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Life was hard for Sarah and Abraham. Sarah, after all, had been barren for so many years. Out of desperation she had ordered her maidservant, Hagar, to lie with Abraham so that they could have a child and Abraham's family line would continue. It seemed like a reasonable plan, but once Hagar conceived, Sarah was wrought with jealousy and could not bear being with her. So Abraham told her to do what she wished with Hagar, who was just a servant – a dark skinned, immigrant servant. Sarah dealt harshly with Hagar, abused her, and Hagar fled from the house.

In the wilderness an angel of God came before Hagar and told her to return. "It will be okay, Hagar," the angel murmured. "God has heard your pain. You will give birth to a son."

And so it was. Hagar gave birth to a beautiful baby boy named Ishmael. It certainly created a complicated family dynamic, and then, as if that wasn't enough, Sarah got pregnant! Miracle of miracles. She too gave birth to a son, whom she called Isaac. By this time Sarah and Abraham were very old. But Sarah's jealousy still did not dissipate. After all of those years she still hated Hagar. And to see her Isaac playing with that Ishmael. It was too much. So she said to her husband, "Cast out that slave woman and her son. I don't want Ishmael to share Isaac's inheritance." Abraham was distressed, but God told him, "Do what Sarah tells you to do. I will make great nations out of both of your sons."

So early the next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, gave them to Hagar, and sent her and Ishmael away. They wandered in the wilderness unsure of where to go. Soon the water was gone. Ishmael was thirsty. Really thirsty. He was becoming ill. Hagar was desperate. She could not bear to see her son suffer. There was nothing that she could do. She didn't have any more water. So she carefully placed Ishmael under a bush and sat down a distance away from him. "I don't want to look at Ishmael as he dies," she thought. "He is my only son. I have nothing else." She burst into tears.

But God heard Ishmael's cry, and an angel of God called out to Hagar. "What troubles you, Hagar? Don't be afraid, for God has heard Ishmael's cry right where he is. Now lift up the boy and hold him." And then God opened her eyes and Hagar saw a well of water. She took the water and gave it to Ishmael to drink. It revived him, and slowly his health improved. They lived in the wilderness as Ishmael grew up, and God was with them.

Today we read the terrible story of Hagar and Ishmael – the family who almost does not survive. The family who are cast out. Immigrants. Outsiders. With dark skin, no material resources, no one to rely on, no home to return to, whose very existence hangs in the balance between life and death.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Hagar? Can you imagine what it must have been like to not be able to protect her dear, precious son from the scorching sun that made him so sick and dehydrated. To not have anywhere to go, no one to turn to, no help in sight? To be so hopeless, so utterly hopeless. To turn away from her dying son because she could not bear to watch him suffer anymore.

We gather today on Rosh Hashanah, in celebration of the Jewish New Year. But our celebration is tempered, because at the heart of our holiday is the story of Hagar and Ishmael. We may ignore them throughout the year, but not on Rosh Hashanah. Today they are starkly before us – all those who are vulnerable, who are suffering, who have nowhere to turn.

How true their story is today, how they are still being cast out from among us. How precarious their position is in our own society. With a crumbling economy, double-digit unemployment, rampant xenophobia, and a broken health care system, Hagar and Ishmael would fare no better today than they did in biblical times.

The Torah instructs, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan, for if you do cause them pain, and they cry out to Me, I shall surely hear their cry.” (Exodus 22:20-22). The stranger, the widow, and the orphan in biblical society are the poor, the uninsured, and the immigrant in our society. Over and over we are called on to hear the cry of the powerless, to transform our bitter memories of being slaves in Egypt into empathy and justice for others. Over and over we are called on to open our eyes and to see what we wish we did not have to see.

This past June, a short drive from here, police officials discovered the body of Dwayne Benjamin Warren on a park bench at the intersection of South Pinckney and East Main Streets – at the foot of the State Capitol. The coroner’s office said he had died of natural causes. What specifically was the cause? Sepsis, an infection caused by sores on his feet. A simple antibiotic could have prevented his death. The problem, however, was that Dwayne was homeless and perhaps mentally ill. He did not have the basic health care that he needed.

What a waste. What a terrible waste. What might Dwayne’s fate been had he received the basic care that he needed? Whose life might he have touched? What goodness might he have brought into the world?

What is most disturbing is how utterly unremarkable this story is. As Alder Mike Verveer said, Downtown Madison’s homeless die of natural causes quite frequently.

