

Sara-Seen and heard as founding matriarch of the Jewish people.

Gen. 21:1-34; Gen 22:1-24

“Now YHWH took account of Sara as he had said, YHWH dealt with Sara as he had spoken. Sara became pregnant and bore Avraham a son in his old age at the set-time of which God had spoken to him”. (Gen. 21:1)

These are the first lines of Torah for the first day of Rosh Hashana. What do they tell us? Are they about God, who keeps promises? Was Sara merely a vehicle for that fulfillment? While either of those is a valid understanding, today we will take the road less travelled and examine those verses through the eyes of Sara. Her name is repeated three times in this *one* verse; Avraham's only once. Does the verse foreshadow Sara's independent voice? What would she want us to know about who she is and what she stands for?

She is our first matriarch. She connects us *directly* to our origins as the children of Israel. She is human. We share her feelings of spiritual skepticism and doubt. She is real; a role model who constructs her personal faith, a unique relationship with God and an unmistakable role in the covenantal blessing, leading to the birth of the Jewish people.

Midrash, both rabbinic and modern, will help us follow Sara's journey and engage as she did, in the difficult but necessary project of re-affirming and re-shaping our relationship with Judaism, ourselves, each other and with God. That is the work of the high holy days.

At the beginning when Sara's name is still Sarai, she is introduced *not* with reference to lineage, as is usually the case, but with her name *only* ...and a significant “disability”: “The name of Avram's wife was Sarai...Sarai was barren, she had no child.” (Gen. 11:29-30) Immediately, she stands out-in a negative way. The medieval commentator Rashi explains this verse ‘as presenting *the opportunity for the beginning of Sara's relationship with God*’. “Now here, *YHWH* has obstructed me from bearing,” (16:2) Sara explains; and simultaneously constructs an initial sense of God's role in her life as the author of her suffering.

The key question in *Sara's* relationship with God, is not *where*, but *when* is God? Sarai was already married to Avram when Adonai said to [him], “Go from your land, from your birthplace and from your father’s house... to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great...” (12:1-2) God’s instructions are not directed at Sara, nor is she included in God’s blessings. We know she went with Avram. Have you ever wondered what she was thinking and feeling?

Ellen Frankel, in her Torah commentary, The Five Books of Miriam, drawing on traditional rabbinic commentary, relevant historical data, and her own imagination, constructs a tale, through the voice of Sara: “What mysteries still surround the story of how our people began?” she wonders. “Although the rabbis recount that Avraham left Ur after smashing his father’s stone gods, they fail to tell all the other stories — *about my own decision to leave ...* One night I had the most frightening dream. The tyrant Nimrod appeared to me and foretold the death of my beloved Avraham and his entire family. Nimrod declared he would no longer tolerate Avraham’s preaching about YHWH, who claimed he was mightier than all the gods of Ur.

When I awoke, I told my mother my dream. She urged me to flee. *I* persuaded Avraham to leave, after he consulted with his God who told him: “Whatever Sarai tells you, do as she says.”¹ (quote from 21:12)

This midrash shows the rabbis recognized Sarai as a partner with God-intellectually and emotionally wise. How Avram “saw” her, is less clear. The following verses from Torah and a midrash, give insight into Avram and Sarai’s relationship as husband and wife. No sooner had Avram and Sarai arrived in Canaan, than they had to leave; there was a famine in the promised land. “Avram went down to Egypt [where there was food] to sojourn there”. Sarai was with him. “When [Avram] came near to Egypt he said to Sarai: ‘Now, I know you are a woman fair to look at. It will be, when the Egyptians see you and say: She is his wife, they will kill me, but you they will allow to live. Pray say you are my *sister* so it may go well with me on your account, that I myself may live, thanks to you.’” (12:10-13) Essentially, Avram asked Sarai to prostitute herself in order that he may live. Avram’s predictions upon their arrival in Egypt, was correct: Pharaoh’s courtiers saw her, praised her

