

## Prelude

This is a story, In two parts  
    On Rosh Hashanah it is written  
    On Yom Kippur it is sealed  
    Who shall live  
    And who shall die  
    Who shall mess around  
    Who shall find out  
        Ok I saw that last part in a tweet not a machzor  
But this is a story, like that one  
And not like it  
That story is written on high  
In a mighty book that is sealed with an outstretched hand  
    And then forgotten for a year  
        Before it is dusted off again  
Life recorded  
    Deed accounted  
        A story in-deed  
And this is a story  
    Too  
This is a story in two parts  
Two parts like an "I and a thou"  
    But don't tell Martin Buber that I translated it that way  
A dialectic, a dialogue, a diad  
A story as old as dinosaurs  
    But still fresh  
Because when there are two there are more  
Because when there are two who see each other  
    An I and a thou  
Then there is also a Presence  
    And she shines from both minds, both hearts, both faces  
And a story is told  
    A story based on two parts  
        But don't tell Martin Buber I explained it that way  
  
This is a story  
    In two parts  
A story that is real, true  
But someone cries, stories are not true

I smile back, "Why let the truth get in the way of a good story"  
A good story might say something about God  
A great story might say something about us  
A story worth remembering might say more

This is a story in two parts  
A story about you and me and I and thou and parents and children  
And God  
Or whatever you want to call that great other that reminds us  
that we are small  
And big  
At the same time

## **Part I**

"Let me not look on as this child dies." Hagar was despondent. The dust on the ground was cold and clammy after a storm, caking against her bare legs. The skin of water that her lord had given her lay empty on the ground, a reminder of promises unfulfilled. Ishmael ate the last of the bread hours ago. When he looked up at her with his confused eyes wondering if she was hungry, she had lied and said she already ate some.

The wilderness of Beer-Sheba is unforgiving. But so was Sarah. "Was it my fault?" In this low moment those dark thoughts crept into Hagar's head. Memories flashed: two young boys, happily playing; Abraham's indifference; the spittle of a furious woman, once scorned, eventually triumphant, but finally imperial. "No," she reminded herself emphatically, "not my fault. I cannot have that thinking, even here at the end."

Being the lesser woman in a household is difficult, particularly hers. Nomads do not often have the wealth to acquire a slave-wife. She was purchased for her womb, merely to be an extension of Sarah's. Hagar imagined that the struggle of infertility must be dehumanizing, and to have your womb replaced, devastating. But that was no fault of Hagar's. Hagar only recalled hearing Sarah laugh twice. Once, in defiance to God. And once, in her old age, in triumphant relief, a life fulfilled. No one ever listened for Hagar's laughter.

What more could this cruel world bring upon her? Enslaved. Objectified. Exiled. Obsolete. A cry escaped from Ishmael--unbidden, unwanted. Her eyes darted to her son. She sobbed. No one ever listened for Hagar's tears either.

But this time, someone did hear.

“*Mah lach, Hagar?*” She had to translate from the foreign tongue, only heard when messengers delivered news to Abraham. “What troubles you, Hagar?” the voice had asked.

The voice continued, “*Al tiri, ki shamah elohim el kol hana’ar ba’asher hu sham.*” “Do not fear, for God has heard the cry of the boy where he is.”

The voice spoke of prophecy, but all Hagar heard was nonsense. Ishmael, a great nation? It could not be so. He would die here, and she, not long after. The voice faded.

Hearing is an act of faith, listening an act of love. Hagar had none of the first and was overwhelmed by the second.

But there, could it be? A well? A well! Not there before, Hagar was sure of it. With her last energy, she stepped forward. Her heart swelled, with hope, with love. An act of faith indeed. One foot in front of the other. A splash and glug as water filled the skin. A few steps more. Water for her son.

It took minutes or hours for them to drink the water. It did not matter. Together, they finally arose. Together, with love and now, with faith, confidence in a future. A future not defined by wombs and wealth or masters and wives, but defined by a story that they would tell together.

As they walked, Hagar did not think, she merely felt. She felt the warmth of her love for her son, and the cooling contentment of newfound freedom, a new lease on life. It was only later, days, months, years, that she was able to reflect on the divine intervention she experienced. She had never thought much of God and was not sure she had much more to add now. But more than anything she was grateful that someone had listened when her son cried. Hagar had lived a life on the margins. Even her story was located in another's, just a short chapter in a long anthology. But for a moment, someone heard. Perhaps that is all that is needed.

## **Part II**

Your small hand clasped in mine; we walk into the room together.