They rarely attract attention. It was only because Dwayne died at the foot of the Capitol that the media even took note.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we chant, “Who shall live and who shall die” – who shall live to a ripe old age and who shall die, mentally ill, on the streets, from sepsis?

What does it say about us as a society when people die from preventable infections only minutes from where we live? What does it say about us as a society when 46 million Americans have no health insurance? Lest we think that this is only a problem of the stranger, widow, or orphan, we only have to look around this room. How many of us are uninsured? How many of us are underinsured? How many of us have a family member or friend who lacks the health coverage they need?

So what does lack of adequate health care really mean? It means choosing not to have your illness diagnosed for fear that a pre-existing condition will prevent you from getting coverage. Staying in a terrible marriage or job in order to hold on to your insurance plan. Not being able to afford the drugs that you need. Being denied life saving medical procedures. Going into overwhelming debt to pay for medical expenses. It means watching pregnant women and children making due without basic health care. It means watching our neighbors, our co-workers, and our loved ones making due without health care.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we chant, “Who shall live and who shall die” – who shall live to a ripe old age and who shall die because they were too much of a risk or too big of an expense?

Jewish tradition does not dictate health care policy, but it does speak very directly to this issue. The Jewish value of *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life, is the very highest of the commandments; indeed all other commandments can be violated in order to further its end.

Joseph Karo, author of the Shulchan Aruch, the great compilation of Jewish law from the 16th century, applies this idea to health care. He writes, “The Torah gave permission to the physician to heal; moreover, this is a religious precept and is included in the category of saving life, and if the physician withholds his services, it is considered as shedding blood” (S.A., Yoreh Deiah 336:1). According to Jewish law, therefore, physicians are commanded to save lives – rich and poor, white and black, native and immigrant.

The physician, however, cannot be expected to bear the costs of health care for those who cannot afford it. As Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher of the 12th century, wrote, health care is an obligation of the community. It was part of the charity that Jewish law obligates us to give. In Maimonides’ day, this charity was mandatory, and the Jewish court would compel individuals who were not giving enough to contribute their fair share either through flogging or seizing property. Thus we can think about this charity in modern terms as taxes. The responsibility for the well-being of each person in a society is to be shared among everyone.

How far we are from these Jewish ideals. How far we are from understanding that we have an obligation to each other, to ensure that all those among us are well cared for. In the words of Rabbi Elliot Dorff, professor of philosophy at American Jewish University and chair of the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, "The fact...that more than 40 million Americans have no health insurance is, from a Jewish point of view, an intolerable dereliction of society's moral duty" ("Why We Must Support Universal Health Care," *The Jewish Journal*, August 26, 2009).

An intolerable dereliction of society's moral duty. The cries are so desperate, yet the obstacles are so great that it seems as if the task is impossible. So let us return to the wilderness, where Hagar is weeping and Ishmael is dying under a bush. God hears Ishmael's cry. An angel calls out to Hagar and says to her, "*Mah lach, Hagar?* – What troubles you, Hagar?" The angel continues, "*Al tir'i* – Do not fear." There is a well of water, Hagar, there is a way out of this terrible mess. There is the potential to change your direction – it has been here all along. But you must open your eyes. You must *choose* to see this well of water. You must have the faith to believe that there is a solution. You must never lose sight on unseen possibilities. Do not turn away from your son, from the one who is vulnerable. Hold his hand. Take some responsibility. Open your eyes and look for that well of water. Transform your fear into acts of courage. Tell your story. Tell Ishmael's story. Join forces with your neighbors, with your community, with those who are also looking for that well of water, and organize for real change. Make your voice heard, and make it heard loudly. Take a drink for yourself and give some to your son.

Judaism commands us to care for every individual in our society. The widow, the orphan, the stranger. The ones with no power and no voice. Hagar and Ishmael. Dwayne. The ones who are working two or three part-time jobs, with no benefits and no job security, who can barely feed their family, and who certainly cannot afford health care. The ones who do have some coverage but who are just on the edge, just holding on, just praying that they do not get too sick.

The health care debate looms over us this High Holy Day season. We can critique or support this policy or that policy – but let us not lose sight of our values, of what we believe in, of our vision of a society where we care for each other.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we chant, "Who shall live and who shall die." To a large extent, the answer to this is, as a nation, in our hands. Lack of universal health care will to some extent determine who will live and who will die. We have a choice – will we care for Hagar and Ishmael? Will we care for Dwayne? Will we care for each other?

L'shanah Tovah – May you have a good year, and may it be a year of health and blessing for all.