

**HAGAR AND SARAH – Rosh Hashana Morning, 5780
Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

Imagine New York City in the late 1980s.

Crime was at its peak. Race relations were strained.

Muggings and rapes were taking place in Central Park.

Then, one night in 1989, a particularly brutal rape occurred.

**A 28-year-old, white woman, a Wall Street executive,
had been out jogging, and was badly beaten, raped, and
left for dead in a Park ravine. She was in a coma for 12 days.**

**The doctors believed she was severely brain damaged and
would never walk again. The district attorney's office
was under pressure to solve the crime.**

**A group of a couple dozen young boys of color
had been seen in Central Park that same night,
some hurting passersby, some harassing the homeless.**

Five young boys were brought in for questioning:

Antron McCray, 15; Kevin Richardson, 14;

Yusef Salaam, 15; Raymond Santana, 14; and Korey Wise, 16.

**It didn't take the DA and the police long to connect
the five to the rape -- despite no clear evidence of their guilt.**

After spending many hours, with no sleep, no food, no attorney or other adult present, and under intense police questioning and coaching, the young men confessed to the crime – though their confessions were inconsistent – and they recanted soon thereafter.

The public and the media immediately believed that these four black and one Latino youth were guilty of the crime. Following a media frenzy in which they were described as a gang out “wilding,” or assaulting people in the park, they were convicted. One very wealthy real estate developer went so far as to take out full page newspaper ads calling for these boys to get the death penalty. Four of them served more than six years in juvenile detention. Korey Wise, 16 at the time, was tried as an adult and served almost 13 years in prison, including at the brutal, maximum security Attica prison.

But these boys were not guilty. In 2002, the man who was actually responsible for the Central Park rape, confessed. DNA testing confirmed his guilt. The five boys, who grew into manhood behind bars, were exonerated. In fact, the District Attorney requested their exoneration.

You can witness this chilling story on the Netflix series, “When They See Us.” Director Ava DuVernay explains why she decided against calling her series the “Central Park Five,” as the young men were characterized by the media. She says, “It was a moniker that I felt further dehumanized them. I want you to know their names, and I want you to see them.”

This story tells us volumes about the problems in our criminal justice system and, in particular, the problem of racial bias. Because the victim was white and the accused, black and brown, the odds were stacked against them. Here are a few stats from a recent study: “black people are 7 times more likely than white people to be wrongly convicted of murder...

“African Americans imprisoned for murder are more likely to be innocent if they were convicted of killing white victims. ...Innocent black defendants accused of sexual assault receive harsher sentences than whites if they are convicted, and then face greater resistance to exoneration even in cases in which they are ultimately released.”¹

¹ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/7/14834454/exoneration-innocence-prison-racism>

Racial bias certainly provides insight into how so many could be so wrongly convicted in this and many other cases. Our opinions are formed based on our values and expectations. We usually make fairly snap judgements about others based on very little information because it is efficient for our brain to work this way. Take the following experiment:

When researchers showed people photographs of faces and provided a few details about their owners, the respondents determined within sixty seconds if they liked or disliked the individuals behind the faces.

They decided if they were innocent or guilty of a crime, if they thought they were trustworthy, and made judgments about their personality that were nothing short of psychic, given the few details with which they had been provided.²

Though this may make our brains efficient, when we have preconceptions about others, we can't give them a fair chance to disprove our assumptions.

² <http://exisleempowerment.com/avoid-being-judgemental-the-principles-of-opinion-forming/>

We need to make an effort to put ourselves in the other's shoes, to open our minds and to really listen to the other's story. Taking the time to listen is what I urged us all to do last night. But we also need to get to know people who are different from and, often, less fortunate than we are. Attorney and criminal justice reform advocate, Bryan Stevenson, tells us that, "We must get 'proximate' to suffering and understand the nuanced experiences of those who suffer from and experience inequality."³ In this way, we can challenge our assumptions about the Other.

You may not be surprised to learn that our tradition has a lot to teach us about opening up to the other's story and point of view. You may remember that, in the Talmud, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai always disagree with each other. Yet their children marry each other. How is this possible? Because they respected and studied each other's opinions, making sure they really understood one another. And why does the Talmud almost always favor Hillel's decisions? Because Hillel's students humbly present the rulings of their opponents before putting forth their own.

³ <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/empathy-and-social-justice-the-power-of-proximity-in-improvement-science/>

The story we traditionally read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah can serve as an example of how our preconceived ideas color our perceptions.

In this reading, our foremother Sarah demands that her husband Abraham banish to the desert her maidservant Hagar and Hagar's son Ishmael. That seems like a pretty harsh decree.

How do we judge Sarah?

Is she justified in taking this action?

Is she being selfish? Imperious? Practical? Wise?

I am sure that our opinions differ as radically as that of the commentators, ancient and modern.

