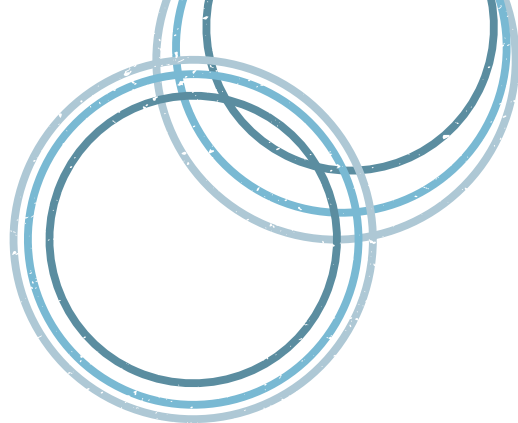


THE DANGER OF DISTANCE

Dena Weiss



When Hagar and Yishmael start out on their journey from the safety of Abraham's tent, we don't know what will become of them. We don't know whether they will make it to their destination; we don't even know if they even *have* a destination. And, unfortunately, we see that they are confronted by the threat of extreme thirst and dehydration at the very outset of their journey, which is particularly dangerous for young Yishmael. Hagar's reaction to this stressful moment illustrates to us how difficult it can be to be present with other people and with them in their distress. But it also teaches us that it is necessary and essential:

בראשית כא:טו-יט

¹⁵וַיֵּכְלוּ הַמֵּיִם מִן הַחֲמָת וַתִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים: ¹⁶וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לֶהּ מִנְּגַד הַרְחֵק בְּמִסְתָּוִי קִשְׁתָּ בִּי אִמְרָה אֵל אֲרָאָה בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנְּגַד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְכֶּי: ¹⁷וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת קוֹל הַנָּעִר וַיִּקְרָא מִלֵּאף אֱלֹהִים אֶל הָגָר. וְהַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶה לָּךְ הָגָר אֵל תִּירָאִי בִּי שִׁמְעֵ אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנָּעִר בְּאַשְׁרֵר הוּא שֵׁם: ¹⁸קוֹמִי שְׂאִי אֶת הַנָּעִר וְהִצִּיֵּקִי אֶת יָדְךָ בּוֹ בִּי לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׁימְנֶנּוּ: ¹⁹וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּבְרָא בָּאָר מִיָּם וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת הַחֲמָת מִיָּם וַתִּשְׁקֵן אֶת הַנָּעִר:

Bereishit 21:15-19

¹⁵The water in the flask ran out and [Hagar] cast the child under one of the shrubs. ¹⁶She walked away and she sat far from him, at an arrow's distance, since she said, "So I won't see the death of the child." She sat far away and she raised her voice and she cried. ¹⁷God heard the voice of the child and

an angel of God called out to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is bothering you, Hagar? Do not fear. Because God has heard the voice of the boy as he was over there. ¹⁸Get up and carry the boy and take hold of his hand with yours, because I will make him a great nation." ¹⁹God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water, and she went, and she filled the flask with water and she gave the boy something to drink.

Hagar's reaction to the possibility that her son might pass away is very human and very understandable: she's afraid. She's afraid of what will happen, and perhaps even more so, she is afraid of how it would feel for her to be there and witness the passing of her only child, God forbid. Hagar chooses her own psychological self-preservation in this moment.¹ She leaves her son at a distance so that she can mentally dissociate from what is about to happen to him. The verse describes this as an arrow's distance—as far as she needs to go to be out of the range of death. However, the angel gently criticizes Hagar for this approach. He tells her to carry her son and to hold his hand. He points out to her that God has heard her son's crying, not on account of his thirst or fear, but rather בְּאַשְׁרֵר הוּא שֵׁם, insofar as he is "there," cast aside by his mother. Insofar as he is alone. Hagar's approach might be good for Hagar, but it's devastating for Yishmael. He is also afraid, and he needs his mother. He needs to be with someone who can support him and hold his hand as he confronts his extreme thirst and, possibly, his own death.

Hagar's choice is a product of her despair. Because she does not have any hope for her son's survival, she can only focus on what she can do in the event of his death. But after she reunites with her son, the water of the well becomes visible to her. When she allows herself to have hope, not only is she able to be there with—and for—her son, she is also able to save him, to see that there is water available, to put it into her own flask, and to bring her son back to safety.

It is important to understand that Hagar's need to push Yishmael away when he is suffering is not an act of callousness. On the contrary, it comes from her love for him. Because she is so attached to him, because she cares for him so much, witnessing his death would have been too hard for her to bear. This is what love does—we become so enmeshed in the life of someone else that what is hard for them becomes hard for us. We can become so close to others, so identified with others, that their pain can become our pain—so strong and so real to us, that it can eclipse the actual reality of who is at risk, who is experiencing non-vicarious pain, where the need actually lies.

