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Parshat Vayera: PostPartum Depression Rabbanit Alissa Thomas Newborn Class of 2016

וַתֵּתַע בְּמִדְבָּר, Hagar wandered in the desert (Bereshit 21:14). After being sent away by Avraham and Sarah, Hagar finds herself hopeless and doomed without water, fearing for her child's life. In this moment of terror, she does something strikingly counterintuitive, Hagar, rather than huddling close to her child, distances herself from her son Yishmael, וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מֵנֶגֶד, sitting from afar. In her tears and shame, Hagar finds herself unable to be the nurturing mother she expected herself to be. She cannot be near her son, she cannot bear to see him in this moment of pain and fear.

What are we to make of Hagar's distancing herself from her child in his moment of need? What are we to think of this woman who deeply struggles to be a doting mother?

We find an answer in how God responds and in how God does not respond. God does not chastise Hagar for distancing herself from her son, Yishmael. God does not judge Hagar in her pain and shame. Instead, through an angel God says, מַה-לָּךְ הָגָר, 'What is troubling you Hagar?' אַל-תִּירָאִי, 'Do not be afraid,' כִּי-שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל-קוֹלִי, 'for God has heard the boy's voice in the place where he is'. God is a non judgemental presence. God invites Hagar to share her very real pain. God comforts her in her fears. And most poignantly, God takes care of Yishmael, listens and cares for him like God's own child, when Hagar herself is unable to. God meets them בְּאֶשֶׁר הֵם שָׂם, where they both are.

Through God's response to Hagar, we learn how to engage those grappling with the distance between their reality and their expectations those who for a variety of reasons are in pain and unable to fulfill the 'normative' standards (whatever 'normal' may be if normal even exists) of motherhood and beyond. This is why Hagar's distancing of herself from Yishmael is included in our parsha.

God models for us our religious imperative to meet others where they are in their pain, to be non judgemental sources of support. In Devarim 13:5 we are commanded, אַחֲרַי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ תֵּלֵךְ, 'You shall walk after the Lord your God'. We know from Masechet Sotah that we are instructed to emulate God's attributes, God's ways. God hears and holds a woman in despair, a mother who is struggling to help her child. We too must do the same. This is our religious imperative. This is what it means to be Jews who live Torah and mitzvot.

Hagar's terror, hopelessness, shame and pain her distance and alienation these are feelings that each of us can identify with in our own personal struggles. Each of us, whether at work, at home, or in our prayer lives, can recall a memory when we wandered in our respective deserts, וַתֵּתַע בְּמִדְבָּר. I believe that it is the loneliness that stings most in such moments.

Today is a special and important Shabbat at B'nai David. As a continuation of the journey we began last spring of increasing mental health awareness and decreasing stigma, today we focus specifically on PostPartum Depression, a desert in and of itself. This is a communitywide issue that stirs each of our hearts in ways we may not currently realize. As you know, I have not yet personally had children God willing one day, Akiva and I will. But regardless of personal experience or being נוגעת בדבר, personally invested, I am committed to being a nonjudgmental presence, to hearing and holding those facing this excruciating illness, just as God modeled for us with Hagar.

Depression does not only impact a new mother. It impacts family units, husbands, parents, friends, coworkers,

and children. It impacts a shul community just like our own! When a woman is struggling with PostPartum Depression, it touches all aspects of her life her sense of self, as well as how she interacts with her loved ones. Like Hagar, a woman with PostPartum Depression may feel distanced, hopeless, ashamed, and completely alone. *Unable to be the mother she expected herself to be.* She may feel מוגד, apart and far afield from her normal life and her community.

Up to 1 in 4 women suffers from PostPartum Depression, including many women sitting in this room today. It is *not* a weakness or a character flaw; it is a complication of giving birth and it *is* a treatable illness. It is worth noting that PostPartum Psychosis, though rare, is a condition with even more severe symptoms, which we must also be sensitive to. When left untreated, these mental illnesses can disrupt and derail a time of potential joy and connection, ripping a mother literally out of herself and dropping her in a lonely, seemingly endless מדבר, desert.

We thank Maternal Mental Health NOW and New Moms Connect, a program from Jewish Family Services, for partnering with us on addressing and voicing this vital need in our community. These organizations are doing the holy work of walking in God's ways, meeting women and families where they are, באשר הם שם, overcoming PostPartum Depression. They give us hope.

Materials from these organizations with helpful information about identifying symptoms as well as resources for support groups and contacts on PostPartum Depression can be found on the back table. Please take them home with you and read up on the symptoms and support available. We will keep copies of these pamphlets in our office.

B'nai David is committed to creating a space in our home in which women with PostPartum Depression can share their pain, fears, and journeys. Increasing awareness, reducing stigma, and providing support must be priorities in our community, a shul grounded in family and inclusivity. We may not be able to avoid the deserts, distance, and sorrow in our lives, but we are able to join each other in our moments of need, so that no one is alone in the desert no one is יושב/יושבת מנגד, sitting from afar. This is our religious imperative as those who follow God, אחרי ה'.

I would like to thank Rav Yosef for his commitment to this important need in our community, so much so that he felt it merited our attention on this Shabbat. I would also like to personally thank EB for spearheading our focus on this cause. She is truly a source of courage, support, and light in darkness. She made it her mission to learn from the support she received so she could support others in the future. We will now have the blessing of hearing her personal story.



Rabbanit Alissa Thomas Newborn is a member of the spiritual leadership at B'nai David-Judea Congregation, an Orthodox shul in Los Angeles. She received her semikha from Yeshivat Maharat and graduated Magna Cum Laude from Brandeis University with a degree in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and Classical Studies Archaeology and Ancient History. Rabbanit Alissa is also a Board Certified Chaplain (BCC) through Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC). Rabbanit Alissa is on the board of NAJC and on the board of the Rabbis and Cantors Retirement Plan. She is a member of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Clergy Roundtable and the Pico-Robertson Mental Health Neighborhood. In 2017, she was chosen as one of the Forward50, the Forward's annual list of the 50 most influential, accomplished, and interesting American Jews.