

## SARAH—THE GREATEST, MOST HUMAN JEWISH WOMAN

There's a James Brown tune that often runs through my head that many of you are undoubtedly familiar with. "This is a man's world. This is a man's world. But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing, without a woman or a girl." Judaism, and most religions, can often seem excessively patriarchal. There is certainly a paucity of female role models in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. So it is a bit of a wonder that on the day where more Jews hear the Torah read than any other day in the Jewish tradition (well, second most, really, to Yom Kippur, but this is the first big reading of the year), that the texts center completely around women! The Torah is about not only Sarah, but also Hagar, and then the Haftarah is about Hannah! Ironic? Definitely. Surprising? Certainly. Wonderful? I think so.

Today, we are going to take an in-depth look at one of these women, Sarah Imeinu, as she is called in our tradition, Sarah our Mother, the Matriarch. Last year, my High Holiday sermons were built around a central theme, that of travel, each sermon visiting different lessons learned from various Jewish communities around the world where I spent my sabbatical. This year we are going to take a different kind of journey, a journey through the Biblical characters we encounter during the textual readings of the High Holidays. Today we will focus on Sarah, tomorrow Isaac, and on Yom Kippur we'll talk about Isaiah, Jonah, and Aaron. My very modest goal is that we all learn something, that you leave here knowing more about these Biblical characters than you did before these holidays. Hopefully, you will be inspired by their lives and teachings, but if not, at least you will have learned something.

The best thing about our Biblical forbears is that they are very human. Their actions are neither idealized nor sugarcoated. For some of us, that's a wonderful thing, since we can see our own, very human selves in the Biblical characters. The most challenging thing about our Biblical forbears is that they are very human. Their actions are neither idealized nor sugarcoated. For some, that is problematic, since those we are supposed to view as heroes do things that are often quite the opposite of heroic. Either way, that is Judaism, a religion very much grounded in the realities of this world rather than the next.

What do we know about Sarah? Let's start with her name. According to Rashi the name denotes aristocracy, as Sarai means my princess in Egyptian. But also, according to Rashi, she was called Ischah from a word which means to see or gaze because she could see the future by holy inspiration, and because everyone gazed at her beauty. Midrash Tanhuma

adds that she was superior to Abraham in prophecy. We also learn that her name was changed from Sarai to Sarah, which in the Torah is the sign of a personal covenantal relationship with God. She gets the extra Hey added to her name, symbolic of God's name Yud Hey Vav Hey. So that alone indicates that she is not just Abraham's wife, but an important figure in her own right.

Beyond her name, sadly, most of what we know about Sarah from the Biblical text involves the moments of her life that were troubled and even tragic. This tzuress is evident as (a) a mother, (b) in her relationships with other women, or at least one other woman, Hagar, and (c), as a wife to Abraham.

If we look at her early life, the first word that comes to mind with Sarah was that she was barren, Akarah in Hebrew. Perhaps we wish that her lack of child would not define her. After all, she was strong, intelligent, beautiful, descended from royalty, and had her own covenant with God separate and apart from her husband; but a woman in Biblical times was often defined by the fecundity of her womb. That's just the way it was. I would argue that for a woman who wants a child today, the situation is no less painful, no less traumatic, no less tragic. No matter how successful many women are in all facets of their lives, there is often still a deep-seated, all consuming, biologically driven quest to have that child. And, despite all the career success, all the testing and technology, despite the fact that we know that the biological issue is often the man's and not the woman's, many women who are unable to have children still feel like they have failed somehow. Similarly, although Sarah had many wonderful qualities, much of her life was consumed by her wish for a child.

This very desperation to have a child is what led to problems in her relationship with her handmaiden Hagar. She decided it would be a good idea for her and Abraham to have a child through Hagar as a surrogate mother. But be careful what you wish for, Sarah, for unintended consequences can be powerful and painful. In the very sentence Hagar becomes pregnant, the problems begin. The Hebrew reads "Vatekal g'virta b'eineiha," which literally means "her strength was lowered in her eyes," meaning Sarah's esteem was lowered in Hagar's eyes, that Hagar no longer saw Sarah as her mistress. One verse later, Sarah tells Abraham how she feels "Va'eikal b'eineiha, and I am lowered in her eyes." As a result Sarah "treats her harshly, vat'aneiha Sarai," the text says. Abraham reacts by saying "do whatever you think is right," meaning "I'm staying out of this one, honey." It's a copout, on the one hand, a smart and supportive husband on the other. The modern reader wants so badly for these two women to get

along, don't we? We want sisterhood, bonding, coming together in a time of difficulty, one happy family. But that is not their reality, and if we're honest, neither is it usually ours. When there are real issues there is often real conflict. According to the commentators, who refuse to impugn blame to Sarah, Hagar changed the moment she became pregnant. Rashi imagines the following scenario:

Hagar brazenly boasted to the ladies, "Since so many years have passed without Sarai having children, she cannot be as righteous as she seems. But I conceived immediately!"

