seen over and over in both folklore and religious practices. Jews in Eastern Europe adopted stories from their neighbors and reframed them to reflect Jewish values just as early Christians reconstructed pagan practices to teach about Jesus. So it is little wonder that the Koran includes numerous references to Old Testament events. Neither Sarah nor Hagar are mentioned by name in the Qur'an, but the story is traditionally understood to be referred to in a line from Abraham's prayer in Sura Ibrahim (14:37): "I have settled some of my family in a barren valley near your Sacred House". While Hagar is not mentioned, the reader lives Hagar's predicament indirectly through the eyes of Abraham. She is also frequently mentioned in the books of Hadith which are the sayings of the prophet Muhammad. According to an Islamic collection of tales about the prophets, Hagar was the daughter of the King of Maghreb, a descendant of an Islamic prophet. Her father was killed by Pharaoh and she was captured and taken as slave. Later, because of her royal blood, she was made mistress of the female slaves and given access to all of Pharaoh's wealth. Upon conversion to Abraham's faith, the Pharaoh gave Hagar to Sarah who gave her to Abraham. In this account, the name "Hagar" (called *Hajar* in Arabic) comes from *Ha ajruka* (Arabic for "here is your recompense"). Hagar's reward for her suffering is to be the mother of a great nation.

According to another Islamic tradition, Hagar was the daughter of the Egyptian king, who gifted her to Abraham as a wife, thinking Sarah was his

sister. According to Ibn Abbas, Ishmael's birth to Hagar caused strife between her and Sarah, who was still barren. Abraham brought Hagar and their son to a land called Paran-aram, the land surrounding Mecca. The objective of this journey was to "resettle" rather than "expel" Hagar. Abraham left Hagar and son Ishmael under a tree and provided them with water. Hagar, learning that God had ordered Abraham to leave her in the desert of Paran, respected his decision. Muslims believe that God ordered Abraham to leave Hagar in order to test his obedience to God's commands. (Interestingly, in the Jewish telling, Abraham is tested by being asked to sacrifice Isaac his son by Sarah) However, soon Hagar ran out of water, and baby Ishmael began to die. Hagar, according to Islamic tradition, panicked and climbed two nearby mountains repeatedly in search for water. After her seventh climb, the angel Gabriel rescued her, digging the ground with his heel and causing a miraculous well to spring out of the ground. This is called Zamzam Well today and is located a few meters by the Kaaba in Mecca.

Another traditional Arabian Bedouin myth (told regionally in Qatar) recounts a tale when Ishmael was still a suckling child. A whirlwind appeared and was sweeping across the desert floor heading toward Ishmael as he was sleeping. Archangel Jibril (Gabriel) descended from heaven and awakened Ishmael from the danger. The whirlwind then gathered itself and formed into a prancing horse.

The story of Hagar's repeated attempts to find water for her son by running between the hills *Safa* and *Marwah* has developed into a Muslim rite (known as the *sail* in Arabic). During the two Muslim pilgrimages (the Hajj and Umra), pilgrims are required to walk between the two hills seven times in memory of Hagar's quest for water. The rite symbolizes the celebration of motherhood in Islam, as well as leadership of the women.

To complete the rite, Muslims drink from the well of Zamzam. Muslims will often take back some of the water, regarding it as sacred, in memory of Hagar. Many American's view Islam as a religion that discriminates against women. This interpretation of the Hagar story suggests a greater enlightenment towards women than the Old Testament telling. Bridget's struggle to reconcile the story using the Old Testament version is nicely resolved here. Hagar is quite visible and holds great power after her ordeal in the wilderness.

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The Christian story in the Old Testament and the Jewish story in the Torah, which are the 5 books of Moses, are nearly identical.

New Testament, Christian commentary on the story takes it in an entirely different direction. This commentary, written by Paul the Apostle in his Epistle to the Galatians, asserts that the story of Hagar is a complex allegory:

²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. ²³His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.

²⁴These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.

²⁷For it is written:

"Be glad, O barren woman,
who bears no children;
break forth and cry aloud,
you who have no labor pains;
because more are the children of the desolate woman
than of her who has a husband."^[a]

²⁸Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. ³⁰But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."^[b] ³¹Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. Galatians 4:22-31 New Testament – New International Version

In other words, Christians are the descendants of Sarah; Jews are among the descendants of Hagar. And we can only assume that the same would be said of Muslims and other non-Christians.