¹ The Five Books of Miraim, A woman’s commentary on the Torah, Ellen Frankel Ph.D-as told by Rabbi Elizabeth Bolton in her d’var Torah: Filling in the Missing Pieces of Sarah's Life

to Pharaoh, took her from Avram and brought her to Pharaoh's house-Avram became wealthy with gifts bestowed on him because of Sarai. YHWH was angry and punished Pharaoh and his household because of Pharaoh's actions [with Sarai]. Pharaoh said to Avram: "Why did you tell me she is your sister, so I took her for myself as a wife?" Avram and Sarai were escorted away, with all that was theirs." (12:17-20)

In this narrative, Sarai is literally visible, but not "seen". She has no voice. Her silent acquiescence is what Torah would have us expect. But the rabbinic imagination is not satisfied with the *pschat*-with the simple directness of the text. *Rabbinic midrash* describes what happened to her in Pharaoh's house, this way: "That whole night Sarai lay prostrate on her face, crying, 'Sovereign of the Universe, Avram went forth from his land on your assurance; *I* went forth *with faith*; Avram is without this prison while I am within!'" Sarai spoke from a place of prayer, of faith. She told God, Avram existed in his mortal, physical body. She, however, went inward. She brought her mortal self, together with her inner Divine self. And God responded: "From within the prison of Pharaoh's house, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: 'Whatever I do, I do for your sake and all will say, 'It is because of Sarai, Avram's wife.'"

There is evidence even in Torah that Sarai was a worthy partner for Avram and God. She understood there was an unbridgeable gap between divine promises and reality, unless Avram had a son. Sarai, on her own, was pro-active. She told Avram: "YHWH has kept me from bearing, consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her." (16:2) She acted valiantly to enable the fulfillment of God's promise and the birth of the Jewish people. God had a different plan.

God appeared to Avram when he was in his 99th year. God renewed God's promise to make Avram "exceedingly, exceedingly many," (17:1) and God changed the names of Avram to Avraham (17:5) and of Sarai, to Sara. (17:15) Sara became the only woman in the bible to have her name changed by God. God said to *Avraham*: "I will bless her, and I will give you a son from her-so she becomes nations, kings of people shall come from her!" (17:15) "But Avraham fell on his face and laughed *within his heart...*"; (17:17) a laughter which the text ignores. Soon thereafter, three messengers appeared at the tent of Sara and Avraham. Avraham sent Sara to get the choicest fixings to make a meal for the guests, who asked him: "Where is your wife, Sara?" (18:9) Avraham responded she was in the tent. Then, a singular messenger, understood to be God, told Avraham that, a year later, Sara would have a son! Hearing that, "Sara laughed (also) *within herself...*" (18:12) Sara's laughter is *not*

ignored. It generates a response from God with a significant theological lesson: “Is anything beyond YHWH?” (18:14) In Torah, it is not clear to whom those words were delivered. The general understanding is to Avraham. Rabbinic midrash however, understands they were intended specifically, for Sara. Never... the rabbis tell us, has God engaged with a woman in direct conversation-except that righteous woman, Sara. Even with the incident of her inner laughter, God did not rebuke her. God said [to her]: “Is anything too hard for God?” which God says only to people with whom God is in relationship. The rabbis understood God heard the silent inner voice of Sara’s reality, with all its complexity.² She demonstrated strength and wisdom, putting herself second to the covenantal promise and the birth of the Jewish people. Clearly, God saw her. She had residual doubt however, regarding her relationship with God.

Although the binding of Isaac, the Akedah which we read tomorrow, is a foundational Jewish story, Torah is silent about Sara’s role in it. We never hear her voice again, after that event, nor is she visible in Torah until notice of her death. But midrash shows her voice *and* her actions to be powerful, clear and inspiring.