Your eyes light up and I see them bouncing around—there’s so much to look at! The room is like a dream. Your head cranes back and you look up to see the massive dome, looming above you, a stained-glass star illuminated by the daylight we left outside. We

are transported away from the summer heat into the cool, empty space seemingly frozen in time.

Your head is stretched so far backwards that you nearly fall over, but I catch you and point out the windows, depicting pictures of the twelve tribes, an American flag, a mogen David, each intricately designed with a kaleidoscope of colors, depicting symbols of our heritage.

And finally, you look forward, realizing that there is even more that you haven't noticed yet. You see the elevated platform, you already know it as a bima. You only take in the steps for a moment as your eyes are drawn to the massive golden pipes that rise out of the back of the bima. I smirk, remembering what sounds those pipes produce, but you, well you haven't heard it before and you can only imagine where these pipes lead and what they are for, telling yourself stories of the amazing worlds they might lead to.

"C'mon" I say, whispering in the empty room, "let's get a little closer." I hold your hand again and we walk towards the steps and take a seat in the first row, looking right up at the golden enclosure dominating the center of the front of this room.

"You know what's in there right?" I ask. You nod silently.

I point to words, etched in golden filigree just above. "Do you know what that says?" I've been teaching you the foreign letters, and even a few words, and you can identify a dalet, a lamed, a mem, but of course not, no, you don't know the meaning yet.

"Dai lifnei mi atah omed," I explain, "It means, 'Know before whom you stand.' This room makes you feel kinda small doesn't it?"

You nod, so I continue, "Well believe it or not, there are things out there that even make me feel small. I've been in this room a lot--the first person who told me I would be a rabbi was standing right over there, at that podium. I was 13. I don't feel so small here anymore, but there are places and things that make everyone feel small."

"Like God?" You whisper, your first words spoken here. I can tell that you're unsure if anyone should even speak in here.

I smile, and nod, "Maybe." I pause, looking around but know that for the first time, your eyes aren't looking around this room, but are staring up at me.

“I want to tell you a secret. You’re really big, bigger than this room. Bigger than anything in it and anything that it can hold. But you might feel small right now. You can be both big and small at the same time. Always remember that. You can be both big and small. Feeling big is going to help you out a lot in your life, it’s going to make you feel important. And you are important. But never forget that it’s ok to feel small. Never forget what it means to stand in this room and feel the entire weight of the dome and the words written up there and...” I’ve lost you, your eyes drifting back up to the dome, but that’s ok, it was a good reminder. And you’ll get it someday too.

I look at you and smile, admiring your enthusiasm, and grab your hand again and say, “C’mon, we can head back out now. There’s a pizza place nearby with slices bigger than your head!”

Wide-eyed once again at the thought of melted cheese, greasy dough, and something bigger than you, we walk out of the room.

I look down at you and I know before whom I stand.

### **Interlude**

Once, Rabbi Mordecai was in the great town of Minsk expounding the Torah to a number of people who disagreed with his method of interpretation. They laughed at him: “What you say does not explain the verse in the least!”

He looked at them and replied, “Do you really think that I was trying to explain the verse in the book? That doesn’t need an explanation! I want to explain the verse that is within me.”

### **Part III**

*Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test, saying to him, “Abraham.” He answered, “Here I am.”*

*“Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point to you.”*

*So early next morning, Abraham saddled his donkey and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the*

*place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."*

A few others were involved, this is their stories:

**The servants**, they didn't need to be told twice. Abraham took the wood from the donkey's saddle bags and left the three to wait for, well, God only knew how long. The servants and donkey were all too relieved. The hill country was tough terrain and a three day hike with no knowledge of an end point was a lot to put faith in.

One servant looked to the other and asked absentmindedly, "What do you suppose they are doing up there? Probably a sacrifice right?"

The second sighed, this would be a long afternoon: "Of course it's a sacrifice," he snapped. "Our master is chosen by God. His faith brings great favor on his household. On us. We would do well to remember."

The first servant thought about that sort of remembering. Abraham's was a good household. If sacrifices and piety were what generated wealth, then Abraham must be the most pious man to walk the earth. But the servant figured that accident of birth and, barring that, extreme cleverness and luck were more likely the causes for wealth. And if that was so, what was the point of the sacrifices? What was the point of anything if the world was divided into masters and servants? He decided that question would not be prudent to ask so instead he wondered aloud, "What do you suppose the sacrifice is?"

It was the second servant's turn to think. What was the sacrifice? The servant had proudly helped Abraham chop the wood for the offering. He knew that normally Abraham would have brought the sacrifice along too, not just the wood. Not to mention, there were plenty of altars closer to the encampment. He spread his hands wide and stated, resolutely, "Surely God will provide."