Some background first. Sarah and Abraham have spent years trying to have a child. Sarah is barren so she asks Abraham to sleep with Hagar.

The idea is that Hagar would be a surrogate mother, and that Sarah would adopt her child. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, but he remains Hagar's son. Some years later, Sarah finally gives birth to her own son, Isaac.

Abraham hosts a big feast to celebrate Isaac's weaning. But Sarah notices something that disturbs her: Ishmael is doing something with Isaac – he is *metzaheq*.

The word is very hard to translate from the Hebrew. It could mean the boys are simply playing together; or it could mean they are laughing. And there are other meanings. So, already, we are in ambiguous territory. What does Sarah see? How does she interpret it? What is going on in her head? As you can tell, this is not simple. Depending on how you translate this key word, you will have more or less sympathy for Sarah. And depending on what your view of Sarah already is, you will probably choose the definition that supports your perspective. Our tradition tends to justify Sarah's behavior because she is, after all, one of our matriarchs. So many of our commentators translate *metzaheq* as involving some kind of sexually inappropriate behavior on Ishmael's part; others see it as denoting Ishmael being involved with idolatry; and some, that Ishmael is being violent. Because the word is also a play on Isaac's name in Hebrew, some speculate that Ishmael is pretending to be Isaac, presuming to take Isaac's place as the inheritor of the covenant with God.

The issue of inheritance is clear when Sarah declares that, “The son of this slave girl is not going to share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

According to the laws of the Ancient Near East, as Abraham’s oldest son, Ishmael is entitled to a larger share of his father’s estate than Isaac. So perhaps Sarah is trying to ensure that Isaac will inherit sufficiently.

This is how the 11th century French commentator, Rashi, explains Sarah’s action, telling us that Ishmael would quarrel with Isaac, boasting, “I am the firstborn and will take two portions [of our father’s inheritance].” Then the two boys would go out in the field and Ishmael would take his bow and shoot arrows at Isaac. This story is NOT in the Torah but is a midrash, an interpretation.

Not all commentators, however, are OK with Sarah’s treatment of Hagar. Here is the 13th century Spanish rabbi, Ramban: “Our mother sinned in this oppression, and also Abraham in permitting her to do so.

And God heard [Hagar’s] oppression and gave her a son who would be a wild ass of a man to oppress the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.”

In this understanding, God is on Hagar's side, punishing Sarah and Abraham by setting up Ishmael's descendants to persecute us, the descendants of Sarah and Abraham.

Some modern commentators see issues of race and class in this story. Hagar is an Egyptian slave, while Sarah is the privileged owner favored by God.

As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg notes:

“Jewish commentators work hard to find some other explanation for Sarah's actions, but at the end of the day, I'm not sure it's appropriate [for] us to justify the ways in which a woman with geographic and ethnic privilege and a higher class status disenfranchises a woman who is, literally, a stranger without resources because the woman with power doesn't want to share her son's inheritance with the son she had, earlier, encouraged her husband to sire...This story reminds us to scrutinize our actions, to think of the ways in which we have been blind to the power we have abused, unthinking in the ways in which our privilege has caused us to bring suffering to others, to people we don't fully see.”⁴

We might apply this perspective to the Central Park 5.

⁴ Dayna Ruttenberg. *Why We Read Sarah and Hagar at Rosh Hashana: On the Abuse of Power*. September 4, 2013,

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, coming at the story from a feminist perspective, looks at how both women are in disadvantaged positions. She says:

“we are pained by the way in which the two women, both of degraded status in their society because of their gender, turn on one another...What if the women, instead, had helped one another to transcend the unjust rules of the patriarchal society that governed their lives? Sarah, of superior status, needed Hagar’s help. Hagar, the handmaid, had an ability that Sarah desperately needed. What if they had joined hands, pooled their gifts, and collaborated (or at least commiserated) to defeat the oppressive patriarchal system?”⁵

You can agree or disagree with these conclusions. But you can see that, depending on where you are coming from, you might understand Sarah as the oppressor or as the oppressed. That is why it is necessary to check our assumptions before deciding on someone’s guilt or innocence, before judging our neighbors.

We should pay heed to the wisdom of our tradition.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-dayna-ruttenberg/why-we-read-sarah-and-hag_b_3855819.html>.

⁵ <https://www.truah.org/resources/a-feminist-lens-on-the-story-of-sarah-and-hagar/>

Rabbi Hillel says: "Don't judge your fellow human being until you have reached that person's place."

15th century Italian Rabbi Obadiah Bartinoro elaborates on this, "If you see your neighbor ensnared by some temptation, do not judge your neighbor harshly until you have faced the same temptation and mastered it."

As we walk through the Ten Days of Awe, let us seriously consider our own prejudgments and work toward judging each other with kindness and compassion.