The protagonist in the akedah is Avraham. The focus is his relationship with God. Isaac, the son of Avraham and Sara, is the potential victim of God’s testing of that relationship. “Avraham arose early in the morning, saddled his ass, took two serving lads and Yitzchak his son, split wood for the offering and went up to the place of which God had told him.” When he found the place... Avraham and Yitzchak continued up. Avraham prepared the altar. He placed his son atop the wood. He stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But YHWH’s messengers called him. “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad ... for now, I know you are God fearing, you have not withheld your son...from me.” Avraham lifted his eyes, saw a ram caught in the thicket, freed it and offered it to God in place of his son. (22:1-13) Immediately following these verses, the story continues: “Now Sara’s life was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years, [thus] the years of Sara’s life. Sara died in *Kiryat Arba*, which is now *Hevron*, in the land of Canaan.” (Gen.23:1-2)

If this were a novel, a thoughtful reader would be confused. “OY! I must have skipped a page. When and how did Sara die??” Torah is silent on this question. Some rabbinic midrash says she died of

² The 5 books of Miriam, p.24

shock when she learned her husband almost killed their son. In one such midrash, Satan appears to Sara in the form of Yitzchak. (Yes, there *is* a place in Jewish lore for Satan.) “What has your father done to you?” Sara asks Satan who appeared as Yitzchak. He responds with details of bringing the wood, walking up the mountain, preparing the altar, placing his son on top of it and reaching for the knife to slaughter him. “If it hadn’t been for the voice of the angel...” Yitzchak said, “I would be dead.” This was an unbearable moment for Sara. She began to weep, uttering 3 wails corresponding to *shevarim*, the three sobbing sounds of the shofar. Her soul flew away and she died- thinking her son had been killed by her husband/his father.”³

This midrash fills a hole in the Torah narrative *and* connects the ritual of Shofar blowing to the birth of our people. Hearing the shofar, we remember Sara’s wails. We recall her internal conflict between doubt and hope; a conflict we may share. We recall Sara’s spiritual struggles, and ours. Her perseverance enable Sara to establish an unmediated relationship with God. Perhaps we also can progress in that realm.

Fast forward to the 21st century and a final *modern* midrash which stunningly, interweaves verses from Torah with a contemporary voice of Sara, affirming Sara *earned* her place within the covenantal blessing.

“And God tested *Sara*. The angel [of God] said to her: ‘please take your son, your only son, the one that you love, Yitchak, and go to the land of Moriah and raise him up, as an offering to God.’ And Sara said ‘NO! Because a mother does not slaughter her son.’

Early the next morning, Sara awakened and was outraged. The lad was gone and so was Avraham. She reached out to God: ‘*Ribono shel olam*, Master of the universe, I know someone who slaughters his son in the name of God, in the end, he doesn’t have a son and doesn’t have a God. Please forgive Avraham who made a mistake. Please remember he never imagined he would sacrifice his son and [please] save the lad from his hand.’ Simultaneously, Avraham extended his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. An angel of God called to him ‘Avraham, Avraham’ and said: ‘Don’t touch the lad because now, I know you are one who fears Elohim. And so, everything that Sara says to you,

³ see Tanhuma Vayera 23; pirke d’Rebbe Eliezer 32

listen to her voice. For it is through Yitchak you will have many descendants.”⁴

I shared these midrashim with you to introduce a different approach to reading Torah. With a guided understanding of the text, augmented by ancient and modern interpretations, we learn to abandon the stance of “outside observer” and step into Torah, empowered to live within and learn from, the words and the stories. These midrashim demonstrate what I call “Sara strength”. It is intuitive and powerful. It shows itself when we are challenged most profoundly. Three weeks ago, was the 18th anniversary of 9/11. The wife of a first responder was interviewed. Her husband died saving the lives of many innocent victims. They had 3 children. Today, they are all first responders -professional firefighters. When asked whether she felt fear for their lives, in her “Sara strength” voice, from the depths of her soul, the woman responded: “I keep my fear to myself. They are doing their soul’s work. They do it well. They know what their purpose is in life. I support them. I will not hold them back.”

Our own stories are not unlike those of our ancestors. Like Sara, we are perceptive and wise. May we have the courage to invoke what we know is right. Hannah’s voice plunges us into heartfelt personal prayer. May we use Hannah’s example to honestly explore the needs of our own hearts and souls, in the embrace of this caring community.

This year, may we find courage, strength and wisdom to help create a more equitable, environmentally healthy and peaceful world.

Shana tova u’metukah I wish you a sweet and fulfilling new year.

⁴ Deershuni, p. 43; Rivka Lovitz; translated by R. Ma’ayan Sands