The first wondered if God had already provided. Would it not be the ultimate test of piety if Abraham were to return alone, without Isaac? Or perhaps, the test was for Isaac and he would overpower his elderly father. Or perhaps neither of the two would return and the servants would be forced into an unenviable catch-22: return to camp blamed for the missing patriarch and heir or take their chances in the wild. Or perhaps lightning would strike everyone involved and the problem would solve itself. But there was not a cloud in the sky. Nothing to do but wait.

The second servant saw the first looking at the sky and was satisfied. Surely God would provide, indeed. God had provided for himself and if he, a lonely servant, could live a life full of God's merit, then he had faith Abraham, God's chosen, would return. He merely had to wait.

**Sarah**, for her part, did not do well alone. She dreaded when her husband and son both would leave. They were all she had in the world. So she prayed. She did not know the words but she prayed with her whole heart and expressed a poetry of longing and loneliness. She prayed about hearts beating. She prayed about the depths that she had sunk to in the days before her son. She prayed about the twinge that only *she* felt the first time Isaac cried—that twinge that echoed in the back of her mind and heart every time he had cried since. She knew not if her prayers would be answered, even if they had been once before. The past did not guarantee the future. Sarah did not pretend to understand what her prayers did in the world. But while her son and husband were away for reasons God only knew, all she could do was pray and wait.

**Ishmael**, he didn't know about the journey and would not be concerned for his father and less for his father's god. Rather, he notched an arrow to his bow, shifted his focus to drawing the taut string, and then, in the moment when his breath shifted from in to out, he released, wholly relaxed and wholly present. The arrow loosed, Ishmael only had a split second to wait.

**The donkey** cared little for Abraham, Isaac, or the servants, or God for that matter. Life was a burden, something a pack animal understood literally, not figuratively. So he did what he always did when confronted with the existential questions of the universe: he found a tasty patch of grass, ate his snack, and waited.

#### **Part IV**

I sit on the bima, you stand, and yet, I can't really see you.

I cannot look at your face, your eyes, your smile, your nose that reminds me of your mother. Your back is turned to me, but it's ok, it's supposed to be. In a few minutes, the roles will reverse and you will see my back and I will miss you completely. We are two ships passing in the night. Only a little later will your mother and I really see you; we will stand next to you and see revelation reflected in your eyes.

But for now, I look at your kippah, the one that used to be mine, until you asked for it a few weeks ago. I was touched, I hadn't given that kippah much thought—I don't give any kippah much thought—and I was surprised to find out it mattered to you so much.

You said it did, that it was a good reminder for you, just like I had taught you a kippah is supposed to be. But you said something else, “abba, I think that the reminder is different for me than for you.” I had simply nodded in response. I’m not sure if you had noticed the tear in my eye. You always have been smart, intuitive, empathetic, and reflective.

I don’t listen to the words you say, I try to listen to you instead. I’ve heard the words many times, said them myself even. They don’t usually do much for me. But when you say them, they are new. Not new to me, but to the whole universe. Today, in this moment, right now, you are changing the world.

No one has ever said these words like you. No one has ever given them the meaning that you have. despite the thousands of millions of times they have been uttered, today they are unique. Maybe I should sit you down and explain that to you. But I think you’ll come to it on your own. I don’t think there is any other way.

I cover my eyes, just for a moment, just for a few words. They are not words whose meaning we agree upon, but as you lead, you let me say them my way nonetheless. And when I uncover my eyes, I look up, and I see you, wearing your kippah. It’s a good reminder.

### **Postscript**

This was a story in two parts  
It was a story about being gracious, about compassion, benevolence,  
    Extending to the thousandth generation  
        Ok it’s long  
            But I won’t make it that long

This was a story with two parts  
Thirteen attributes  
Ten emanations  
Four ineffable letters  
One, singular I  
    None of which are out there  
    All of which are real

This was a story with two voices  
    Not a father not a king  
    Not a voice still and small  
        We don’t listen to that voice



We don't listen to a bat kol  
So what is the other voice?

This is a story with two voices

The voice of fathers and mothers

The voice of child and flock and vineyard and treasure and

People

It is the voice of the loved and unloved

The voice of a whole people caring, crying, kvelling, creating

Kaplan called it a civilization

I just call that voice

you

This was a story in two parts

But the story is not finished

And the parts are not whole

And the service is not done

Perhaps they never will be

Does that matter?

Will you make it?