

## Looking Up – Hidden Gifts from God

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Do you know the one about the guy who is driving around looking for a parking space. He looks up and says to God, if you find me a parking spot I'll go to Temple every week and give tons of money to Tzedakah. He continues driving, and comes upon a great spot. Parks the car, and says to God, Never mind, the deal's off, I found a spot, I don't need your help anymore.

So true – it is really hard to see when God is working in our lives. Even in the Torah they had trouble seeing God's miracles.

Today we are reading the story known as the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. But in traditional synagogues they are reading the story of Hagar and Ishmael being cast out into the desert by Abraham and they will read the Akedah tomorrow. The early Reformers made different choices when they originally observed Rosh HaShana for only one day.

But the two stories seem connected to me.

Sarah asks/demands that Abraham cast out his other wife Hagar and her son Ishmael. God tells Abraham to do as Sarah has asked and Abraham does.

Early the next morning Abraham take some bread and a skin of water and gives them to Hagar. He places them on her shoulder, together with the child, and sends her away.

Sounds familiar-- in the next story Abraham takes the wood for the burnt offering and puts it on his son Isaac. He himself takes the firestone and the knife, and the two walked on together.

But let's go back to Hagar and Ishmael. They are not doing so well. "When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies."... she burst into tears."

Hopeless. At the point of utter despair.

Now Abraham and Isaac go up the mountain. "they arrive at the place of which God had shown them. Abraham builds an altar; he lays out the wood; he binds his son Isaac; he lays him on the altar, on top of the wood."

We are not told of Abraham feeling despair but he and Isaac must have been getting very nervous . . . for in the next verse it says,

"And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son." (G22:9-10)

Let's leave the knife hanging in the air [like a graphic novel] and return to Hagar as she is sitting a bowshot away from her dying son.

But then --

"God heard the cry of the child, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the voice of the child where he is. (G 21:17)

**God then opened her eyes, and she, Hagar, saw a well .**

Thank goodness.

But what is happening with Abraham: Then an angel of Adonai called to him from heaven: "Abraham, Abraham!" and he answered, "Here I am." And God says do not harm your son, now I know you trust in me. "When Abraham **looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns.**" G22:11-13

Phew.

Rescue arrived for both of them at the last minute.

In both stories a gift from God is discovered at the very last possible moment, when hope is seemingly gone. Hagar looks up and sees a well, now they have water to drink and will not die. Abraham looks up and sees a ram's horn caught in the thicket and is told to sacrifice the ram instead of his son.

But this is strange --

Rams are not quiet animals. They are not known for sneaking up on people. How did Abraham not see it? C'mon.

A Well, maybe, there are lots of stories of mirages in the desert. But she must have been looking for water. How did Hagar not see the well?

But there is something else here. Both Hagar and Abraham need to *yisa et einayim* – lift up their eyes – *Pokeach einayim* – have their eyes opened.

Hmm, so maybe we have our miracles mixed up. It is not that a well suddenly appeared, but the miracle is that Hagar's eyes were opened so that she could now see it. Not that the ram appeared, but that Abraham was truly connected to God and he could now SEE the ram.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro teaches:

...The well had always been there, but Hagar, paralyzed by fear, despair, and her own sense of powerlessness was blinded to the possibility of salvation. In calling out to God, she finds the strength to discover what she needs to do. Only then does Hagar see the well.<sup>i</sup>

While these are stories from ancient times, we, today, often close our eyes to God's miracles.

True story in the Times of Israel this week:

With Rosh Hashanah fast approaching, a new rabbi was in need of a synagogue. After running around Tel Aviv trying to secure a location for the holidays, he had all but given up, It was September. Then he met a 92-year-old gabbai (warden) who just happened to have the keys to an abandoned synagogue across the street.

In our personal lives.

Think of that time you were feeling lonely and the phone rang and it was that friend who can always cheer you up or a funny email comes at the right moment.

I remember looking for a job. My current job was ending on June 30 and I had started looking in January. On June 17 I got the perfect job for that moment in my life.

Sometimes the bad thing does happen and we lose someone we love. But that doesn't stop the miracles; it just makes them much harder to see. The husband whose wife dies and a few years later the perfect companion for that new moment arrives in his life.

The job opportunity that falls through forces you to get creative and your find your passion.

The world is vast and sometimes it is hard to see things that are right in front of us. I was in New Hampshire last week and I looked up at the sky and was blown away by the stars. I could see the Milky Way. The constellations loomed large in the night sky. In cities and even on Long Island, We can't see the stars anymore, not in that awesome way. We have a created a world that blocks them out. – Much like we have created a world blocks out so many ordinary miracles.

That is part of the truth that we learn from these stories in the Torah. That we walk around living our lives as if we are in control. As if everything depends on us. And God is fine to let us live with at illusion. Maybe it takes things getting so bad, reaching a point in which we have lost all hope, that the only choice left is to turn things over to God or the universe, or whatever you call that amazing power outside of yourself and wait for a miracle – a gift from God that gives you exactly what you need, even if you didn't know it.

Open your eyes today. At the end of the Torah service we will bring out the ram's horn, the shofar.

When you hear the shofar, take the time to open your eyes and listen. See all the unseen possibilities. And as the sound stirs your soul, think of all the gifts you have been given especially the ones that have appeared when you least expected them.

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<sup>i</sup> Rabbi Rami Shapiro, Opening our Eyes, Dov Peretz Elkins, p.103