And modern Rabbi Aryeh Levin adds:

It is incongruous to believe that a woman as righteous as Sarah would persecute another human being out of personal pique. Rather, Sarah treated Hagar as she always had, but in the light of Hagar's newly inflated self-image, she took it as persecution.

The commentators are engaging in apologetics on Sarah's behalf, to be sure, but put yourself in Sarah's shoes. She was now being confronted on a daily basis in the very place where she was most insecure. In order for the family to remain intact, one of them would eventually have to go.

Given all these issues with her handmaiden and her children, we can imagine the strain that would put on a marriage, and Abraham and Sarah had real communication issues in their marriage. We see this even in some of the positive stories about Abraham's life. Abraham gets a lot of credit for his hospitality, welcoming the three strangers/angels by the terebinths of Mamre. But do you know what his hospitality consists of? Telling Sarah to "Hurry! Take three seahs of meal, fine flour! Knead and make cakes!" What if Sarah was busy? She could have been weaving a garment for her husband, attending to a sick servant, talking to God. But she interrupts whatever she is doing and attends to the task at hand. As the Yiddish expression goes, "the food gets cooked in a pot, but the plate gets all the credit."

We sense their problematic issues of communication when Sarah is told she is going to have a child at her advanced age. Most of us would laugh too if our menopause had already happened. But Sarah actually uses the words how am I going to receive pleasure and have children "with my husband so old." So God changes the story when talking to Abraham in order to gloss over the insult, saying Sarah said "with herself so old." A little white lie told by God to protect their relationship. And who can blame God for trying to keep a couple together who has faced so many challenges?

Eventually, it may be this very lack of communication which leads to Sarah's death. Tomorrow we will read about the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, when Abraham takes Isaac to Mount Moriah and nearly sacrifices

him. And the reader is left to wonder: what did Sarah have to say about all this? What were her thoughts? Midrash Tanhuma points out that in the text the line about Sarah's death immediately follows the Akedah story. This is a technique called a Heikesh, in Hebrew, a juxtaposition that the rabbinic sages believe is intentional, even if it doesn't seem to be. When two lines are next to each other in the Torah, even if they seem to be completely unrelated, the idea is that they are related, and it is up to us to find the connection. The story of Isaac is followed immediately by "And the life of Sarah was..." Abraham leaves early in the morning in order to avoid having to talk to Sarah about it. According to this Midrash, she assumes the worst, and so she essentially dies of a broken heart after learning of their trip to Mount Moriah.

And yet, despite the problems Sarah had with her husband, with Hagar, with becoming a mother, and as a mother, her death is described in the sentence which follows the Akedah in a unique and interesting way. Instead of just saying she died at 120 years old, the text says "the life of Sarah was 100 years old, plus 20 years old, plus seven years old. Why was she described in such a unique way? According to Genesis Rabba and Rashi it is described in these three distinct periods to teach us that at every age Sarah possessed the qualities of the other ages. At 100 she was as sinless as a 20 year old, at 20 she still had the wholesome beauty and innocence of a 7 year old, and at 7 she had the wisdom of a 100 year old. So despite the tragedy, her story ends with an expression of triumph. The rabbinic commentaries throughout the centuries as well as the Bible itself tell us that Sarah was the ultimate Jewish role model: beautiful, virtuous, and wise. It's the trauma and the drama that make it into the written story. We have to trust that in between the tension with Hagar, the lack of communication with Abraham, and the desperation of her infertility there lived one of the greatest women ever to have graced the Jewish people, all too human foibles and all.

I want to conclude with the beginning, in a sense, going back to the one part of Sarah's story I didn't really cover in detail, which is the first significant word in today's Torah reading, pakad. Hashem pakad et Sarah. Our translation says it means God "took note of Sarah," ostensibly meaning that God promised a child, and now one is being literally and figuratively delivered. A commentary in our Machzor says perhaps it is an allusion to one of the main themes of Rosh Hashana, zichronot, remembrance. "By choosing to begin the Torah reading here, the Rabbis may be expressing the hope that God will similarly remember us for good on Rosh Hashana, and judge us accordingly."

To understand this connection Rashi instructs us to look at the sentence and story that precede it in the Torah. This is, once again, the technique of the “Heikesh” or juxtaposition. What precedes “Hashem pakad et Sarah” is that Abraham had just come from a place called Gerar, where he had told the King Avimelech that Sarah was his sister. Unknowingly, Avimelech had almost taken Sarah as a wife, and he and his actual wife became ill as a result. Abraham then prayed for Avimelech, and he and his wife not only recovered, but conceived and had a child. Immediately following that in the text is God taking note of Sarah, and her finally bearing a son, Isaac. Rashi says the juxtaposition of these two childbearing events teaches that if you pray for mercy on behalf of another, you yourself will receive that very same blessing. God took note of Sarah and Abraham. God responded to their selfless prayers and fulfilled the earlier promise to grant them a child. Praying and acting unselfishly will, in the end, help us to help ourselves. Over the next ten days you will be pouring your own hearts in unselfish prayer for others: for the health of family and friends, for strength for the United States of America, for peace in Israel and the world. As we enter the year 5773 may you be granted those same blessings, a year of health, strength, and peace.