

## MOTHER LODE

### 9.16.23 Lisë Stern, Or HaTzafon Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5784

In the stories we read on Rosh Hashanah, in these 21 verses we read today about the mothers of Abraham's first two children, we have a microcosm, a foreshadowing, a representation of the conflicts to come both biblically and historically, among the peoples living in Israel and Palestine and environs.

Stories political, and stories personal.

The personal can humanize the political.

Imagine Sarah, remember Sarah, channel Sarah

A matriarch, known from our first encounter with her

In Genesis chapter 12, when we also meet Avram for the first time,

When her name was Sarai,

As someone who could not be a matriarch,

An AKARAH, a barren woman,

One who cannot have children,

Or, at the very least, one who has none.

Sarai, whose name means princess

But whose name could also mean struggle,

With the same root letters as her descendant YISRAEL

The name given by an angel to the grandson she never meets

One who struggles with God.

Sarai, who is manipulated by her husband Avram

To diminish herself to the position of sister rather than wife

So that Avram can negotiate with Pharaoh in Egypt.

The very first words we hear from Avram are to his wife:

"I know that you are beautiful... Say, please, that you are my sister;

that it may be well with me for your sake, and that my soul may live because of you."

Indeed, comely Sarai is placed in Pharaoh's house, and Pharaoh treats Avram quite nicely

So this is Sarah/Sarai's first encounter with Egyptians,

A foreshadowing

Laying the groundwork for fissures and resentments

For pain received and pain inflicted.

Because those who suffer are often those who cause others to suffer.

Because, Hagar is Egyptian, we're told when we meet her

Hagar, servant to Sarai, a slave perhaps given to Sarai by Pharaoh?

when she no longer has to play the role of Avram's sister, living in Pharaoh's house

Was this maidservant payment for services rendered?

Hagar is a SHIFCHAH, translated as slave girl, servant, maidservant,

Always a female in a subservient class

Two of the mothers of Jacob's 13 children are categorized this way

SHIFCHAH, a word that also forms the base of the word MISHPACHA

Family

And we, the descendants of the Mishpacha, the family of Jacob also known as Yisrael, God Struggler

We, we are the descendants of the enslaved Bilhah and Zilpha

Maidservants, respectively, to the full-on sister wives Rachel and Leah.

Hagar, whose name means The stranger, or migrant, or flight

And some say she was an Egyptian princess

Were she and Sarai close? Were they friends? Can an enslaved one

A maidservant one be a friend with her mistress?  
 When they have no choice, really  
 Was Sarai a princess as her name implies? We have no backstory  
 Like we have no backstory about her husband Avram,  
 Who one day God chose  
 Who one day could hear God, and followed instructions, unquestioningly, from the very beginning.  
*Lech Lecha*, go out, from your land, to the land that I will show you.  
 Sarai is barren, Sarai is beautiful.

We do not know why Sarai has been barren  
 Except perhaps to help create two nations?  
 For when, after decades of wandering, then a decade of settling in Canaan and still no children,  
 She turns to Hagar.  
 Does she know about God's promises to Avram?  
 "I will make of you a great nation" -- did she overhear?

Did she wonder, year after year, how this promise could possibly come to be?  
 Did she take matters, then, into her own hands, when she told Avram, in Genesis 16,  
 "Go in, please unto my handmaid; perhaps I shall be built up through her"....and Sarai gave her to Avram her  
 husband to be his wife."

And that part of Sarai's plan is successful -- Hagar does indeed become pregnant, with Avram's first son.  
 He is still Avram when Ishmael is born.  
 But Hagar is a wife now, pregnant and no longer content to be a maidservant,  
 And Sarai soon regrets her plan  
 Because as much as we may try to manipulate people  
 People are their own person, and Hagar is no longer willing to settle and serve:  
 "her mistress was despised in her eyes."

An Egyptian and a Hebrew, in conflict over love  
 In conflict over inheritance  
 In conflict over heritage.  
 Sarai, in a position of power, mistreats Hagar badly, to the point where Hagar flees.

Hagar has so much that Sarai does not, including, now, the status of expectant wife  
 Including the ability to talk to angels of God  
 Something Sarai can only do in the most second-hand way.  
 Overhearing, eavesdropping, but scant direct contact.  
 But when Hagar flees from Sarai's punitive treatment  
 Into the desert, the first time her choice,  
 Immediately she encounters a MALACH ADONAI  
 And angel, a messenger of God.  
 And Hagar, unlike any other woman in the Torah, receives a direct promise  
 Four times the angel speaks to her, offering Hagar the promise God gives Avram  
 I shall multiply your seed  
 His name: Yishmael, because God heard you.  
 And the role Yishmael will play throughout history is outlined here:  
*And he shall be a wild ass of a man: his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him;  
 and he shall dwell in the face of all his brethren.'*

Does this also describe the fate of Isaac's descendants?

And so, with reluctance, Hagar returns to serve Sarai, and as promised, gives birth to Ishmael.  
 And then 15 years later God reiterates his promise to Avram of multiplying,  
 Announcing his first wife will become pregnant  
 And God changes her name, along with Avram's, now Sarah and Avraham  
 He will now be father of nations  
 And she will have a son, *I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be of her.*

Abraham laughs at this idea  
 As does Sarah  
 And their son will be named Isaac, for laughter.