This close identification, this emotional entanglement, can lead us to want to put up barriers between us and other people. If I want to spare myself pain, I also need to keep myself at a distance from other people. This is true both of the type of "your pain is my pain" experience that Hagar was dealing with, and also true about the kind of pain that others can cause to us directly. The closer someone is to us, the more they can hurt us. True closeness en-

¹ I would like to acknowledge that my colleague, R. Tali Adler, offers an opposite reading to mine. She sees in Hagar a model of permission for the overburdened mother to separate herself. See her essay, "The God of Hagar," in *Zokhreinu Le-Hayyim: Memory and Promise* (Hadar High Holiday Reader, 5782), available [here](#).

tails vulnerability. When I love you, and I feel that you understand me, what you say to me has weight and can therefore cut and sting, or affirm and elevate. Strangers and people at a distance are easier to ignore. Because they aren't near us, we can dismiss them. It is the people whom we love, whom we care about enough, who can wound us so deeply.

The truth of the danger of proximity is beautifully expressed by a statement of Shmuel to Rav Yehudah:

תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין ז.
כי רחמיתין הוה עזיזא אפותיא
דספסירא שכיבן השתא דלא
עזיזא רחמיתין פוריא בר שיתין
גרמידי לא טגי לן.

Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 7a
*When our love was strong,
we would lie on the face of a
sword. Now that our love is
not strong, a bed of sixty amot
would not be sufficient for us.²*

The image of the extreme closeness of the people who are in love here is both sweet and threatening. On the one hand, they are so in love, so happy together, that there is no space between them—and they feel that they don't need any space. However, the image is also threatening. This couple is not snuggling on a single feather; they are lying on the face of a sword. If either of them moves the smallest amount or pushes the other a bit too far, the results will be tragic. The sword is sharp; the intimacy of the sword is fraught and foreboding. It is fierce, not placid; it is difficult, not easy. The strength of this love is also its danger. Because they love each other, they want to be close, but because they love each other, that closeness is often tense and threatening.

The love of the king-sized bed is a comfortable love. We have plenty of space and plenty of autonomy, and my actions don't affect you, don't hurt you. But this love is not

as strong a love; it is a weak and impoverished relationship. It is not as tense, but it is also not as powerful and sustaining.

The months and years of Covid have taught us that being socially distant is the safe position. The farther we are from other people, the less risk we have of them hurting us—of contracting an illness from them that has cost so many people their lives or continued health. However, we also learned that social distance can also be emotionally and psychologically convenient. If there is a family member I don't want to see, a conversation I don't want to have, I can avoid seeing or talking to anyone I don't want to without experiencing any backlash, because a culture of social distance has made avoiding other people socially acceptable. The experience of the pandemic has accustomed us to the ease of separation. We have been given license to insulate ourselves from other people—and it's an arrangement we can get too used to.

The warning of the angel to Hagar is that the distance that she is hiding behind, that she is using to protect herself, seems safe—but it's also dangerous. She is protecting herself at the expense of her son, she is distancing herself from the pain of being close to him, without fully thinking through the pain that her distance is causing her son. And in her quest for self-preservation, she's also depriving herself of the benefits of proximity. This is why the angel tells her, "You need to go there, and you need to hold his hand. You need to be present for him, not loving him from a distance." As difficult as it is, that's how important it is. It is the difference between life and death, being able to see that there actually *is* water available. If she were to remain at an arrow's length, her fear of her son's death would have become a self-fulfilling prophecy.³ Her fear of his demise would have guaranteed it.

This is particularly pressing around the High Holidays because

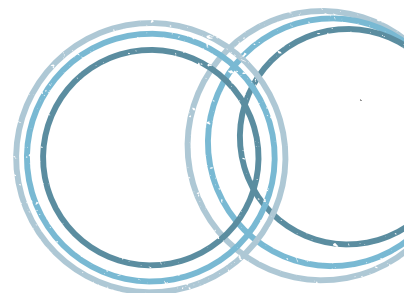
proximity is necessary for reconciliation, as R. Zeira understood:

תלמוד בבלי יומא פז.
ר' זירא כי הוה מילתא בהדי
איניש הוה חליף ותני לקמיה
וממציא ליה כי היכי דניתי וניפוק
ליה מדעתיה

Talmud Bavli Yoma 87a
*When R. Zeira had an issue
with someone, he would walk
back and forth in front of them
and make himself available, so
that [the person] could come
out and change his perspective.*

The closeness that enables someone to hurt your feelings—or enables you to hurt theirs—is also a critical ingredient in the process of reconciliation. If we avoid the people with whom we have tension or a complicated history, we may spare ourselves discomfort and awkwardness or further pain. However, we will also have prevented ourselves from realizing the possibility that the relationship can be salvaged. We need to enable ourselves to have the type of confrontation that is necessary for progress and continued closeness.

As we are preparing ourselves to confront the changes that we need to make in order to become better people, let us avoid the danger of thinking that this is a process that occurs in isolation. Rather, it occurs through conversation, through the awkwardness and the difficulty and the pain of confronting our own pain and the pain of others. This may be the most emotionally trying path, but it may also promise to be the most fruitful. ♦



² In the continuation of the passage, Rav Huna maps these two experiences of love onto the relationship between the Jewish people and God. The tense intimacy of the sword image corresponds to the closeness that was experienced in the wilderness, where God "lived" in the *mishkan* (tabernacle), in the midst of the people. The comfortable—but distant—relationship of the bed image corresponds to the times when the people were established in the land of Canaan and God resided in the Beit Ha-Mikdash (temple), a transition from a tiny and temporary tent to a large and permanent palace.

³ On tragedy as a self-fulfilling prophecy, see R. Avi Strausberg's essay in this very reader, "I Am (Not) Afraid," on p. 12..