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Paul has been interpreted by some to be saying that Mount Sinai was also called "Agar" and that it was named after Hagar. He links the laws of the Torah, given on Mount Sinai, to the bondage of the Israelite people,

implying that it was signified by Hagar's condition as a bondswoman, while the "free" heavenly Jerusalem is signified by Sarah and her child.

Saint Augustine developed Paul's view, by saying that Hagar symbolized the earthly "city", or the sinful condition of humanity: "In the earthly city (symbolized by Hagar)...we find two things, its own obvious presence (the physical city) and the symbolic presence of the heavenly city (heaven on earth). New citizens are begotten to the earthly city by nature vitiated by sin but to the heavenly city by grace (or gods intervention) freeing nature from sin." This view was further developed by medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and John Wycliffe. The latter compared the children of Sarah to the redeemed, and those of Hagar to the unredeemed, who are "carnal by nature and mere exiles". Paul's view was also used to link Hagar to Judaism, on the basis that the bondswoman Hagar represented bondage to the "old law", which was replaced by Christianity. In this respect Jews were seen - spiritually speaking - as descendants of Hagar, not Sarah. The equation of Jews with descendents of Hagar was also used to justify the subordination of Jews in medieval Christian kingdoms, and even their expulsion, on the model of the subjugation and expulsion of Hagar.

Oi vey, or as my grandmother would have said "what tsouras with the mispocha". Is it any wonder we can't all get along? I suspect that a therapist would declare this to be a toxic family and that in order to move on with their lives they might do well to sever the ties. That however, is not an option.

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By imposing Paul's lens on the story one can reconcile the harshness of the Old Testament story with the "good news" that Jesus brings. By following Jesus one can escape the grim circumstances of Hagar's condition, and bring the city of god to earth. We can't reconcile the Christian and Muslim stories because in the Muslim story Hagar is heroic and not an object of scorn. These two interpretations are by their nature mutually exclusive.

So how does this story help us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love?

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In a family argument each member wishes to be seen as innocent. Their telling of their story will reflect that wish. And the big wish is, of course, to win, to prevail. To be able to say, I'm right and you're wrong.

In the summer service conducted by Mark Piechota about how people who disagree can have meaningful discussions, Mark urged us to practice authentic and deep listening and then to find a way to be able to say, "Yes, and..." rather than "Yes, but..." Is that what the tradition of telling these stories are asking us to do? To follow Mark's suggestion one must draw upon one's compassion and humility. Compassion to recognize another's problem and humility to recognize that there is more than one way to solve a problem.

Through the process of story sharing we see illustrations of the good and the bad in people and in doing so we cultivate our own capabilities for compassion. These stories demand, regardless of whose interpretation, compassion for all of the victims, and they are all victims: Hagar, Sarah, Ishmael, Isaac, and even Abraham. They're victims of powers and structures of evil manifested by patriarchal dominance, class oppression, and roles imposed on them that inhibit their abilities to define their own destinies.

An individual cannot be a power or structure of evil. As individuals we are capable of doing terrible things, Sarah banishes Hagar, but we lack the power of the group to institutionalize our actions. We can join with others to create institutions. It is at the institutional level that we can become powerful. When we are able to recognize this we are able to see the humanity in the individual and to see the affect institutions have on them. At the institutional level we can battle the powers of evil. We are morally obliged to do so. Through our relationship with the UUA and the UUSC we hope to bring our collective voices as UUs to address problems created by the powers and structures of evil. These various forms of oppression are alive and well today. We need to each of us, daily, confront our own senses of superiority and our capacity to mistreat others and ignore their sufferings.

On the interpersonal level we can only take responsibility for our own actions. At the personal level it is certainly less complicated. We must listen to the stories of others. Especially the Other with a capital "O",

like Hagar. But listening doesn't only mean letting them tell their story it means welcoming them into your home, listening to their story and validating it. By doing this a conversation in which both participants can feel safe can begin. Once they are part of your mispoucha then, of course, you must act on their behalf. Sarah's mistake was not to let Hagar be part of her family. We don't have to repeat that mistake.