And when this happens  
 Imagine Sarah, with a no longer subservient servant  
 One who is confidently a mother of nations  
 Now confident herself  
 Because she has heard God's promises regarding Isaac  
 And she no longer wants to share  
 Because she has had to share  
 Her whole adult life  
 Her self  
 Her spouse  
 And Abraham sacrifices his relationship with his older son  
 Sending Yishamel and his mother out into the desert  
 And Hagar, perhaps, foreshadows a test given to Abraham  
 Leaving her son to die alone  
 Rather than watch him perish.  
 And he lives, an angel of God reassures her, like an angel of God will soon reassure Abraham when he is poised  
 to kill his second son, and they each go on to become great nations.

All these players  
 In place nearly six thousand years ago  
 Representing human nature  
 Human conflict  
 In a land we still cannot settle.  
 In a land we want to love, and lay claim to.

These tales of matrilineal ancestry and conflict connect profoundly with present day Israel.  
 In June this year, I traveled with 14 other rabbinical students, led by a rabbi who wanted to explore the conflict  
 Of this land we love  
 Named for the struggle of our ancestor Yisrael  
 Our ancestor who was also Jacob,  
 A follower who became a leader

This is a land populated by descendants of a God who listens, and a God who struggles, and a God of laughter.

It used to be easy, we Jews were the good guys, no question,  
 The Arabs were the others, the evil ones, out to get us.

But at some point, we have to realize that it is never that simple,  
 That Sarah suffered

That Hagar suffered  
 That Sarah loved her son  
 As did Hagar,  
 In spite of their father's willingness to let them go.

We rabbi students traveled around for six days, based in Jerusalem  
 At a fancy hotel supporting elaborate Jewish weddings,  
 Staffed almost entirely by Arabs  
 Like the barista who created a portrait of Rabbi Akiva in my morning latte  
 And we visited settlements  
 And we visited Bethlehm, seeing the wall topped with barbed wire, murals -- graffiti -- of a murdered journalist,  
 Sitting behind our Arab bus driver  
 Who chose to become an Israeli citizen  
 So his children could have rights and services  
 Who was stopped and questioned  
 As we crossed a border that is not technically a border, to return from Bethlehm to Jerusalem.

And we danced in the streets of Jerusalem, wearing headphones as a DJ led us through an open air mall, adults  
 dancing beside high school students,  
 In a space that was a garbage dump beside the old city when I first saw it 40 years ago,  
 Now an upscale mall  
 At the foot of the walls of the old city.

The Occupiers, some friends call Israel, refusing to say the name of the state named for our God-Struggling  
 ancestor, as if that oversimplification of a designation will solve the conflict  
 Although not naming the problems does not solve the conflict either.

I have another Israel fellowship for rabbinical students on Israel education, and our textbook, the Alef Bet of  
 Israel Education does not even mention the word conflict. We cannot learn, we cannot grow, if we do not  
 acknowledge the existence of trouble, of history, if we do not examine our own selves, recognizing our role in  
 history, in presence, in a compassionate future.

We cannot grow, we cannot change  
 We cannot live peacefully if we do not acknowledge each others' reality.  
 Despite their mothers' conflict, Isaac and Ishmael were brothers and companions who enjoyed each other's  
 company  
 Who came together to bury their father.

The conflict between siblings,  
 Between in power and restricted people is real in Israel  
 And at the ground level, at the people level, people are working to overcome the restrictions put in place by  
 those in charge.  
 The two men who have each lost children to the other side, working together to bring Arab residents the  
 medical care they need. The thousands of protestors showing up again and again, to work toward keeping the  
 country whole and grounded and moral. The rabbinical students traveling to this country that is an ingrained  
 part of our history, working to bring back to our campuses as complete a picture as possible of land that is part  
 of us, like it or not.

I once considered aliyah, moving to Israel, and realized it was not the move for me. Like my German  
 grandmother in 1938, when she chose to come to America, rather than Israel, where her mother and siblings had  
 fled; America was the better place for her and my grandfather.

But we Jews need Israel. We need the anchor of a strong Jewish state existing in the place where we all began. Because we have been persecuted, weakest in history when we didn't have the rock of Israel to be our island. I've been to Israel many times, including living there for a year during the first intifada in the 1980s. And although I choose to live in America, I value this source country of ours, even when I don't value the difficult behavior of those in charge now, like I do not value the difficult behavior of some of our ancestors. But we learn, we embrace, because, like with blowing the shofar on a day that some Jews do and some Jews do not, these traditions, this history, this shared heritage connects us all.

I like to think Hagar made her peace with Sarah, perhaps understanding the other woman's pain reflected in her own. And Sarah knew, whatever steps she took, she suffered regardless. For immediately after her expulsion of Hagar, God will test Abraham, asking him to sacrifice Isaac, and Sarah will die of grief from that knowledge, unlike Hagar, never seeing her son grow and flourish and become a father to kings.

When we cause others to suffer, it can have a way of internalizing, turning back on ourselves. I like to think of Sarah in a place of teshuvah now, reflecting on the generations, on things she may have done differently.

Channel Sarah, channel Hagar, imagine them sitting on a bench in a park in Jerusalem, watching great grandchildren play together, asking each other for forgiveness, forgiving, a model for us to open our hearts to the presence of holiness around us, to the miracles that result in laughter, in joy, in peace.

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